



Media release

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IPCC climate science report confirms Australia cannot afford to delay: health experts

Health and medical experts have called for Australia to recommit to and to intensify efforts to reduce the nation's greenhouse gas emissions, as the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reveals greater certainty among the world scientists about climate change and its risks to communities, environment and economies.

Climate and Health Alliance President and heatwave researcher Dr Liz Hanna said Australia was already experiencing serious health impacts associated with climate change.

"We are experiencing more heatwaves and extremely hot days across Australia and around the world. The number and intensity of heatwaves is expected to increase significantly into the future as global temperatures rise and this poses a significant threat to Australians, particularly those people whose occupations require them to spend a lot of time outdoors."

This fifth IPCC report, one of the most comprehensive, authoritative and scrutinised reports on climate change ever written, identifies for the first time a maximum level for global carbon dioxide emissions that the world must not exceed if there is to be any chance of limiting global to below two degrees Celsius.

Dr Melissa Haswell, Associate Professor of Public Health and Community Medicine, said the IPCC report covered "the most important science of our time".

"Conveying current knowledge about climate change – arguably our greatest and most urgent challenge in this way requires a heroic effort by thousands of scientists.

"We will not like its findings – they are frightening. They tell a story that we would rather not hear. They highlight that if we do not rapidly reduce and eliminate our use of fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas) and protect our forests and natural carbon sinks - our world will transform into a place that will be dismal at best with the loss of many things we cherish now. It will be dangerous much more often and deadly for many - increasingly often."

IPCC author Professor Colin Butler from the University of Canberra said the report highlighted the need for all governments, but particularly those in wealthy high polluting countries like Australia, to accept their responsibility to cut emissions.

"We not only have an ethical responsibility to act on climate change; this is also in our long-term self-interest. Civilisation is at risk due resource depletion, ecological harm, and rapid population growth in developing countries; further climate change worsens these pressures.

“We should not deceive ourselves by imagining that our wealth and power immunises us from the cumulative damage we are still adding to. Our life support systems are being eroded and it is shameful to think that because others will bear most of the burden of harm from our actions that we need do nothing.

“In fact, Australians are already experiencing harm from climate change (eg heatwaves and fires); but these harms will seem trivial compared to those which civilisation will face this century if we continue our current trajectory. We must lessen our carbon intensity, conserve resources and contribute to regional solutions. The imperative for a low carbon transformation for our global economy is writ large in this report.”

Dr Peter Tait, Ecology and Environment SIG, Public Health Association Australia, said the need for action to avert a series of ecological crises and protect human society was urgent.

“The report flags the need to act sooner rather than later to minimise the risks to society from warming by both reducing greenhouse emissions rapidly by all possible means at the same time as planning measures to adapt social systems to manage the impacts of the heat already in the biosphere. Our government needs to act responsibly to safeguard our future well-being and prosperity,” Dr Tait said.

The IPCC report points to increasing risks to mental and physical health from unmitigated climate change, said Dr Susie Burke, a senior psychologist at the Australian Psychological Society.

“Extreme weather events can lead to mental health disorders associated with loss, social disruption, and displacement, as well as cumulative effects from repeated exposure to natural disasters, with the most severe consequences being felt by communities who were already disadvantaged prior to the event,” Dr Burke said.

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