



Adapting to Climate Impacts

Main Points

What we examined

Government reports have demonstrated that climate change affects all regions of the country and a wide range of economic sectors. These impacts and the need to adapt to them touch on virtually all federal government portfolios, with significant implications for policies and programs related to Canadians' health and the country's industry, infrastructure, and ecosystems. The federal government is well positioned to help Canadians reduce their exposure to risks from climate change by providing them with information on impacts and adaptive measures.

We examined five key federal departments whose mandates are affected significantly by climate change—Environment Canada, Natural Resources Canada, Health Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada. We looked at whether the departments are identifying and assessing the risks posed by climate change in their areas of responsibility. We also looked at whether they are taking steps to adapt to the risks by considering them in their planning and decision making.

We looked at four climate change adaptation programs in these departments to determine whether they have collected and disseminated information in a usable way to those who need the information—for example, other federal departments, provinces and territories, Aboriginal communities, municipalities, industry sectors, non-governmental organizations, and academics.

Audit work for this chapter was substantially completed on 8 June 2010.

Why it's important

The health of Canadians and Canada's natural environment, communities, and economy are vulnerable to the impacts of a changing climate. Some of these impacts are already occurring from coast to coast. They are most evident in Canada's North where, for example, the thawing of permafrost as a result of temperature increases is affecting the stability of roads, buildings, pipelines, and other infrastructure.

Adapting to actual or expected changes in climate involves adjusting our decisions, activities, and thinking. These adjustments are essential both to minimize adverse effects and to take advantage of new and beneficial opportunities. The government acknowledges that climate change is inevitable and that we must adapt to its impacts in order to reduce their severity.

What we found

- The government has not established clear priorities for addressing the need to adapt to a changing climate. Although the government committed in 2007 to produce a federal adaptation policy to assist it in establishing priorities for future action, there is still no federal adaptation policy, strategy, or action plan in place. Departments therefore lack the necessary central direction for prioritizing and coordinating their efforts to develop more effective and efficient ways of managing climate change risks.
- Overall, the departments we examined have not taken concrete actions to adapt to the impacts of a changing climate. With few exceptions, they have yet to adjust or develop policies and practices to better respond to the risks. However, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Natural Resources Canada, Health Canada, and Environment Canada have taken the first steps of risk management by completing assessments of the risks to their mandate areas from climate change, and they have prioritized the risks. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has initiated but not yet completed a department-wide assessment of climate change risks it must manage.
- The four programs we examined have shared information on climate impacts and adaptation in a manner that responds to the needs of their specific clients, stakeholders, and partners. However, the programs cannot meet the increasing demand for information. Funding for adaptation programs under the Clean Air Agenda is scheduled to end in March 2011, and there is no plan in place to address ongoing needs after that date.

The departments have responded. The departments agree with all of the recommendations addressed to them. Their detailed responses follow the recommendations throughout the chapter.