N.C. lawmakers tackle issue of global warming

By Mark Schreiner
Raleigh Bureau Chief

RALEIGH | It’s an old joke that everybody talks about the weather but no one does anything about it.

But a new state government panel will look at data showing the climate is getting hotter and suggest what North Carolina should do to address the issue.

State lawmakers may soon empower a commission to study North Carolina’s contribution to global warming and propose what actions the state should take to limit pollution and adapt to climactic change.

“If global warming is in fact taking place, while it would be happening over the entire earth, North Carolina could be affected more than most,” said state Sen. Charlie Albertson, D-Duplin, who is sponsoring the legislation. “It could be devastating to our coastline.”

Most scientists who study long-term weather trends believe the earth is getting warmer and that this warming is causing the climate to change. A growing body of evidence suggests the warming is caused by build-up of pollution in the atmosphere.

There are skeptics, including a coalition of business and trade organizations called the National Consumer Coalition, who argue global warming and climate change are exaggerated.

On Tuesday, the state House Environment Committee gave its approval to Senate Bill 1134, which would create a 32-member Legislative Commission on Global Climate Change.

In addition to examining scientific studies, the panel also would be charged to evaluate whether the state should set its own pollution reduction goals. It would have to report its findings to the General Assembly before November 2006.

The bill sets out seats on the commission for scientists, environmentalists and representatives of the state’s two largest utility companies. The presidents of Duke Power and Progress Energy, as well as the directors of the N.C. Coastal Federation and the N.C. Conservation Council, could serve on the panel or send someone to represent them, for example.

Progress, which serves electric and natural gas customers in Southeastern North Carolina, is preparing its own study of global warming and will present it to shareholders and the public in March, said company spokeswoman Dana Yeganian.

About 20 states have convened similar studies.

State efforts to address global warming have accelerated since the federal administration decided in 2001 not to participate in the global pollution control treaty known as the Kyoto accord, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. California, for example, set air pollution controls tougher than federal rules.

So far, climate and sea level changes have been slight, but scientists say effects are measurable and of concern.

“No one will be able to notice the sea level rise, but it is happening,” said Frederick Bingham, an associate professor of physics and physical oceanography at UNCW’s Center for Marine Science in Wilmington. “The ocean is rising about a foot and a half a century.”

His most recent research has been on declining salinity in the ocean and whether global warming causes it.

The most likely cause of warming, he said, is that increasing temperatures are causing the water in the world’s oceans to expand. To a lesser extent, he said, the melting of glaciers and ice caps are adding more water to the oceans.

The average surface temperature of the planet has increased by about 1.1 degrees since the start of the 20th century, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Some fear that in coming centuries, the seas will rise to cover some coastal areas and that the weather overall will become hotter and often more inhospitable.

Climactic scientists also believe the rate of heating is increasing, lending credence to theorists who believe carbon dioxide gas from the burning of coal, oil and gas is the main culprit behind global warming.

“The climate is such a huge and complicated thing, we may never pinpoint that human activity is to blame,” Bingham said. “But it is clear that burning fossil fuels creates chemicals that cause warming in the atmosphere.”

The Senate approved the bill last month 44-6. Voting in favor were Mr. Albertson; Sen. Julia Boseman, D-New Hanover; and Sen. R.C. Soles, D-Columbus.

It now goes to the full House, which may vote on the proposal as early as Thursday.