STATEMENT ON SEA LEVEL IN THE COMING CENTURY

Science and Technology Committee
Miami-Dade County Climate Change Task Force.
September 19, 2007

Significant sea level rise is a very real threat to the near future for Miami-Dade County.

BACKGROUND: Over the past 2,500 years south Florida has experienced an average rate of relative sea level rise[1] of about 1.5 inches per century. Over this time our sandy, mangrove and muddy coastlines were mostly stable or expanding seawards. The broad coastal wetlands and historically stable sandy coastlines of south Florida are a product of this prolonged period of very gradual sea level rise.

Since 1932, south Florida has had about a 9 inch relative rise of sea level. This is a rate of one foot per century and is about 8 times the average rate over the past 2,500 years. Much of this accelerated rise is the result of warming (and expansion) of water in the western North Atlantic Ocean in response to global warming. Our coastal and shallow-marine environments are now evolving in response to the stresses of this rising sea level.

EVALUATION: The 2001 report of the United Nations sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projected an additional sea level rise over the coming century of 1-3 feet (median level rise of 2 feet.). The 2007 IPCC report projected a somewhat lower level, but it did not incorporate the significantly accelerated melting being observed in the Greenland Ice Sheet (apparently because the results had not yet been published in peer-reviewed science journals). As a result, the IPCC report, which should be the guidance for the future, underestimates the amount of sea level rise that is likely to occur in this century.

Since 2000, rapid changes have been occurring to the Greenland Ice Sheet - changes that were projected to begin at the end of this century. Over this past decade, there has also been rapid loss of multiyear pack ice in the Arctic Ocean, a phenomenon not projected to occur until 2070. Simply put, climate and glacial scientists now see that models failed to predict the rapidity and quickness with which these critical changes would occur.

Both the Arctic Ocean and Greenland Ice Sheet have important 'positive feedback' effects that are driving these accelerated changes. Positive feedbacks are secondary effects that further reinforce and accelerate the primary changes. For the Greenland Ice Sheet, (a) summer melt water on the lower elevation margins of the ice sheet is forming surface pools on the ice which absorb incoming solar energy, thus accelerating melting; (b) the melted surface water is flushing down to the bottom through fractures and dissolved moulins (vertical holes) in the ice sheet, forming a lubricated layer over the rock which is dramatically accelerating the rate of the ice sheet breakup and movement towards the sea; and (c) as the ice sheet margins melt and move towards the sea, the elevations on the ice sheet are lowering, placing the surface in yet warmer conditions.

[1] Relative sea level rise for an area is a combination of the change in ocean level and local changes in response to uplift or subsidence of the land. For example, North Carolina has a greater relative sea level rise than south Florida because the land there is subsiding faster.

Melt effects are expanding northwards on both coasts of Greenland. Even the very northern portions of Greenland have seen increased melting over the past decade.

Field observations from this summer in western Greenland have documented amazing acceleration of marginal glaciers. The Illulissat Icefjord, located 150 miles north of the Arctic Circle, is an outlet for about 7% of the Greenland Sheet. This marginal glacier had been receding in response to increased marginal glacier melt. Beginning in 2002, the ice has surged seaward and is presently moving seaward at over 9 miles per year with additional pulses as high as 3.1 miles in 90 minutes! Melt waters seeping down through the ice sheet have created a 1,600 foot thick layer of water on which the interior ice sheet is now floating, fracturing, and surging to the sea. Acceleration of melting of the Greenland ice sheet is the critical factor to the rise of global sea level in the coming century.

The Arctic Ocean has historically been sufficiently blocked with thick floating pack ice that navigation through the 'Northwest Passage' has remained elusive until recently. The pack ice is floating on the water of the Arctic Ocean and its melting would not in itself change sea level (like a melting ice cube in your glass). However, the white pack ice surface reflects nearly all incoming solar energy back into the air and space. Melting of the pack ice leaves areas of open water which absorb nearly 90 percent of the incoming solar energy. This warms the water, which further accelerates the rate of melting in the Arctic summer and reduces cooling in winter. Historically, the pack ice covering much of the Arctic Ocean through the summer was made of large solid masses of ice that were 4-5 years old, thickening each year. In the past decade, the pack ice has become increasingly younger and thinner. Most of the pack ice this summer is only 1-2 years old. It is thin, highly fragmented and contains many open water areas. As of mid September, this year's summer melt has left 30% less pack ice than the previous record low (in 2005). The large open water areas were 9 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than normal. Melting will continue until at least mid September. The pack ice is now so thin and fragmented that it could potentially float out of the Arctic into the Atlantic.

Climate projections had talked of the possibility of a summer ice-free Arctic Ocean in 40-80 years. Now it looks like that may happen within a decade if recent trends continue. As the pack ice diminishes over the Arctic Ocean, the adjacent land will warm, vast areas of tundra permafrost will melt releasing potentially catastrophic amounts of methane to the atmosphere[2], and melting of the Greenland Ice Sheet will even further accelerate.

In short, the recent changes occurring in the Arctic and Greenland mean that global warming and sea level rise will happen much more rapidly than had been only recently projected. Even recent model projections of future ice melt for Greenland by 2040 have already happened in 2007.

In the Antarctic, there is no inherent reason why the impacts of warming should follow the pattern of the Arctic Ocean. The Arctic is an ocean surrounded by land, whereas the Antarctic is a continent surrounded by ocean. Nevertheless, there has been a gradual loss

[2] Methane is another greenhouse gas. One molecule of methane captures 20 times the heat of a molecule of carbon dioxide. In the atmosphere, methane eventually will oxidize to carbon dioxide and water. This takes about 10 years.

of pack ice through the last half of the twentieth century, but a slight expansion in the past decade (as anticipated by climate models); about a 12% increase in the flow rate of 300 glaciers around the margin of Antarctica between 1993 and 2003; and a significant increase in summer snow melt in both marginal and interior areas of the ice sheet since 2005. Antarctica is a critical unknown to future projections; however, it is showing distinctive early signatures of accelerated ice release.

PROJECTION: A further 2-foot sea level rise by the end of the century, as projected in the 2001 IPCC report, would make life in south Florida very difficult for everyone. Spring high tides would be at about +5.8 feet[3]; storm surges would be higher; barrier islands, fill islands and low-lying mainland areas would be frequently flooded; salt water intrusion would restrict available freshwater resources; drainage would be more sluggish; Turkey Point would be an offshore island; and so on.

Unfortunately, it looks as though sea level in the coming century will rise significantly more than two feet. With what is happening in the Arctic and Greenland, many respected scientists[4] now see a likely sea level rise of **at least** 1.5 feet in the coming 50 years and a total of **at least** 3-5 feet by the end of the century, possibly significantly more. Spring high tides would be at +7 to +9 feet. This does not take into account the possibility of a catastrophically rapid melt of land-bound ice from Greenland, and it makes no assumptions about Antarctica.

The projected rises will just be the beginning of further significant releases from Greenland and possibly Antarctica[5]. Hopefully, the IPCC will quickly revisit the question of sea level rise and provide a more valid and meaningful projection; however, to date, that is not planned until about 2012. When they revisit the current estimates, we expect it will be at least in the 3-5 foot range for this century.

Developed Miami-Dade County as we know it will significantly change with a 3-4 foot sea level rise. Spring high tides would be at about + 7 to 8 feet; freshwater resources would be gone; the Everglades would be inundated on the west side of Miami-Dade

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[3] Elevations are relative to a zero, which is 'mean lower low water' (spring low tide) when originally established in the late 1920s. This is the datum used for flood elevations in Miami-Dade County. Today, mean higher high water is +3.8 feet, exceptional tides may reach over 4.5 feet, and storm tides and surges are added on to that. For considering future sea level rise, add 3.8 feet to the projected increase for mean higher high water (average spring high tide).

[4] For example: Dr. Robert Corell, a key contributor to the IPCC and chair of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, said this September that there is a consensus that new data collected since the IPCC report (i.e., the last two years) shows a 'massive acceleration' in the loss of ice mass in Greenland, and the consequences are outstripping the capacity of scientific models to predict it. Dr. James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, suggests that sea level could rise by one to several meters (1 meter = 3.25 feet) by the end of the century.

[5] Total melting of the Greenland ice sheet would add about 23 feet to global sea level. In Antarctica, the collapse of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet would result in another 20 feet. With the warming we have caused and will cause from greenhouse gas buildup, melting of both of these is a distinct possibility in the future. During the previous interglacial period 130,000 to 120,000 years ago, sea level was about 25 feet higher than present.

Were the ice on Antarctica to totally melt, sea level would rise over 200 feet, but that seems unlikely.

County; the barrier islands would be largely inundated; storm surges would be devastating; landfill sites would be exposed to erosion contaminating marine and coastal environments. With a five foot rise (spring tides at nearly +9 feet), Miami-Dade County will be extremely diminished.

REALITY FOR OUR FUTURE: Miami-Dade County, like all other coastal and low-lying counties, is now facing much more challenging decisions than ever imagined. We will work to provide more carefully documented projections, but we hope you see the urgency of reconsidering nearly every aspect of the county's management, zoning, infrastructure, and planning.

One urgent effort is to look at what Miami-Dade County will need to do to remain inhabitable and functional at benchmarks of a further 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 foot rise in sea level – and at what point portions of the county will need to yield to the rising sea. This will require a detailed documentation of the elevations of infrastructure elements and roadways; susceptibility of coastal, wetland and artificial fill areas to erosion; defining areas of potential pollution and contamination release; determining changing drainage and storm surge risks; assessing structural viability of buildings and levees with changing groundwater levels and saline water intrusion; looking at the future of fresh potable water sources; defining the modifications necessary to maintain connectivity of roadways; and many other aspects.

It should be pointed out that the highly porous limestone and sand substrate of Miami-Dade County (which at present permits excellent drainage) will limit the effectiveness of widespread use of levees and dikes to wall off the encroaching sea.

Respectfully submitted,
Science and Technology Committee[6]

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[6] All members of the committee have worked together to develop this statement, and all have signed on.