

White House to Introduce Climate Data Website

WASHINGTON — President Obama wants Americans to see how climate change will remake their own backyards — and to make it as easy as opening a web-based app.

As part of its effort to make the public see global warming as a tangible, immediate and urgent problem, the White House on Wednesday will inaugurate a website aimed at turning scientific data about projected droughts and wildfires and the rise in sea levels into eye-catching digital presentations that can be mapped using an app.

Mr. Obama's counselor, John D. Podesta, who has been charged with creating a strategy to build political support for Mr. Obama's climate change agenda, and the White House science adviser, John P. Holdren, came up with the idea. In theory, the app, at climate.data.gov, would be a powerful tool, allowing local governments or home and business owners to type in an address — as they do on sites like Google Earth — to quickly see how the projected rise in sea levels might increase the chance that their house will be flooded in the coming years. But in practice, until climate science and mapping applications can live up to the site's ambitions, it will remain very much in its testing phase.

At the beginning, the website will serve chiefly as a clearinghouse for climate science data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the United States Geological Survey, the Defense Department and NASA, according to Mr. Holdren and Mr. Podesta. The first batch of data will focus on coastal flooding and the rise in sea levels.

Average users will not be able to do much yet on their own. Instead, NASA and the NOAA will call on researchers and private companies to create software simulations illustrating the impact of sea level rise.

White House officials say they hope to help recreate the success of desktop and

mobile apps and software that were built by private companies using government data, like on the real estate sites Trulia, Redfin and Zillow. Those apps use information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau to help families make more informed decisions about buying a house.

Robert M. Pestronk, executive director of the National Association of County and City Health Officials, said he hoped the new climate data tools would help municipal officials plan for climate change. “Local health officials are on the front lines of preparing for and addressing the health effects of climate change — from reduced air quality to extreme weather to climate-sensitive infectious disease like West Nile virus and Lyme disease,” he said.

The website, Mr. Pestronk said, “will provide valuable data to guide and support local health departments in their efforts to ensure the health and safety of people in their communities.”

But the research and projections on climate change are vastly more nuanced than simple housing, labor and census statistics. While a number of scientific reports have reached the consensus that carbon pollution from the burning of fossil fuels has warmed the planet — leading to a future of rising sea levels, melting land ice, an increase in the most damaging types of hurricanes, and drought in some places and deluges in others — scientists warn against trying to use that data to model precisely what will happen when.

“The essence of dealing with climate change is not so much about identifying specific impacts at a specific time in the future. It’s about managing risk,” Prof. Chris Field, the director of the department of global ecology at Stanford University, said in February.

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“The thing that’s important about framing climate change as a risk is that it puts the emphasis where it should be. Not that a specific thing will happen at a certain

time — some things are known, some things aren't," said Professor Field, an expert on earth sciences and a member of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a group of scientists that regularly publishes reports on the state of climate science.

Professor Field pointed out that higher emission levels could lead to more intense warming in the coming decades, and thus higher sea levels, but lower pollution levels could lead to different results.

Mr. Obama hopes to make climate change a signature issue of his second term, and the Environmental Protection Agency is working on a pair of highly debated regulations that could cut emissions but would also shutter hundreds of coal-fired power plants, the chief cause of carbon pollution.

Republicans, who have already started to push back, have called the proposed rules a war on coal.

Since joining the White House in January, Mr. Podesta has taken on the uphill task of building a political case for the E.P.A. rules, both by defusing the opposition and building support for them by creating, among voters, an urgent sense that they are necessary. The website is the latest step in that strategy. This year, the White House [unveiled a series of regional climate hubs](#), research centers aimed at highlighting the impacts of climate change on farmers and offering resources to help.

Mr. Podesta has his work cut out for him. Sixty-seven percent of Americans believe that global warming is occurring, [according to a Pew poll conducted in October](#). But [another Pew poll in January](#) found that Americans prioritized global warming at No. 19 on a list of 20 issues for Congress and the president.