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News / Science

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# Experts: Sea-level rise in Hampton Roads is a 'manageable problem'



Flooding is a recurring problem in Hampton Roads. Here, vehicles are stuck in Newport News. (Daily Press File Photo)



By **Tamara Dietrich** · **Contact Reporter**

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Sea-level rise in Hampton Roads is a "manageable problem" with the right response, experts say

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SEPTEMBER 16, 2015, 8:16 PM

**H**ave an **iPhone**? See how wide it is? Six centimeters — or about how much the Atlantic Ocean is predicted to rise here in Hampton Roads over the next 10 years.

See how tall the iPhone is? Twelve centimeters — or about how much rise the region will see over the next 20 years.

It's a visual aide favored by Col. Paul B. Olsen, who spent nearly 28 years in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and just took a position with Old Dominion University in Norfolk to help lead governmental planning partnerships for sea level rise and climate change.

"Is it an emergency?" said Olsen, who lives in Poquoson. "Well, as an engineer I'd say it's an emergency. But, for most people, it really shouldn't be."

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With smart and effective actions over time, he said, it's a "manageable problem."

"No one should be running for the hills," Olsen said. "No one should be selling their house at a loss. And every engineer and strategic planner out there knows that we have time to do something about it."

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On Wednesday, Olsen was among a roomful of participants at a daylong seminar on sea level rise and resilience at The Mariners' Museum in Newport News. It was hosted by the Hampton Roads chapter of ULI (Urban Land Institute) Virginia.

"The concern," said Burrell Saunders of ULI, "is that we here in Hampton Roads understand the impact that a major storm event or sea level rise, itself, will have on us and our economy, our homes

and our families and our lives. We hope out of this program to inform people that they can go forth and start to develop policies that can help us to build a 21<sup>st</sup>-century region."

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Hampton Roads is settling and, a lot of people don't know this, but the Gulf Stream pushes more water against the East Coast than anywhere else in the United States. It does that in Virginia, so those all put together contribute to a sea-level rise that's twice that of anywhere else along the East Coast."

There are several broad ways to respond, he said: retreat if it becomes impossible to combat rising waters; adapt by, for instance, raising buildings or infrastructure and protecting electrical distribution systems; defend to keep the water out, which is unfortunately a huge drain on resources; and avoidance.

Avoidance, Olsen said, includes smarter zoning laws and restrictions to keep development out of areas expected to succumb to rising waters — a strategy already being adopted by communities such as Poquoson and Norfolk.

Building a 21<sup>st</sup>-century region doesn't require fleeing coastal areas entirely, said Hans-Peter Plag, a German geophysicist who's been at ODU since 2013 co-directing its Climate Change and Sea Level Rise Initiative.

"The coastal zone is so important for the global civilization that we cannot move out," Plag said. "We don't move out of a house just because it may burn, but we have a smoke detector so that we know when it is burning. And I think this is what scientists need to work on — an early-warning system for upward climate change, upward sea-level rise. And our engineers need to think about how we can build the cities, because we are (always) rebuilding them."

A commercial building has a working life of 20 to 30 years, he said. A public building, 50

It's long been known that Hampton Roads is bearing an outsized burden when it comes to rising seas, attributed by scientists to the climate change caused largely by the burning of fossil fuels. Only New Orleans is experiencing a faster sea-level rise in this country.

"We have a triple whammy here," Olsen said. "The seas are rising, Hampton

to 60 years. And a residence, 100 to 150 years. So when it comes time to rebuild, he said, consider whether it's necessary or smart to do so in a coastal zone.

Plag and other scientists say the growing imbalance between warming global temperatures and land-based sea ice means that ice will eventually melt, flooding into the global oceans.

"We have in the past seen sea-level rise up to 5 meters (15 feet) per century," Plag said. "And this could happen again."

*Dietrich can be at 757-247-7892.*

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