



Health & Safety

# MATTERS

Health & Safety Information for GMB Safety Reps

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## UK Climate Change Risk Assessment 2012

### Introduction

It is generally accepted now that the global climate is changing and will continue to change over the coming century, potentially affecting our children and grand-children in differing, serious ways. Many scientists agree that these changes are attributable to increased atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, principally CO<sub>2</sub>, produced by human activities. The Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA), was commissioned by the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) among others, in an attempt by the government to outline actions already in place and the plans for the future. This is the first ever comprehensive assessment of potential threats and opportunities arising from climate change and has been generated by the Climate Change Act (2008) which stipulated a series of assessments, both currently and for the future. This Act makes the UK the first country in the world to have a national, legally binding, long term framework to cut carbon emissions, in an attempt to mitigate climate change.

### Key messages from the CCRA

Some of these messages might seem fairly obvious but it is useful to see them officially recorded as they could have a great impact on GMB members and their families. The following have been identified in the report:

- The global climate is changing and warming will continue over the next century.
- The UK is already vulnerable to extreme weather, including flooding and heatwaves.
- Flood risk is projected to increase significantly across the UK.
- UK water resources are projected to come under increased pressure.
- There might be health benefits, as well as threats to the more vulnerable in society.
- Sensitive eco-systems are likely to come under increasing pressure.
- There might be agricultural opportunities, though these might not out-weigh the threats.

### The extent of the risk to the UK

Since the 1970's average global temperatures have increased by 0.7° C and this is projected to rise by between 1 – 6° C by the end of the century. Even if immediate steps are taken to reduce emissions existing, and historical emissions, mean that some climate change is inevitable. Due to yearly variations, the climate in the short term can make it look as though the claims are untrue which is why it is important to look at the long term analysis. For example the average UK temperature in recent years has been 0.5 – 1° C more than the period from 1961- 1990. While many of the projections could be classified

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as “guesstimates” the broad picture that has emerged based on current evidence is believed to be a credible interpretation. In effect, if the UK does not act to implement effective and adaptive actions, the situation is likely to get worse, quicker.

### **Climate change in the working context**

Most GMB members’ top concerns are likely to feature fears around high workplace temperatures, where there is no legal maximum, and how flooding might affect their livelihoods. In the very hot summer of 2003 it is estimated that there were over 2,000 extra deaths due to the heat. Summer floods in 2007 cost the economy more than £3billion in England alone, and the loss of 20 road bridges would make getting to work more difficult with a loss of wages and the potential loss of a job if the business were to fail to recover. Conversely in the winters of 2009 & 2010, prolonged cold weather disrupted many domestic water supplies and left hundreds of motorists stranded, unable to get home or to work. However climate change in itself is only one of a number of issues that will shape the UK’s future as other factors can have an environmental bearing. These include:

- Population growth which will put a squeeze on limited resources.
- Changes in land use – more urbanisation can lead to an increase in temperatures in towns and cities.
- Rising sea levels which could increase erosion, cover coastal settlements, increased expenditure on coastal defences or the abandonment of settlements.
- Changes in socio-economic policy which could for example favour wealthier areas on the basis of tax payments as being more *deserving* of government help.

As can be seen today with an economic crises it is usually those at the margins of society that suffer most, a situation unlikely to change with climate change impact.

As well as people, there are other areas to consider which will be more vulnerable to change. These will include Agriculture & Forestry, Businesses, Health & Wellbeing, Buildings and Infrastructure and the Natural Environment.

### **Conclusion**

GMB members in many workplaces are already under tremendous pressure with cuts and redundancies happening all around them, along with wage freezes and cuts in terms and conditions. So it is not surprising that environmental factors are not necessarily top of their individual, or collective, agendas. The CCRA attempts to highlight some potential benefits, such as fewer deaths in milder winters or the increase in the land area to grow grapes. It does throw up more threats in the future, particularly for the most vulnerable in society. Governments have a moral duty to look after all the citizens but the evidence from a so called *Greenest Government* ever points to them abandoning some of the pledges previously made. At least with the Climate Change Act there was a duty to publish the CCRA- we must hope it remains that way and that the government act on its conclusions. For the full report from DEFRA go to –[www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climate/government/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climate/government/) For further information on this or other environmental issues please contact [Daniel.shears@gmb.org.uk](mailto:Daniel.shears@gmb.org.uk) or [John.mcclean@gmb.org.uk](mailto:John.mcclean@gmb.org.uk)

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