Climate change information for local government

The ESCC Hub carried out a small case study to guide the development and delivery of climate change information for local government.

Responses collected in a survey and interviews suggests that existing climate change information is not accessible or applicable to many council operational tasks, and council staff are not resourced nor required to interpret and apply existing information.

With so many councils and so many information needs, resources may be best directed to developing a set of guidelines that step local government staff through finding and applying climate change information rather than developing council-specific products.

Understanding information needs

Our changing climate will affect every community across the country. Responding to the changes that are already occurring, and planning for the changes still to come, is a huge task, with local councils on the front line. Important decisions about services and infrastructure need to consider a range of factors to ensure community sustainability and resilience, including the best available information about our current and future climate.

Is this information available for local councils? More importantly, is it accessible? Do local councils have the resources to source and apply appropriate climate change information for operational purposes?

To gauge this, the ESCC Hub invited Victorian councils to participate in a survey to identify climate change information use and needs. Seventy-nine councils were invited to participate, and responses were received from 12. Of these, seven councils indicated they would be interested in discussing climate change information in more detail.

Councils and climate information services
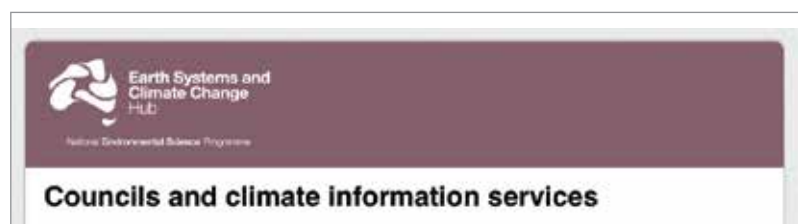
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In April 2017, Hub knowledge brokers met with representatives from four councils (Bass Coast Shire Council, Colac Otway Shire Council, Maribyrnong City Council, Strathbogie Shire Council) and from the Western Alliance for Greenhouse Action, to find out more about:

- the issues and concerns facing the council (as context for accessibility and applicability of climate change information)
- what climate change information the council uses and where they get it
- what climate change information the council needs for local government.

Barriers to using climate change information

Five clear issues were identified with regards to using climate change information in local government:

- There are vastly different levels of understanding of climate change and how it may affect councils and their constituents within and between councils.

- Council staff are dealing with many (and sometimes conflicting) priorities, of which climate change is just one (and certainly not the most immediate concern). For instance, questions of liability and responsibility are a concern with provision of climate change risk information. Difficulties also arise where there are implications for property values.

- Councils have limited time, personnel and resources to devote to climate change issues. There is not always scope for long-term initiatives as councils work on a four-year cycle, in line with local government elections.

- There is an overwhelming supply of climate change information, data and advice which is not readily interpreted or applied, and so is put to the side (particularly in light of the first three factors).

- Unless considering climate change information is required as part of a standard operating procedure or legislated guideline, there is no driver to incorporate it into decision making.

In addition, there is a perception that detailed, local information (e.g. downscaled projections) is necessary for planning and decision making. In the absence of this information, little or no climate change information is being considered in operational and planning decisions – yet these decisions, that have implications for the next 20-30 years and beyond are still being made, without considering tolerances and thresholds that current climate change information can provide insight to.

A way forward

There are many tools and products being developed to assist local government apply climate change information. However, the time, resource and other operational constraints that prevent the uptake of existing climate change information are just as applicable to these products.

While these more involved tools are in development, there is scope for quick and easy guidelines that assist councils to conduct rapid climate change risk assessments that can be used to inform planning decisions and as the basis for more detailed risk assessments if resources and requirements dictate.

CSIRO researchers and knowledge brokers, in partnership with the Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, developed such guidelines for sectoral stakeholders in Pacific island countries, which are now being revised for use in Australia.

The guidelines are not intended to be comprehensive but rather provide the working knowledge necessary to incorporate preliminary/high-level climate change information into planning decisions. While there is a desire/perceived need to use detailed downscaled data for these activities, this information does not always exist. Instead of overlooking or omitting climate change in these circumstances, the guidelines provide a means to factor climate change into planning.

Next steps

The Hub is looking to work with councils to apply and refine the guidelines for using climate change information for risk assessment and planning. Interested councils are invited to contact Hub Knowledge Broker Mandy Hopkins on 03 9239 4649 or mandy.hopkins@csiro.au for more information.