

Climate change in Florida is a threat to national security | Opinion

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By Norm Seip



A damaged airplane hanger is seen on the grounds of Tyndall Air Force Base after Hurricane Michael passed through the area on October 12, 2018 in Mexico Beach, Florida. The hurricane hit the panhandle area with category 4 winds causing major damage. (Joe Raedle / Getty Images)

Florida is home to three combatant commands and over 20 bases, representing each branch of the military. Florida's geography and location provide a unique and valuable training ground for our forces and are ideally suited for supporting our country's military and national security operations.

Unfortunately, the benefits to national security provided by its geography are being countered by ever increasing climate change threats, such as worsening storms and hurricanes.

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In 2019, Congress commissioned a Department of Defense report of the bases most threatened by climate change, and eight Florida bases made the list. The climate threats cited in the report included sea level rise and recurrent flooding, hurricanes and extreme weather, as well as extreme heat and drought.



Lt. Gen. Norm Seip, USAF (ret.) served in the U.S. Air Force for 35 years. Currently, he is an independent consultant focused on defense and national security-related matters and a member of the American Security Project's Board of Directors.

But the military didn't need a report to tell them climate change threatens national security. In 2014, torrential rains caused historic flooding, which disrupted operations at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field.

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In 2018, Hurricane Michael severely damaged 95% of the infrastructure at Tyndall Air Force Base, which disrupted critical training and maintenance for almost a month. It cost roughly \$2 billion to repair 17 of 55 F-22s housed at Tyndall, and experts expect it will take years to rebuild the base, at a cost of over \$3 billion.

In part due to the damage, the Air Force had to consider grounding combat aircraft and cutting the flying hours for non-deploying squadrons. Such cuts affect military readiness and put U.S. national security at risk.

Climate threats to bases are expected to worsen in the coming years. Evidence now shows that hurricanes will have higher wind speeds, move slower, and take twice as long to break apart. This will increase the potential and scope of wind and flood damage to military infrastructure and assets.

By 2050, Florida's coastal bases may experience 10 times the number of floods they experience today. If current trends continue, by 2100, low-lying areas of Eglin AFB may be underwater for 80% of the year.

Current trends indicate Florida bases will suffer a four-fold increase in dangerously hot days by 2050, with MacDill, Homestead and Tyndall experiencing 76 to 116 more days annually with a heat index above 100 degrees.

All of this is an argument for risk management and mitigation, something that the U.S. military does well. During my nearly four decades in the military, we constantly assessed threats and recommended action against those threats.

We know that waiting for 100% certainty on the battlefield can be disastrous, and our certainty about the national security consequences of climate change is high enough to demand immediate action. Even if you choose not to believe that human activity contributes to climate change, we cannot wait until there's 100% certainty.

Adaptation and resilience programs like the Readiness and Environmental Protection Initiative (REPI) and the Defense Community Infrastructure Pilot Program (DCIP) need continued and expanded Congressional funding.

REPI helps bases manage forests to mitigate wildfires and preserve coastal wetlands and mangroves to reduce flooding. DCIP empowers base communities to strengthen readiness by building or improving vital community infrastructure, such as roads and schools. And these are just two examples.

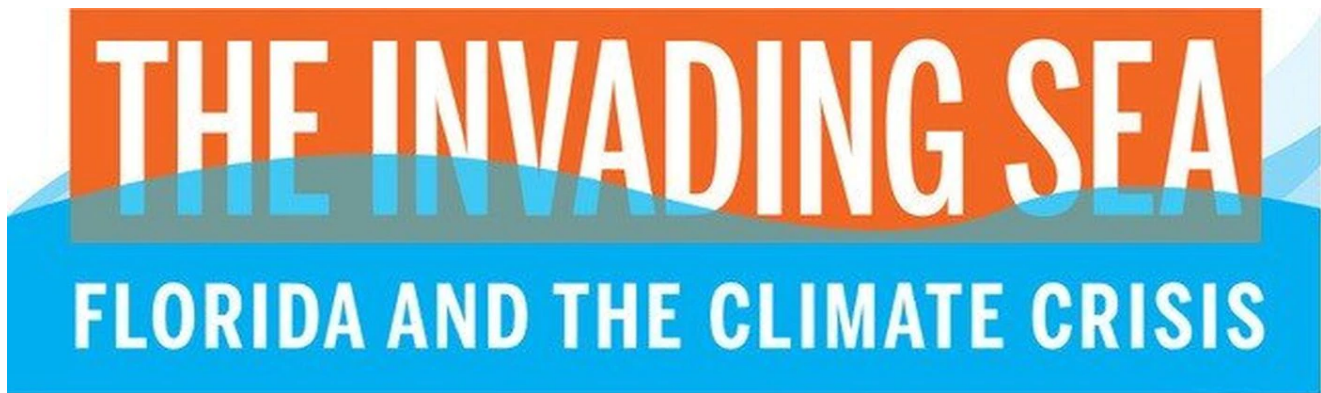
The Department of Defense should develop performance metrics that are objective, clear and quantifiable, to ensure these programs are successful.

Our elected officials and the public should take a lesson from the military. We must start by acknowledging that the risks of climate change are real and growing every day. Then we must act — as individual, as communities, as a state and as a nation. We cannot afford to ignore the risks of a changing climate and its impact on our nation's security.

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"The Invading Sea" is the opinion arm of the Florida Climate Reporting Network, a collaborative of news organizations across the state focusing on the threats posed by the warming climate.



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