

# The StarPhoenix

## Planning ahead vital

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Even though it's the second year in a row that Premier Brad Wall has shown up at the western premiers' meeting with soggy boots, it is impossible to attach these unusual rainy days to climate change.

As John Pomeroy, the University of Saskatchewan's Canadian Research Chair on water research and climate change notes, some climate models have predicted extreme weather, extended drought and eras of flooding all to occur, but whether 2011 is part of that won't be known until a pattern can be established.

What is known, however, is that these weather events - including last-weekend's severe storms - are unusual, appear to be happening more frequently, and don't fit into the planning methodology that governments and agencies have used in the past.

When engineers designs such public infrastructure as bridges, roads, dams and buildings, their plans are based on historical record of high floods and extended droughts.

These recent floods that have occurred not only in Saskatchewan, and also in Alberta, Manitoba, Quebec, the Mississippi River valley, as well as in Brazil, Australia, Africa, and China are a reminder that we can no longer predict the future based solely on the past.

But when it comes to predicting such things as flooding in the future, most countries including Canada are woefully ill-equipped to do the job adequately.

And rather than getting better at it, there is evidence we are getting worse.

For example, as Prof. Pomeroy points out, just when scientific expertise is most required to look at water management, climate, and changes to atmospheric conditions, budget cuts to organizations such as Environment Canada and the Canadian Foundation for Climate and Atmospheric Science have badly impaired Canada's ability to study these crucial areas.

For example, the CFCAS-funded Drought Research Initiative had to close its doors at the end of March, and the IP3, which studies the effects of climate change in cold regions, will close in September.

To its credit, the U of S has devoted a great deal of attention to the study of water and climate. Mr. Pomeroy's position is evidence of it, as is the university's ability to attract Howard Wheater, the world's top hydrologist, to the position of a Canada Excellence Research Chair.

But both the DRI and IP3 are U of S initiatives whose closure will make it much more difficult to formulate informed public policy related to developing infrastructure that's adequate to cope with changes already occurring.

It's like being blindfolded while trying to prepare for the trouble coming our way.

In times of budget constraints, supporting highend research to better predict what may or may not happen might seem an unaffordable luxury. But it's much more expensive to react after the fact to every disaster than to put in place the effective mitigation measures.

Premier Wall has indicated that discussing emergency measures is top of mind as he heads to Yellowknife today for the premiers' meeting. But political leaders would be well-advised to support research and build for the future rather than rely on increasingly unreliable historic data.

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