Editorial: Adapting to climate's new normal

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the May 5, 2013, Sacramento Bee.***

No doubt, it is gearing up to be a dry, ugly summer.

It's just early May, but fires have erupted around the state, most notably in Ventura County. Folsom Reservoir, normally brimming with water at this time of year, is at two-thirds its capacity. And it won't get help from the remaining snowpack, which, according to the state's latest and last snow survey, is at 17 percent of normal.

It was possible to walk under the Tahoe Keys pier in November 2009. Photo/LTN file

But of course, that's the problem. Climate change has changed the norm, creating a "new normal" that is far from easy to predict. All we know is that the bulk of reputable scientists tell us to prepare for extremes. By this, they mean extreme events far beyond what is "normal" in a state known for its disastrous wildfires, droughts, floods and mudslides.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Global Change Research Program

released a draft of its Climate Assessment Report. It noted that the Southwestern United States, including California, has heated up markedly in recent decades.

“The period since 1950 has been hotter than any comparable period in at least 600 years,” the report stated, citing more than 10 studies. It also cited research concluding that human-caused temperature increases and drought have killed trees and increased both the frequency and size of wildfires in the region.

Climate models – not absolute proof, but the best tools available for forecasting the future – show that annual average temperatures in the Southwest are projected to rise 2 to 6 degrees Fahrenheit by 2041-70 even if global emissions of greenhouse gases are substantially reduced. The Climate Assessment Report warns that the Southwest should prepare for decreased snowpack and stream flows, meaning reduced water for cities, agriculture and fisheries. It predicts serious impacts on high-value crops, stronger flood events and more extreme high tides. And it warns that, with 90 percent of the Southwest’s population living in urban areas, heat waves will claim an ever-higher toll, partly because of the way hard-scaped cities amplify heat, known as the “heat-island effect.”

California has been a leader in reducing greenhouse gases through cleaner cars, energy efficiency, conservation and a state law requiring a reduction in emissions. But adaptation has to be an equal part of the strategy. Overall, and especially on the local and regional level, public officials aren’t taking seriously the need to prepare their communities for the kind of extreme events that are inevitable with a changing climate.

These extremes – and the responses to them – vary on where Californians live. In the Central Valley, authorities must prepare communities for flooding evacuations and protracted heat waves that are particularly brutal, especially for the

elderly and infirm. In coastal areas, sea level rise is projected to increase, and flooding and erosion are already occurring in places where houses were built too close to the water, or too close to cliffs.

In Southern California and the foothills, wildfires are the primary threat, and as the photo above shows, the unrestrained construction of suburban homes in wildfire zones complicates the task of first responders.

California has developed a “climate change adaptation strategy” that is thoughtful and comprehensive, including a tool called “Cal-Adapt” that allows local officials to better understand projected impacts to their communities.

Local leaders need to read this report and take the threats seriously. To adapt to a changing climate, cities and counties will have to be proactive in planning for more extreme floods, droughts and fires, even if means changing their general plans that were developed under the “old normal.”