

Wildlife boss not fish out of water

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AUSTIN — As a self-proclaimed conservative Republican bureaucrat appointed by a conservative Republican governor, Texas Parks and Wildlife Chairman Joseph Fitzsimons admits he probably looks a little out of place at a global warming conference.

But he seemed perfectly at ease when addressing an audience of 180 environmentalists and scientists at Environmental Defense's sixth annual water conference, which focused on the impact of climate change.

He even endorsed the idea of charging a tax on carbon emissions from power plants and other industrial facilities as a way to fight the phenomena.

"I'm not an expert on global warming, but I do know that the sooner you get started on an ecological problem the cheaper it will be," Fitzsimons said.

He then added a bit of wisdom he picked up from an old horse trainer while working his way through the West as a ranch hand as a young man. Fitzsimons said the wisdom summed up the carrot-and-stick approach needed to trigger industry to reduce greenhouse gasses.

"All you do is make the right thing easy and the wrong thing hard," he said. "Sometimes it's that simple."

Global warming is the heating of the planet caused by man-made emissions of carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gasses.

Although still a politically controversial issue, the scientific community generally agrees that the planet is already feeling the impact of global warming, and will continue to do so unless drastic steps are taken to reduce greenhouse gasses.

The temperatures in Texas could rise by as much as 4 degrees by the end of the century, according to the National Wildlife Federation. This could cause a 20-inch sea level rise at the coast and, among other things, massive damage to gulf fisheries as salt water inundates the estuaries that serve as nurseries for marine life.

Climate change is already changing the migration seasons of birds and causing small marine organisms and insects to change their reproductive patterns.

The effect on the state's streams and lakes, although still largely unknown, could become pronounced in the coming years, said James Matthews, a doctoral student at the University of Texas Section of Integrated Biology.

Climate change is also expected to cause longer periods of drought in Texas as well as more violent storms. Those at Friday's conference preached the need to take the coming changes in account while planning for the state's water needs.

This is particularly important, many said, when looking at how much water the state's streams and estuaries require to remain ecologically healthy — a delicate balancing act when accounting for the water needs of Texas's growing and thirsty cities.