

10-1-2021

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Repository Citation

Kennedy, Amber, "ODU Scientist Tapped to Edit National Climate Assessment" (2021). *News Items*. 93.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/odurc_news/93

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ODU Scientist Tapped to Edit National Climate Assessment

October 01, 2021

[By Amber Kennedy](#)

An Old Dominion University scientist is among two in Virginia selected to serve as a chapter lead for the Fifth National Climate Assessment (NCA5).

Jessica Whitehead, the Joan P. Brock Endowed Executive Director for ODU's Institute for Coastal Adaptation and Resilience (ICAR), will represent Virginia's role as a leader in science, technology, engineering and math alongside Jeremy Hoffman, the David and Jane Cohn Scientist at the Science Museum of Virginia.

Whitehead was selected to coordinate the development of the Northeast chapter of the report produced by the U.S. Global Change Research Program, and Hoffman will oversee the drafting of the section focused on the impacts of climate change on the Southeast region. Whitehead's expertise lies in coastal issues, while Hoffman studies heat. With the selection of two Virginia representatives tasked with compiling and editing regional sections, the assessment will place a fresh focus on the effects of our changing climate on the Mid-Atlantic.

"This project has the same tenets as the hyperlocal research I've been focused on for the past five years: opportunities for local community involvement, cross-disciplinary collaboration, communicating with a variety of audiences and a final product that will help inform data-driven decisions," Hoffman said. "This assessment is critical for making decisions around what a climate-resilient Southeast region will really look like."

In 1990, Congress established the U.S. Global Change Research Program, which is composed of 13 agencies that work together to understand forces shaping the environment and their impacts on society. Similar to the recent climate assessment released by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the program is tasked with producing a periodic National Climate Assessment, which summarizes the impacts of climate change on the United States now and in the future. The first assessment was released in 2000. The new team of experts will synthesize climate science research that has been published since the Fourth Assessment in 2018. The NCA5 is expected to be released in late 2023.



After being evaluated and selected by a steering committee, each chapter lead works with experts from various sectors, including nonprofit organizations, private corporations and research institutions, to review materials pertinent to climate science. Each of the 31 chapters has a specific topic area or regional focus. The Southeast chapter Hoffman is leading covers Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. Whitehead's region stretches from the Chesapeake Bay watershed up the East Coast to Maine, and across to Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

In their respective narratives, Hoffman's and Whitehead's groups will assess the impacts of a changing climate that are specific and perhaps unique to the region. They are not conducting new research, but are instead drawing on the expertise of numerous professionals working in the field who have published recent studies related to climate science. The team will review and condense the body of research into a high-level overview that summarizes the data in an easy-to-understand format. The final assessment will serve as a resource for policy makers, business leaders, community organizations and citizens to inform decision-making around topics including infrastructure, agriculture, human health and tourism.

Over the next few months, both will recruit authors for their regional teams, with a focus on ensuring they're including diverse perspectives. Beginning in early 2022, they will host public meetings to solicit feedback. In previous assessments, the public engagement opportunities have helped shape the key messages and emphases of the report. Once a draft is completed, a public comment period will begin and revisions will be made before the assessment is released.

"We can be those coordinators who are able to take really complex information and help it be more useful and engaging," Whitehead said. "Five years may not seem like very long since the last assessment was released, but there has been rapid advancement in both our understanding of the human fingerprint on extreme weather events and in how people are responding to prepare for the future. Having different and diverse teams continuously reviewing the most recent research sharpens the level of detail we have about who and what is most impacted by climate change first and worst. We need this information to envision more resilient paths forward."

https://www.odu.edu/news/2021/10/whitehead_selected_f#.YhVMt4rMKUk