

Opinion: State's future depends on adapting to climate

By Dan Cayan

Maybe it is the fact that in 1862 massive floods from 45 straight days of rain transformed the Central Valley into an inland sea that drove the California Legislature to relocate to San Francisco.

Or maybe it's because sunny beaches, cool Sierra slopes and expansive deserts can be seen and felt, all within a half-day's drive. Santa Ana winds and San Francisco fog figure prominently in our culture. For many reasons, Californians have a heightened sense of their special relationship to climate, an appreciation for how it changes from year to year, and a high awareness of the extremes that come with it.

On the national level, however, climate change science has been a challenging message to convey in the political arena. Politicians respond to immediate, often emotional, issues and are especially tuned to the timetables of legislative terms and news cycles.

Climate change is in many ways the opposite – a plodding sequence of events, dominoes falling one at a time only every 10 years or 100. Warnings of temperature rises that may amount to only a few degrees in 50 years do not inspire angst. The climate trend that is set in motion today might be recognized as serious only by a voter two generations hence.

But Californians have shown that they understand how important it is to understand climate and invest in research. Even through years of unsigned budgets, shutdowns and IOUs, we have still managed, wisely, to take the long view on one thing that

really matters.

Dan Cayan is a researcher at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego and the U.S. Geological Survey.

Read the whole story