

Farms face devastation

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AUSTRALIA could suffer a massive decline in farm production and agricultural export earnings in coming decades unless it can halt climate change or adapt to it, a report to the Federal Government has warned.

In a stark assessment of Australia's vulnerability to a heating planet, a key research agency has predicted that production of wheat, beef, dairy items and sugar will fall by about 10% by 2020 as temperatures rise and rainfall declines.

By 2050, it warns the nation's total economic output could have been shaved by as much as 5% as key agricultural exports are slashed by between 15% and 79% — placing Australia among the nations worst affected by climate change.

The warning from the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) came as Prime Minister Kevin Rudd yesterday distanced himself from suggestions at the Bali climate change conference that Australia would back an agreement on making deep cuts to greenhouse emissions by 2020.

Australia's delegation in Bali was quoted as saying Australia "fully supports" a plan for developed nations to examine cutting emissions by between 25% and 40% by 2020.

Mr Rudd and his Climate Change Minister, Penny Wong, later issued statements stressing that Australia was not yet committing to any 2020 targets.

Mr Rudd said some countries had indicated that "they do not necessarily accept those targets ... that is also the position of the Australian Government."

By playing down the need for Australia to commit to the deep cuts in emissions, Mr Rudd could find himself in conflict with the leading players in Bali, including China and India — and some of the world's leading climate change experts.

More than 200 scientists, led by Australian experts, yesterday called on nations at the Bali talks to launch an agreement that would stop the global temperature from rising more than 2 degrees — considered by some a crucial threshold to avoid catastrophic consequences.

The call, by scientists from more than 20 countries, was spearheaded by Professor Matthew England and Andy Pitman from the University of NSW.

Professor England warned that if the growth in emissions was not halted soon, "many millions of people will be at risk from extreme events such as heatwaves, drought, floods and storms".

Labor under Kevin Rudd has agreed to set a target of a 60% cut by 2050, but has resisted setting a 2020 goal until it receives a report from economist Ross Garnaut next year.

"I think speculation on individual numbers prior to that is not productive and I would suggest it would be better for all concerned if we waited for the outcome of that properly deliberated document," Mr Rudd said.

His remarks came after Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson said a 2020 target in the range mentioned in Bali would damage industries and hurt low-income Australians. "If Mr Rudd, in our name, on our behalf, accepts in the order of 25% to 30% by 2020, that will have a devastating impact on our economic development," he said.

But the Government has also been warned of devastating consequences from inaction on climate change, with yesterday's report from ABARE warning of a decline in agricultural productivity of 17% by 2050.

ABARE chief economist Don Gunasekera said that without innovation, Australian agriculture would be ravaged by climate change. "But I think the message has to be not just doom and gloom, it's about how we can convert these challenges into opportunities," he said.

ABARE's report said that by 2030 Australian wheat production could fall by 9.6%, beef by 9.6%, sheep meat by 8.5%, dairy products by 9.5% and sugar by 10%. Exports would fall more dramatically, by up to 63% by 2030 and by up to 79% by 2050 because other countries would be able to produce the commodities more efficiently.

Dr Gunasekera said improved farm technologies, such as genetic modification and carbon fertilisation, could be the key to coping with climate change.

Amid the debate, Melbourne University and the Department of Primary Industries have launched an experiment at Horsham, in Victoria's west, on carbon fertilisation, the theory that plants grow faster when there is more carbon dioxide in the air.

Melbourne University chair of horticulture and viticulture, Professor Snow Barlow, said many scientific models failed to take into account the fact that carbon dioxide in the air was driving climate change. "And actually, CO₂ in the atmosphere at these levels is quite good for plants," he said.

Professor Barlow said Australian agriculture had a proud record of investing in productivity improvements.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2007/12/06/1196812922296.html>