

Despite interference from US and other countries

# Climate change report outlines dire impact of global warming

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10 April 2007

On April 6, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released the Working Group II Summary for Policy Makers from its report on “Climate Change Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability.”

The report by the IPCC, a body established by the United Nations in 1988 that brings together the opinions of scientists around the world, finds that global warming will lead to an increased prevalence of droughts, rising sea levels, flooding rivers, large-scale extinctions of plant and animal life, and greater malnutrition and disease. The most severe impact will be on the poor, but global warming will affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people internationally.

The summary released Friday comes from the second of the IPCC’s three-part report on climate change and deals with impacts of climate change on human and natural systems. The first part, released in February 2007, examined the physical science basis for climate change, finding that warming is real and is “very likely” to be caused by humans. The third part is due to examine ways that global warming can be halted or reversed. The full report will be released later this year.

The dire nature of the report’s findings comes despite an intense dispute between the lead scientists authoring the report and diplomats representing national governments. According to a report in the Associated Press, “Five days of negotiations reached a climax when the delegates removed parts of a key chart highlighting devastating effects of climate change that kick in with every rise of 1.8 degrees, and in a tussle over the level of scientific reliability attached to key statements.”

The AP reported, “The United States, China and Saudi Arabia raised many of the objections to the phrasing, often seeking to tone down the certainty of some of the more dire projections.” Countering this, “Three top

scientists-authors formally objected to the change by the diplomats, including American scientist David Karoly of the University of Oklahoma. The scientists said it was an unprecedented weakening of the scientific confidence that was not raised when the report was circulated the past several months.”

The US appears to have led the way in attempting to weaken the report’s findings. According to the *Washington Post*, “US negotiators managed to eliminate language in one section that called for cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, said Patricia Romero Lankao,” one of the lead authors of the report and a scientist from the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado.

Changes to the report documented by the AP include first revising and then removing the qualification “very high confidence” from a statement affirming the impact of climate change on natural systems. A statement concluding that “hundreds of millions” will be affected by flooding was reduced to “many millions.” Also, a statement that 120 million people will be at risk of hunger because of global warming was removed entirely.

The pressure to water down the IPCC assessment parallels developments in the US with the Bush administration’s political interference in governmental climate research. There have been numerous reports of government scientists being pressured to remove references to climate change in their work, or tone down conclusions they had reached on the likelihood and effects of global warming.

In a press briefing on the summary report, Sharon Hays, from the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, avoided answering repeated questions about what changes the US delegation advanced during the four-day discussions. Meanwhile, James Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality,

sought to portray Bush's proposal to displace gasoline with "renewable fuels" as a "mandatory cap" that will "produce a significant greenhouse gas reduction."

The posturing of the Bush administration is a response to the overwhelming public acceptance of the mounting scientific evidence of climate change and its impact. The position of the Bush administration, however, is that there will be no change in US government policy.

The summary report finds that climate change is expected to affect the health of millions of people, with increased malnutrition; greater incidences of diarrhea; "increased deaths, disease and injury due to heat waves, floods, storms, fires and droughts"; and "increased frequency of cardio-respiratory disease due to higher concentrations of ground level ozone related to climate change."

Bettina Menne, a World Health Organization specialist and lead author of the chapter on health, said 150,000 deaths could be attributed directly to climate change in 2000 alone due to malnutrition and diarrhea.

The IPCC's full report draws on more than 29,000 data sets collected since 1970 that show global trends in the impact of climate change. The summary outlines general trends, but gives few figures or details on what impact climate change has already had on human and natural systems.

The summary report contains predictions on what impacts can be expected in the future, with projections for different regions of the world, and a graphic table that shows the expected impact on water, ecosystems, food, coasts, and human health as global temperatures rise.

With a temperature rise exceeding 1.5 to 2.5 degrees Celsius, a massive 20 to 30 percent of plant and animal species is expected to be at an increased risk of extinction, with major changes to ecosystem structure and function. The result will be "predominantly negative consequences for biodiversity, and ecosystem goods and services, e.g., water and food supply," according to the report.

The report states, "Africa is one of the most vulnerable continents to climate variability and change." In Africa, "between 75 and 250 million people are projected to be exposed to an increase of water stress" by 2020. Agricultural production is expected to be impacted with yields from rain-fed agriculture "reduced by up to 50% by 2020" in some African countries. The report concludes, "This would further adversely affect food security and exacerbate malnutrition in the continent."

In Asia, a decrease in freshwater availability combined with "population growth and increasing demand arising

from higher standards of living, could adversely affect more than a billion people by the 2050s." The report states that "Many millions more people are projected to be flooded every year due to sea-level rise by the 2080s," primarily those on small islands and in the coastal areas of Africa and Asia.

In Australia and New Zealand, the report projects greater water security problems, a "significant loss of biodiversity," greater threats from sea-level rises and storms in coastal areas experiencing population growth, and a decline in agricultural production in some areas with an increase in others.

Europe will continue to experience the retreat of glaciers, and an increased risk of flash floods, heat waves, and droughts. Climate change in Latin America is expected to lead to the retreat of tropical forests, the "salinisation and desertification of agricultural land" with a corresponding decline in agricultural and livestock productivity, and a decrease in water availability.

North America will suffer from an increase in tropical storms, among other effects. The report notes, "Where extreme weather events become more intense and/or more frequent, the economic and social costs of those events will increase." Many scientists predict that with the global warming there will be an increase in the strength and prevalence of hurricanes such as Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005.

Finally, the polar regions are expected to continue to experience glacial melting, while small islands are menaced by rising waters.

The report explains, "Poor communities can be especially vulnerable" due to "limited adaptive capacities," and being "more dependent on climate-sensitive resources such as local water and food supplies." As IPCC Chairman Rajendra Pachauri summarized at the IPCC press conference, "It is the poorest of the poor in the world, and this includes poor people even in prosperous societies, who are going to be the worst hit."



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