

Harper touts climate change research hub from afar as climate rages

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CHURCHILL, MAN. – Canada's new Arctic research station will turn a spotlight on the environmental challenge that is transforming vast regions of the north – climate change.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper confirmed Tuesday that will be one mission of the new northern research hub which he announced will be located in Cambridge Bay on Victoria Island.

"I anticipate that the high Arctic research station will become a hub on climate change, as well as a wide range of other issues," he told reporters here as he announced the location of the station, first promised in 2007.

It may have been such climatic changes that kept Harper from making the announcement in Cambridge Bay, a town of about 1,400 set on the edge of the Northwest Passage, as planned on Tuesday.

Instead, a fierce storm with lashing rains and winds topping 90 km/h grounded Harper's military Hercules transport plane in this remote Manitoba community, forcing him to unveil the news here.

Harper took the delay in stride, and instead held his news conference inside the log cabin surroundings of the Lazy Bear Lodge here, with rain pelting the windows.

"This is a reality of Canada's north," he told reporters.

He boasted that the new station would be a "large-scale, world class centre" that would examine "all aspects of northern science and northern environment."

But Arctic expert Michael Byers warned that with the station must come new investments to support the science that will take place there.

"The greatest need, in terms of Arctic science, is long-term program money to pay for grad students, technicians, equipment and fuel. New buildings aren't worth much if you don't have people trained and paid to work in them," said Byers, who holds the Canadian Research Chair in International Law and Politics at the University of British Columbia.

He also questioned why the research station didn't go to Resolute, which was also in the running and is already home to the Polar Continental Shelf Project, which has been providing logistical support to Arctic researchers for more than four decades.

"Why start from scratch in Cambridge Bay when there's an existing infrastructure in Resolute on which you could build," Byers said in an email.

Political scientist Rob Huebert said research in the Arctic is vital to better understand the harsh region.

"The Arctic is sort of the canary in the coal mine when it comes to some of the environmental changes we are talking about," Huebert, of the University of Calgary, said in an interview.

Confirmation of the research station comes at time of renewed environmental worries about the fragile northern ecosystem, both from the effects of climate change and the increased activity it promises to bring.

The government's own Arctic policy statement, released last week, concedes that climate change is having a significant impact on the region's unique and fragile environment."

The reduction in sea ice will have "profound consequences" for the people and environment across the Arctic," the statement said.

It's envisaged that the station will be a year-round, multidisciplinary facility "exploring the cutting-edge of Arctic science and technology," according to a government news release. There was no immediate cost provided for its construction. However, the 2010 federal budget set aside \$18 million for pre-construction design.

"Investments in Arctic science strengthen Canada's sovereignty, foster a more sustainable environment and contribute to a growing economy," Harper said.

He said the new station would be a meeting place for "Canada's top scientists and indeed, leading scientists around the world.

"This station will stimulate not only local economic activity and leading edge research. It will also inspire the imagination and the ambitions of young Canadians in Cambridge Bay and across the north," Harper said.

He defended the pace of the research station, which is not expected to open until 2017, and other signature programs of the Conservative northern strategy, such as a new icebreaker and patrol vessels.

"These are big-scale projects. They're not done in an instant," Harper said, citing the amount of time it takes to design such complex programs.

And in the case of Arctic research, he said his government has boosted funding into existing programs and facilities.

"Just to be clear ... we're not standing still. Things are happening to prepare the ground and expand scientific research programs in the meantime," he said.

Harper hopes to resume his week-long northern tour Wednesday with a flight to Resolute – weather permitting – and a visit with Canadian troops taking part in an Arctic exercise.