

Report warns Australia of severe climate impacts

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CANBERRA (Reuters) - Australia, slowly emerging from its worst drought in a century, will suffer killer heatwaves, bushfires and floods as global warming intensifies, a draft report by international climate scientists said on Friday.



Already the world's driest inhabited continent, Australia's outback interior will see temperatures rise by up to 6.7 degrees Celsius (12 Fahrenheit) by 2080, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report said.

"An increase in fire danger in Australia is likely to be associated with a reduced interval between fires, increased fire intensity, a decrease in fire extinguishments," sections of the report leaked to Australian media said on Friday.

The study will increase pressure on Australia's conservative government, which refuses to sign the Kyoto Protocol, to do more to combat climate change ahead of elections later this year. Global warming is shaping as a major issue.

The draft is the second of four to be completed this year by IPCC climate experts and will be released for discussion in Brussels on April 6.

The first study said there was almost 90 percent certainty that humans were changing the world's climate and causing global warming, mostly through reliance on burning fossil fuels.

The draft second report said sea levels would rise due to glacial melt, causing havoc for coastal-dwelling Australia and New Zealand with "greater coastal inundation, erosion, loss of wetlands and salt water intrusion into freshwater sources."

Rising temperatures would also hit the Great Barrier Reef with "catastrophic mortality of coral species annually." The first report by the IPCC said the reef would be "functionally extinct" in 40 years.

STORMS, DEATHS

Landslides, water shortages and storm surges would cause infrastructure destruction, and heat-related deaths could rise to 6,300 a year from 1,115 at present by 2050, when temperatures would have already spiked by 3.4C, the report said.

The Australian government, which this week hardened opposition to signing the Kyoto Protocol which set greenhouse gas reduction targets, said there was nothing new in the draft.

"We know that there is the possibility or the probability of a hotter and drier future," Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull told Australian Broadcasting Corp. radio.

But former environment department chief Roger Beale, a member of the IPCC's working group on the economic impacts of climate change, said Canberra could not ignore the findings.

"Australia among developed countries is very broadly exposed and we are already close to the thresholds," Beale told Reuters.

Prime Minister John Howard this week rejected a plea from British climate economist Nicholas Stern to urgently ratify the Kyoto Protocol and slash greenhouse gas emissions by at least 60 percent by 2050 to help fight global warming.

Howard told Parliament that Stern's demands would destroy Australia's economic growth and cost jobs.

Environment group WWF said Australia faced massive upheaval and potentially waves of wildlife extinctions due to global warming, with 1,590 native species threatened.

"Even if major greenhouse emission reductions happened tomorrow, the climate will still change dramatically and we have to be ready for it," WWF spokesman Martin Taylor said.

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