

Global effort needed to avoid environmental disaster: UN

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The world is veering towards a multi-century environmental disaster involving flood, famine, fire, drought and disease that cannot be averted without a global effort to curtail greenhouse gas emissions, a United Nations group warns today in its final 2007 report on climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says climate change caused by human activity threatens land and ocean ecosystems, could push to extinction 30 per cent of all species on Earth, elevate the risk of extreme weather events and annually claim millions of lives from accelerating risk of disease, according to a draft copy of the report obtained by The Vancouver Sun.

The IPCC was recently named co-winner of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for its groundbreaking series of scientific studies on the adverse impacts of climate change -- and opportunities to avert the worst disasters by curtailing emissions and adapting human habitation to deal with changes that have already been set in motion by greenhouse gas emissions over the past 150 years.

The new report cites "growing evidence that the risk of very large impacts on multiple-century time scales would continue to increase as long as GHG concentrations and temperature continue to increase."

It says recent extreme climate events "exposed a higher vulnerability in both developing and developed countries" to water-related stress, wildfires, food production, health threats, increased flood risk, extreme high sea level, and damage to infrastructure."

The report notes "high agreement and much evidence of many options for achieving reductions of global [greenhouse gas] emissions at the international level through cooperation."

Scientists and politicians representing 130 nations on the IPCC have been in Valencia, Spain, for the past week arguing over details and final wording of the report, the concluding document in a year-long series.



CREDIT: Eduardo Munoz, Reuters
Tropical Storm Noel sweeps the Dominican Republic in October.



CREDIT: Gabriel Bouys, AFP, Getty Images

This home in the Alaskan village of Shishmaref was destroyed by beach erosion in 2006. The village is on an island that has seen temperatures rise so much that thawing of permafrost along the coast has made the shoreline vulnerable to erosion.

Previous reports dwelled upon the link between human reliance on fossil fuels and a greenhouse effect in the atmosphere, impacts of climate change, adaptation to it, and opportunities to substantially curtail emissions at the least possible economic cost.

The fourth study is essentially a summary of the earlier documents, but it may be the most critical because it is the one upon which governments will base future action to deal with climate change, including legislated reductions in emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that are changing Earth's atmosphere.

The IPCC's concluding report will be tabled next month at an international meeting of environment ministers, who are expected to use it to inform negotiations of a strategy to replace the failed Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas reduction.

The cutoff date for data in the report is 2005 but since then, studies from Greenland and the Canadian Arctic have suggested that global warming is happening even faster.

In B.C., Premier Gordon Campbell noted in an interview on Friday that the debate is resolved in favour of action.

"The one thing that British Columbians understand is that the pine beetle has cost us hundreds of millions of dollars and that's actually a result of climate change," Campbell said. "The flooding preparations and the adaptation strategies we've had have cost us tens of millions of dollars and those are a result of climate change.

"I think people know now that climate change is something we must deal with and the status quo will cost us more than actually acting prudently -- and I think not just prudently but directly and explicitly to change behaviours and to change the way we interact with the world."

Most of B.C.'s efforts at present are focused on greenhouse gas reductions. Campbell announced in February a plan to cut emissions 33 per cent by 2020 -- even before it was clear how the province would proceed.

Since then, B.C. has developed a strategy calling for vehicle emission cuts, carbon-trading schemes and emission caps, green technology incentives, and energy-efficiency standards for new construction.

Campbell has persuaded other Canadian premiers to join North American and international projects to cut emissions.

B.C.'s 33-per-cent reduction target for 2020 will be enshrined in law by late 2008.

"I think we will exceed this goal because I think we will surprise ourselves with how much can be done," Campbell said.

"Right now in Canada, we're energy gluttons. We put more greenhouse gas per capita into the environment than California does in spite of all their automobiles and all of those sorts of things. There is lots of stuff we can do that just requires us to think differently."

Non-government organizations think B.C. is doing well in some areas, but could do more.

"Even if we do reduce our emissions, the next 10-20 years have just heated up in terms of what we are going to be seeing," said Deborah Harford, program director of Simon Fraser University's Adaptation to Climate Change Team.

Harford believes B.C. needs to do more to prepare for impacts, including human health threats and viability of food crops.

David Suzuki Foundation climate policy analyst Nicholas Heap, author of a report for the Real Estate Institute of British Columbia, says B.C. can cut emissions, climate risks and costs by expanding development of medium- and high-density housing.

"More than a third of total emissions come from this sector. But it's important to note that in B.C., we actually have quite a bit of practice in doing this stuff," Heap said. "We do a lot of compact developments. The real estate industry has made this a very viable proposition."

But Pembina Institute legal counsel Karen Campbell said the non-profit group has calculated that B.C.'s promises to date will cut only two million tonnes of emissions -- 31 million tonnes short of the target.

"While we are really excited about B.C.'s adoption of the California vehicle [lower emission] standard, the numbers we've crunched show that the gains will be offset by the fact that we will have more cars on the road and people will be driving them more often because we are building more highways," Karen Campbell said.

"There will be no significant net reduction by 2020 on our scenarios at this point."

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