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The Threat in Hampton Roads

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Home / Opinion / Columnists / Guest Columnist

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Toll and Titley: The threat in Hampton Roads

By Ray Toll and David W. Titley
Nov 30, 2014

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Rising seas, extreme storm surge and recurrent floods threaten the Hampton Roads region. In fact, according to data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Hampton Roads is the area most threatened by rising seas on the East Coast.

It's not just an environmental issue. It's an issue that costs money, depletes resources and impacts residents and visitors alike.

It's also an issue that threatens national security.

Late last month, the U.S. Department of Defense released a new sustainability strategy - the 2014 Sustainability Performance Plan - which highlighted Hampton Roads as a community bearing the brunt of early impacts of climate change.

With the plan's release, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel emphasized the potential impact of climate change to the area:

"We see recurrent flooding today, and we are beginning to work to address a projected sea level rise of 1.5 feet over the next 20 to 50 years," Hagel said.

A sea level rise of this proportion has the potential to impact the region's military installations dramatically.

However, it is worth calling attention to the security risks climate change is already posing to the state's coastline, including our military infrastructure and economic centers in Hampton Roads.

Flooding in the Norfolk area in late May of this year was just one incident confirming projections for recurrent floods in the area.

Roads closed, stranding commuters. Norfolk Naval Station - the world's largest naval base, and critical for military readiness - was flooded.

When the very infrastructure of our naval bases is threatened, we have no choice but to make a plan of action to curb the threat.

With the support of U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine and Reps. Rob Wittman, Bobby Scott and Scott Rigell, some excellent work has already begun to address rising seas in the region now, and for the future.

One important example of this work is a pilot study being conducted by Old Dominion University and the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission to understand how the changing climate will affect our military infrastructure.

Information from this pilot will be used to create new resilience strategies.

We are encouraged that the region is garnering attention as an area of climate risk.

On Dec. 2, the National Security Council will convene a group of local leaders, nongovernmental and academic partners for a Preparedness and Resilience Exercise for Hampton Roads.

The event marks the seriousness with which the area is considered as a security risk, but a lot more must be done on the local and national level to meet this growing threat.

As these groups come together in Hampton Roads to learn and share knowledge, we know we will be joined by others who care deeply about this region.

We must act swiftly. We must act with persistence, with our sights on a future facing a changing climate.

The strength of our national security depends on it.

Ray Toll, a former captain in the U.S. Navy, is director of coastal resilience research at Old Dominion University. David W. Titley, a retired rear admiral, is director of the Center for Solutions to Weather and Climate Risk at Pennsylvania State University, and member of the Advisory Board at the Center for Climate and Security.

