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## **EBC/RISEP R.I. Chapter Climate Change Program Science & Solutions in R.I.**

March 21, 2013 - Green Buildings

On February 26th the Environmental Business Council of New England hosted its Second Annual program on climate change adaptation in R.I. The program, chaired by Kelly Knee, manager of RPS ASA's Coastal Hazards group and co-hosted by the R.I. Society of Environmental Professionals, included an array of speakers and attendees from the public and private sector.

This year's program focused on the interactions between climate change and extreme weather. Recent events such as 'Superstorm' Sandy highlighted the need for improved understanding of the connections between extreme weather and climate change in the region. While the association between climate change and extreme weather remains an area of active scientific research, in its Fourth Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) an increase in hurricane intensity leading to an increase in the frequency of the most intense storms as well as changes to extra-tropical storm tracks as storms get pushed further pole-ward. In the coastal zone, the impacts of sea level rise further complicate the expected severity of storms as higher sea levels allow storm surge and waves to propagate further inland.

In its 2012 Progress Report, the R.I. Climate Change Commission (RICCC) predicts that as the climate continues to change, extreme weather events such as droughts, intense precipitation, severe storms, and flooding will challenge R.I. The commission identified four key concerns for R.I.; these include wastewater infrastructure, drinking water supplies, energy infrastructure, and public health and safety.

David Vallee, hydrologist-in-charge at the National Weather Service's Northeast River Forecast Center began the morning with an overview of meteorological characteristics of Hurricane Sandy and a review of why R.I. experienced so much coastal damage.

He emphasized that the long duration southeast fetch of the winds, which drove swells directly into the south coast of the state winds provided a wake-up call to the region. This sentiment was later echoed by Michelle Burnett, R.I.'s state floodplain coordinator.

Following the overview of storm characteristics and damage, Caroline Karp, senior lecturer at Brown University, and Julia Wyman, staff attorney at Roger Williams University, provided an overview of the challenges and legal issues involved with disaster recovery and preparing for future climate change. They were then joined by Michelle Burnett in a panel discussion during which the future of the National Flood Insurance Program, including increased insurance rates, as well as several innovative adaptation and retreat strategies such as transferable development rights and a public trust mitigation bank were debated.

In addition to learning about the scientific and legal aspects of extreme weather, attendees were treated to overviews of several public sector initiatives for adapting to climate change. June Swallow, chief of the office of drinking water provided an update on the Department of Health's

initiative to ensure safe water for Rhode Island's future. This four part project to help water suppliers understand changing environmental conditions and impacts on drinking water supply consists of data collection, impact assessment, strategy development, and outreach and education. Bill Patenaude, principal engineer at the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, gave an overview of impacts wastewater treatment facilities resulting from recent extreme weather events promoted the need for a full scale vulnerability assessment. Finally, the application of EPA's Climate Ready Estuaries program to a local watershed was presented by Thomas Ardito of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program.

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