

Alaska: 'The canary in the coal mine'

By Terri Harber, Daily News staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, September 8, 2015 12:00 am

Bob Lohr has great love for the outdoors, and his adopted home state of Alaska occupies a special place in his heart.

"I cross-country skiing, year-round biking, climbing, hiking - you can do just about anything you can imagine in Alaska," he said.

But environmentally, Alaska's scenic beauty provides a window into the future, he said. Warmer temperatures and melting permafrost are forcing changes in how people living in the Arctic hunt and gather. Scientists also fear low-lying native villages along the Arctic Ocean and Bering Strait are in danger of being washed out because of stronger and more frequent storms eroding shorelines.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

"Alaska serves as a head's up - it has the role of being the canary in the coal mine," Lohr said.

"There's no room for doubt anymore about climate change."

Lohr, who was visiting family living in the Palouse area, spoke to members of Citizens Climate Lobby of the Palouse last week about what was happening in Alaska. His sister, Virginia, of Pullman, is involved in the Palouse CCL group.

Lohr said he has watched changes occur at one of his favorite locations, Byron Glacier.

"The heart of the glacier has disappeared. It's not natural at all," he said. "It's a real troubling sight."

While Lohr was visiting the Palouse, he missed President Barack Obama's visit to Alaska, where he focused on calling attention to the effects of climate change.

"Presidents make stops in Alaska on their way to Asia but they aren't here very long," Lohr said. "Once (their aircraft) is refueled they're on their way."

Lohr, who moved to Alaska from the East Coast in 1974 when he became a Vista volunteer, lives in Anchorage and works as an insurance



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consultant.

"It has the most splendid scenery, so far, that I've seen in the world," he said. "The scale of things. It's impossible to imagine how big the scenery is - and how far away these things are."

Lohr spent a dozen years as the state's director of insurance and served as executive director of the Alaska Public Utilities Commission. He has a master's degree from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

He said it was important that the president called climate change "a challenge that will define the contours of this century more dramatically than any other."

Obama's political opponents focused on the name change of Mt. McKinley to the more native Denali, but, Lohr said, the president also made plenty of other important stops and speeches.

Obama spoke about the need to halt climate change at "The Conference on Global Leadership in the Arctic: Cooperation, Innovation, Engagement and Resilience" in Anchorage and also hiked along the Exit Glacier, about 120 miles south of Anchorage. It has retreated 187 feet in about a year, according to the National Parks Service.

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