WASHINGTON -- There's no clear answer to the scientific debate over whether climate change, including this summer's record-low levels of sea ice in the Arctic, influenced superstorm Sandy's path and intensity.

But scientists agree on one point: Rising sea levels caused primarily by global warming could worsen the effects of storms such as Sandy, particularly when it comes to storm surge. And that means coastal communities throughout the U.S. must think about what they will need for protection from such storms.

"The economic impacts go from Florida to Maine," said Leonard Berry, the director of the Climate Change Initiative at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Fla. "Whatever you think about global warming, it suggests we're dealing with a different scenario of storms and patterns of rainfall, which is going to be exacerbated by even the small rise in sea level which we've already had."

In hard-hit New York, that means rebuilding flooded subway tunnels in the short term and in the long term, perhaps constructing a multibillion-dollar flood barrier to protect lower Manhattan from the sort of storm surge it experienced during Sandy. In places such as Punta Gorda, Fla., which was swamped by waters from the Gulf of Mexico during Hurricane Charley in 2004, it means rethinking coastal land uses.

"It's a longer conversation, but I think part of learning from this is the recognition that climate change is a reality; extreme weather is a reality; it is a reality that we are vulnerable," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, said Wednesday.

Climate change got short shrift this election season. It didn't come up during the presidential or vice presidential debates, a first since 1984.
President Barack Obama mentioned it during the Democratic National Convention, saying that "climate change is not a hoax."

Republican opponent Mitt Romney has bashed Obama repeatedly for his 2008 promise to "begin to slow the rise of the oceans and heal the planet."