

Lawmakers avoid buzzwords on climate change bills

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State lawmakers ran into a problem this year when recommending a study on rising sea levels and their potential impacts on coastal Virginia.

It was not a scientific problem or a financial one. It was linguistic.

They discovered that they could not use the phrases "sea level rise" or "climate change" in requesting the study, in part because of objections from Republican colleagues and also for fear of stirring up conservative activists, some of whom believe such terms are liberal code words.

On its website, for example, the Virginia tea party described the proposed "sea level rise" study this way: "More wasted tax dollars for more ridiculous studies designed to separate us from our money and control all land and water use."

The group urged its members to contact elected officials right away to defeat the measure: "They will pass this without blinking if we don't yell loudly."

So lawmakers did away with all mention of sea level rise, substituting a more politically neutral phrase: "recurrent flooding."

The amended study, while fixed on the same research, sailed through the General Assembly and was signed by Gov. Bob McDonnell, who also has raised questions about what is causing slightly higher temperatures on the planet.

The episode illustrates the continuing, even increasing, volatility of climate change as a policy issue in Virginia, at the same time that other states and whole nations are moving forward with plans to combat the phenomenon.

It also shows how climate skeptics, through their political connections and organization, are forcing state and local government to stay clear of certain buzzwords in quietly pursuing a strategy, else they risk unleashing a brawl.

Government officials and scientists just shrug when asked about the language games, especially when the subject is sea level rise. To them, the debate should not be about what is causing waters to slowly rise, but what should be done about it.

"These studies need to be done if we're going to logically tackle these problems that scientific data unequivocally proves are happening," said Larry Atkinson, an oceanographer at Old Dominion University who is overseeing a climate change initiative that focuses on rising sea levels.

"So, whatever we have to call it, I've got no problem with that," he added. "What's the alternative? Do nothing?"

The semantics dance harkens to the days when "global warming" was commonly uttered. But after conservatives criticized and ridiculed Al Gore and others, "climate change" became the kinder, gentler way to communicate the same thing.

Now it appears that "climate change" and "sea level rise" are being phased out, in Virginia at least, amid political pressure from the far right. Emerging labels include "increased flooding risk," "coastal resiliency" and,

of course, "recurrent flooding."

State Del. Chris Stolle, R-Virginia Beach, who insisted on changing the "sea level rise" study in the General Assembly to one on "recurrent flooding," said he wants to get political speech out of the mix altogether.

He said "sea level rise" is a "left-wing term" that conjures up animosities on the right. So why bring it into the equation?

"What people care about is the floodwater coming through their door," Stolle said. "Let's focus on that. Let's study that. So that's what I wanted us to call it."

According to scientific tide measurements at Sewells Point in Norfolk, the sea level has risen by 14.5 inches in the past 100 years. The trend is projected to continue for at least the next century, and some scientists predict that the rate could accelerate, with the level rising an additional 2 to 3 feet by 2100, and perhaps higher.

What seems certain is that Norfolk and the rest of coastal Virginia are going to get wetter, with more frequent flooding and more waterfront property and infrastructure at risk.

Complicating the problem is that, at the same time, land is sinking, a process called subsidence. Scientists are not sure at what rate the soft, marshy region is sinking, only that it plays a significant role in calculating "relative sea level rise."

This one-two punch of rising water and sinking land is what makes Hampton Roads the second-most-vulnerable region in the United States to flooding, behind only New Orleans.

Given the stakes, environmentalists are frustrated that Virginia has not made sea level rise a priority. And they see the sensitivity over semantics as symbolic of state reluctance to dive into a politically divisive topic.

The city of Norfolk, which is especially vulnerable to rising sea waters and subsidence, given its geography and marshy footprint, today is developing a "flooding strategy" through a "citizens flooding task force." Members include residents from neighborhoods that routinely flood after minor rains and slightly higher tide cycles.

The city also recently launched a "flooding awareness" website about its efforts. But the phrases "sea level rise" and "climate change" cannot be found there.

Fleta Jackson, a spokeswoman for the city's stormwater division, said the absence is not intentional.

"Sea level rise is definitely a part of the conversation," Jackson said. "It just doesn't appear in a definitive statement."

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality is the clearinghouse for federal grants helping to pay for three specific studies of sea level rise in Hampton Roads, the Middle Peninsula and Northern Virginia.

At each stage of the studies, the state has altered its verbiage, said Laura McKay, state director of coastal zone management programs.

At first, McKay said, the studies were about "climate change." Then they were changed to "sea level rise." Now they are about "coastal resilience." And while the studies themselves are slightly different, McKay said, political sensitivities played a role.

"It's kind of silly," she said. "But the reality is, some of the phrases just really send people screaming. We want to use language that doesn't alienate people."

Kris Allen, a Virginia Beach businessman, is one climate skeptic who believes sea level rise is real, is a problem and should be studied and acted upon. Indeed, he would prefer that state and local studies be labeled as such.

He gets upset, however, when government wants to prescribe economically harmful regulations on coal and gas and enact strategies such as cap-and-trade to combat a phenomenon that might be more about sinking land.

"It's a game about control," Allen said, echoing a sentiment that government is really after more control of property rights and individual liberty.

State Sen. Ralph Northam, D-Norfolk, co-sponsored the "recurrent flooding" study that eventually won approval in the General Assembly this year. He said that when he met with state Del. Stolle, the co-patron in the House, he was told that the phrase "sea level rise" needed to go or the study "would end up in the circular file."

So Northam and other Democrats agreed to amend the proposal.

"It's kind of embarrassing that people are playing politics instead of just talking straight," Northam said. "But we went along with it. We needed the study done."

Today, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science is leading the \$138,000 "flooding" study, along with scientists from the University of Virginia and ODU. Their work is expected to be completed by the end of the year, offering officials from low-lying Hampton Roads, the Eastern Shore and other coastal areas insight and ideas about rising waters and increased flooding.

State officials also hope the results will help win federal funds for combating sea level rise and coastal flooding, either by constructing sea walls or berms, or by elevating streets and moving infrastructure inland.

"I question whether we're doing the public a disservice by not telling it the way it is," said state Del. Kenneth Alexander, D-Norfolk, who also voted to amend the study name. "But we can't continue to dismiss it or kick it down the road."

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