



CLIMATE CHANGE BUSINESS JOURNAL®

Volume VI, No. 12

REPRINT

High Tide On Main Street: America's Small Businesses Must Adapt To Rising Sea Level

By Rebecca R. Rubin and John Englander

A strange thing has been happening in Miami Beach. Some streets are flooded a few days each month, even without rain. Saltwater is backing up through storm drains and bubbling up through the porous limestone, rusting car wheels and undercarriages.

Up in Gloucester County Virginia, on the Chesapeake, FEMA recently spent \$12 million to elevate 60 houses, while an equal number of homes remain on the waiting list. The land there is subsiding, amplifying the rising sea height and providing a glimpse of what's to come in all coastal areas in the years ahead.

Rising sea levels are a silent and relentless force that, combined with severe storms—most notably Sandy just over one year ago—and extreme tides, will dramatically reshape coastlines everywhere.

Because sea level has remained relatively stable for thousands of years, we have been lulled into thinking the shoreline is fixed in place. But we have entered a new era, with sea level destined to move higher for decades. With more than 30% of the global population situated within 60 miles of the ocean, the changing coastline will be one of the most disruptive aspects of climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's recent report offered up a sobering picture of the future. Yet we only need to witness the world's rapidly receding glaciers, the shrinking

Greenland ice sheet, new melting in West Antarctica and the disappearing polar ice cap to know that the world is warming faster than previous geologic cycles. The ocean is now 1.5 degrees warmer than a century ago, an increase that has drastically reduced the size of our ice sheets and glaciers.

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While policymakers argue over a course of action, America's small businesses must begin to consider the practical effects of sea level rise and what they can do to protect themselves and their communities.

Small businesses nationwide employ half of our labor force with more than 99

percent of U.S. firms qualifying, making them an economic bedrock of America. Owners of these Main Street companies should understand that while they can rebuild after a storm like Sandy, the destruction from sea level rise will be permanent. For each additional foot of rise, the shoreline moves inland roughly the length of a football field, depending on local topography. Higher sea levels mean future storms and extreme tides reaching ever-higher levels, which in turn will affect insurance rates, flood zones, security for financing and the viability of some communities.

What can America's small businesses do to adapt to this monumental challenge, this new normal?

First, business owners should undertake a risk assessment to look at potential flood damage from storms, extreme tides and gradually worsening sea level rise, then consider possible improvements, perhaps as simple as elevating equipment. In addition, it's important to examine supply-chain issues that could impact the business. For instance, companies themselves may not be directly affected by sea level rise but may rely on vendors that are vulnerable. In areas where the long-term risks seem unacceptably high, businesses should develop a relocation plan.

Second, business owners should encourage their communities to plan for this sea change. While elected officials often have perspectives limited to their term in

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CLIMATE CHANGE BUSINESS JOURNAL®

Vol. VI, No. 12 ISSN 1940-8781
REPRINT

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Climate Change Business Journal® newsletter is published 8 times a year (includes 4 double issues) by Environmental Business International Inc., 4452 Park Blvd., Suite 306, San Diego, CA 92116. Phone: 619-295-7685 or email info@climatechangebusiness.com

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office, this coming coastal crisis not only warrants looking at the next storm season, but also three decades ahead, a timeframe that covers most financing and amortization periods. To secure their futures, some communities in South Florida and elsewhere will have to begin moving to higher ground. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Port of Gulfport, AL, is now rebuilding 25 feet above the historic flood-level elevation.

Finally, through emissions-cutting measures and by speaking collectively through sustainable business networks, small businesses can wield influence with federal, state and local policy makers who pay attention to American business interests and their actions.

Sea level rise presents a truly daunting challenge. Yet in contrast to hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes and tornadoes, this one affords us the opportunity for long-term planning. Rising seas and shifting shorelines are problems that allow us to assess, prepare and adjust in a non-emergency mode. We urge main street businesses to begin a rational process of “intelligent adaptation.” For now, we are fortunate to have the luxury of time. The water is only at our ankles. ⚙

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This article was first published in the December 2013 Executive Review edition of Climate Change Business Journal; see www.ebionline.org