

Investment builds on three-year old Climate Change Adaptation Program, but the North's most isolated communities continue to struggle with effects of climate change

By CHRIS PLECASH | Nov. 21, 2011

The federal government plans to invest \$20-million over the next five years in climate change adaptation for northern and aboriginal communities, but in the Far North public infrastructure and housing are already deteriorating, and disruptions to northern wildlife are taking away the livelihood of many of the region's inhabitants.

Environment Minister Peter Kent (Thornhill, Ont.) announced the government's plans to fund climate change adaptation in a speech to Toronto's Economic Club on Nov. 8. Mr. Kent told the audience that federal funding for climate change adaptation in Canada will total \$148.8-million over the next five years, building on the \$85.9-million that the government invested in climate change adaptation between 2007 and 2011.

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"This funding, which extends and expands 10 programs across nine departments, will help us frame a credible, science-based response to the impact that climate change has and will have on our economy, our health, our security, and, in particular, our northern and aboriginal communities," Mr. Kent stated.

Of the funding that was announced, \$20-million will be directed to the government's Climate Change Adaptation Program. Established in 2008, the program has invested \$14-million over the last three years to assist northern and aboriginal communities in developing strategies to respond to the effects of climate change.

While Environment Canada has a lead role in coordinating the program, other departments

involved include Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Health Canada, Natural Resources Canada, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

To date, the program has funded a number of programs aimed at assessing the risks of climate change and developing responses to those risks in the North. Northern communities are already beginning to see the immediate effects of longer, warmer summers on their homes and public infrastructure. Permafrost thaw and soil erosion have destabilized housing in certain areas and led to the deterioration of roads. Communities that rely on ice roads are at risk of becoming increasingly isolated as their transportation routes are affected by changes to the local climate.

Recently-elected Northwest Territories Premier Bob McLeod told The Hill Times last week that the impact of climate change in the North is adding to the region's already high cost of living.

"The cost of living is very high up here. If we can't resupply with ice roads then we need to look at other infrastructure—all weather roads and airports so that we're able to get in and out of communities on an emergency basis," said Premier McLeod, who pointed out that melting permafrost has caused the foundations of homes in some areas to rot and collapse, making housing more scarce and less safe.

Premier McLeod called for sustained coordination between communities, the territorial governments, and the federal government in supporting climate change adaptation throughout the North.

"We're only 43,000 people, it would be very difficult for us to invest in nation-building infrastructure on our own," Premier McLeod said in stressing the need for federal assistance in adapting to the effects of climate change. "Climate change is something that we can't resolve in isolation. It's a worldwide phenomenon. We're prepared to do our part, but it needs to be recognized that we're living a high-cost environment, a harsh environment where we need to be able to survive."

The vast Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut have a total population of roughly 110,000, and the federal government has stated its commitment to support northern communities mainly through mining, oil and gas as part of its "Northern Strategy" for economic development.

The impact of climate change on the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions is well-known to the federal government. In 2009, the National Round Table on Energy and the Environment published a comprehensive report on the emerging impacts of climate change on infrastructure in the North. NRTEE's True North report noted that climate change was creating new economic, social and environmental pressures for northern communities, and stressed the need for a "core focus" on infrastructure in any northern policy strategy.

Framing the problem as a "security issue," NRTEE recommended that the federal government account for climate risks in its policies, and "[b]uild community capacity to address climate risk to northern infrastructure and take advantage of opportunities."

The Arctic Council, of which Canada is a member, has also provided a comprehensive assessment of the impacts of climate change on the far North. The council's Arctic Climate Impact Assessment reported that the Arctic is experiencing the most rapid effects of climate change, which is contributing to shifting vegetation zones, unpredictable weather patterns, and sudden changes to biodiversity, resulting in "major economic and cultural impacts," for the region's indigenous communities. The federal government has clearly taken some advice from the National Round Table and the Arctic Council with the renewal of the Climate Change Adaptation Program, and the Northern Strategy's emphasis on economic development throughout the region will necessitate improvements to some public infrastructure. However, in a region with a widely-dispersed population there is a risk that more isolated communities won't see as many of the benefits of the government's climate change adaptation initiatives in the North.

Duane Smith, president of Canada's chapter of the Inuit Circumpolar Council told The Hill Times that the effects of climate change are compounding the North's housing shortage, with public health consequences.

"That's been a chronic problem throughout all of Canada's North," Mr. Smith observed. "Not only the quantity of housing but also the quality of housing and that's where you've got overcrowding taking place." Mr. Smith said that the increased prevalence of tuberculosis in the Arctic's Inuit communities is partly due to inadequate, overcrowded housing.

Changes in biodiversity have also compounded food scarcity for the North's most isolated

communities. Mr. Smith explained that Inuit communities have relied on inter-settlement trade of "country foods," such as seasonal vegetation and wildlife, to ensure year-round sustenance.

"When you look at it from an economic perspective, when you look at the high cost of living throughout the Arctic, [inter-settlement trade] does offset the need to provide yourself and your family with the nutrition that you need on a regular basis," Mr. Smith pointed out. "Otherwise you really couldn't afford to shop for your daily food intake."

While the first three years of the federal government's Climate Change Adaptation Program have led to some improvements in public infrastructure in northern communities, Mr. Smith was unaware of any specific CAPP initiatives in the Inuit communities represented by his organization.

"I don't recall offhand any policy being that specific in trying to address these issues, by either the federal or territorial governments," Mr. Smith observed. "You've got health, education, and housing issues, which are the most crucial, chronic issues in the Arctic as it is."

Mr. Smith added that improvements to public health were essential if the North is to unlock the economic potential that the federal government has focused on through its Northern Strategy.

"If you don't have healthy people throughout the Arctic, then they're not going to be able to make meaningful contributions to the well-being of the country as a whole. If you can work with communities and the people to help improve their health and well-being, then you're on the right track forward."

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