

UNL joins Oregon and New Mexico in hosting Climate Masters program

By Sarah Miller, Daily Nebraskan

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Climate Masters will give people the chance to learn about climate change and the efforts they can take to reduce their personal carbon footprints.

The new School of Natural Resources program will start this spring. "This is strictly an action-based program," said Tapan Pathak, one of the project assistants and assistant extension educator in climate variability at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The program is one of three in the nation, according to Tonya Bernadt, the Climate Masters project coordinator and education & outreach specialist at the National Drought Mitigation Center. The first started in Oregon in 2008, she said. The other is in New Mexico.

"It's pretty cool that we're alongside Oregon, doing this, you know, because they're so proactive with sustainability," Bernadt said.

The course is funded through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which provided a \$47,000 grant, Pathak said. UNL is also contributing to the project to give the Climate Masters program between \$66,000 and \$67,000 total to cover costs.

The program is free, open to anyone 19 years or older and will begin March 8. A second round of training will begin January 2013.

Participants will first learn about the basics of climate change, Bernadt said.

From there, students will learn ways to change their habits, ranging from green building, water conservation and transportation methods, Bernadt said, adding there will be expert speakers throughout the course.

Cecil Steward, dean emeritus and professor at the School of Architecture at UNL, will be talking about green building, and a speaker from Lincoln Electric System will be presenting about energy, Bernadt said.

Students will also go on field trips to local farms and the landfill, she said.

Bernadt said her first trip to a landfill was an eye opener.

"It's an interesting place and I think it's good for people to see," she said.

Once students graduate as Climate Masters, they are expected to volunteer 30 hours to spread awareness about climate change.

"A lot of these actions, you don't actually invest anything," Pathak said. "It's just changing some of the practices, and that's what we are going to teach them."

Bernadt said they will be pushing volunteers to conduct carbon analyses on people's homes. After completing an analysis, the Climate Masters will give tips on ways to reduce emissions.

Other ways Climate Masters can fulfill their volunteer hours is by participating in local events to teach others what they learned in the course. Natalie Umphlett, another project assistant and a regional climatologist for the High Plains Regional Climate Center, said they will have booths at the Central Plains Severe Weather Symposium and Family Weatherfest in March and at Earth Day Lincoln in April.

Climate Masters is a partner project with Cleaner Greener Lincoln, Mayor Chris Beutler's sustainability initiative.

"We still have some challenges because a lot of people still don't accept the climate change trends," Pathak said.

Despite this obstacle, Pathak said people don't have to believe in climate change to be a part of the program — there are economic and environmental incentives.

"Even though you don't believe our belief, the action-based program is going to benefit the people and the environment," he said.

The class is open to 25 people and has nine seats available, Bernadt said. Climate Masters applications can be filled out online at climatemasters.unl.edu and are due March 1. The program will be on Thursday nights from 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. March 8 through May 10.

Bernadt said they hope to keep the program going through more grants.

"We are really excited to kick off this first session," Pathak said.

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