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Human Actions Blamed for Worst Australian Drought

SYDNEY, Australia, January 15, 2003 (ENS) - Human-induced global warming was a key factor in the severity of the 2002 drought in Australia, the worst in the country's history, according to a report issued Tuesday by WWF Australia. The report is part of an effort by Australian environmental organizations to convince the Liberal Government of John Howard to reverse its policy and sign the Kyoto climate protocol.

Higher temperatures and drier conditions have created greater bushfire danger than previous droughts, the report warns. Drought severity has increased in the Murray Darling Basin, where 40 percent of Australia's agricultural produce is grown. It has cost some A\$8.1 billion in lost farm production, and taxpayer funded drought assistance to farmers could exceed A\$500 million.



**Dry
rangeland
in
Western
Australia**
(Photo
courtesy
[National
Land and
Resources
Audit](#))

The
report,

"Global Warming Contributes to Australia's Worst Drought," compares the 2002 drought with the four other major droughts in the country since 1950 and has found higher temperatures caused a marked increase in evaporation rates from soil, watercourses and vegetation.

"The higher temperatures experienced throughout Australia last year are part of a national warming trend over the past 50 years which cannot be explained by natural climate variability alone," said

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Professor David Karoly, formerly professor of Meteorology at Monash University.

Karoly coauthored the report with Dr. James Risbey from Monash University's School of Mathematical Sciences, and Anna Reynolds, WWF Australia's Climate Change Campaign manager.

In 2002 Australia recorded its highest ever average March-November daytime maximum temperature. The temperature across the country was 1.6°C higher than the long term average and 0.8°C higher than the previous record.

The Murray Darling Basin experienced average maximum temperatures more than 1.2°C higher than in any previous drought since 1950.

"Most of this warming is likely due to the increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere from human activity such as burning fossil fuels for electricity and transport and from landclearing," said Karoly.

The actual trend in Australian temperature since 1950 now matches the climate model studies of how temperatures respond to increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Karoly believes this is the first drought in Australia where the impact of human-induced global warming can be clearly observed.

Dr. Risbey said that although the 2002 drought was related to natural climate variations associated with El Niño, last year's higher temperatures could not be attributed solely to this factor.

"While higher temperatures are expected during El Niño triggered droughts," Risbey said, "the 2002 drought temperatures are extraordinary when compared to the four major droughts since 1950, with average maximum temperatures more than 1°C higher than these other droughts."

Reynolds says global warming is affecting the livelihoods of rural Australians. The report contains new data on evaporation rates, and says low rainfall and higher evaporation has adversely impacted agricultural productivity with lower crop production leading to lower export earnings for farmers.

Sheep

surrounded by a cloud of dust in Australia's 1982 drought.

(Photo courtesy Australian Bureau of Meteorology)

WWF is urging Prime Minister Howard to sign the Kyoto climate protocol to prevent more economic and environmental devastation. Australia would be permitted to limit its greenhouse gas emissions to an eight percent increase in the 2008 to 2012 period. The Howard government has chosen to follow the United States away from the protocol and towards technological and market based ways to dealing with global warming.

"We can slow global warming, keep temperature increases to the lower end of the scale and reduce the severity of future droughts," said Reynolds.

"The Kyoto Protocol is the first international agreement with targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and slowing global warming - it is in our national interest to ratify the treaty," she said.

The nation's largest conservation group agrees. The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) issued a statement today urging the Howard government to reconsider its Kyoto Protocol policy. "Australia and the United States are now the only developed countries refusing to join Kyoto - and both countries are big contributors to climate change, with huge greenhouse pollution problems," the ACF said.

"If the Howard Government is serious about addressing climate change and protecting Australia's natural resources, agricultural industries and economy, it would ratify the Kyoto Protocol immediately," said the ACF. "With water already such a problem, Australia can't afford to ignore climate change."



In the Murray-Darling River Basin
(Photo courtesy CSIRO)

Australia is the world's driest continent. The report means that Australia's already stressed

rivers will have less water in the coming decades.

The biggest drops in rainfall are expected in spring, particularly over eastern Australia. Mean flows in the Murray-Darling river system are predicted to be reduced by 30 percent by 2050, which would undo current repair efforts. the ACF said.

In late December, the Howard Government sponsored a national conference in Canberra on climate change. Some 150 business and community leaders, government officials and scientists looked at the possible impacts of climate change on Australians and adaptation strategies.

They acknowledged that climate change "could potentially affect Australia's water supply, agricultural production, flooding and stormwater management, coastal erosion, biodiversity, increases in pest species and diseases, insurance cover and premiums and tourism."

Environment Minister Dr. David Kemp said, "Adaptation to the impacts of climate change will require an understanding of projected effects on regions within Australia, sectors of economy and society. It is imperative that Australia be prepared and have a plan of action on ways to respond to climate change impacts and adaptation."

As part of what the Howard Government is calling the Government-Business Climate Change Dialogue, five business working groups were formed and are currently examining greenhouse gas response options with regard to energy and resources, energy intensive manufacturing, transport and transport infrastructure, agriculture and land management and cross-sectoral issues.

These groups will provide advice to the federal government in March 2003 on issues and options that will guide the development of a long term greenhouse strategy for Australia. This advice will be the focus of a Government-Business Roundtable in April or May.

Prime Minister John Howard touched on this issue in his New Year message. "The separate but related environmental challenges of water and salinity must be high on the national agenda in 2003 and beyond," the Prime Minister said.

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