

Asia Pacific

October 4, 2007

Australian Fires Add to Fears on Climate Change

By TIM JOHNSTON

SYDNEY, [Australia](#), Oct. 3 — As the first bush fires of the year rage through Australia's national forests, concern over [climate change](#) and its effects is intensifying among Australians. A telephone survey of more than 1,000 people released today showed that 40 percent of Australians thought that global warming was a greater threat to security than Islamic fundamentalism. Only 20 percent thought it was less serious.

The survey, by the United States Studies Center, based at the University of Sydney, came a day after the government's most senior scientific body said that rising temperatures and reduced rainfall were inevitable in Australia.

The report brought calls for more resources to be focused on mitigating the effects of future climate change rather than the current policy of concentrating on trying to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Extreme weather, including a drought that has persisted in some places for six years, has focused the Australian public on climate change, and it is shaping up as a major issue in the general elections that are expected to be called in the next few weeks.

On Tuesday, Australia's most influential scientific research body, the government-financed Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, released a report that said a temperature rise of 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit was likely by 2030, along with many more days with temperatures of over 95 degrees and reduced rainfall across much of southern Australia, already the driest part of the driest inhabited continent.

"The message is that global warming is real, humans are very likely to be causing it and that it is very likely that there will be changes in the global climate system in the centuries to come larger than those seen in the recent past," the report said.

Recent events have made the subject even more urgent for many Australians. Although the spring season started only a month ago, about 50 separate bush fires, fanned by unseasonably

hot weather and strong winds, have burned about 76,000 acres, of bush and national forest and destroyed a house.

Large areas of the state of New South Wales, including Sydney, had a total fire ban in force today. "It is very interesting to see how climate change has moved from the environmental field to the security sphere," said Alan Dupont, who heads the United States Studies Center, referring to the report released today. "Most of the government response has been about reducing greenhouse gas emissions rather than trying to manage the effects of the change."

The survey's results echo comments last week by the head of Australia's police, Commissioner Mick Keelty, that climate was a growing security concern. "We could see a catastrophic decline in the availability of fresh water," Mr. Keelty said. "Crops could fail, disease could be rampant and flooding might be so frequent that people, en masse, would be on the move. Even if only some and not all of this occurs, climate change is going to be the security issue of the 21st century."

His comments provoked a sharp retort from Prime Minister John Howard, who said that terrorism was a more immediate threat to security than climate change. Mr. Howard was until recently a climate change skeptic, and the opposition Labor Party has said that the new attention he is paying to climate change is driven more by polls than conviction.

Australia has one of the world's highest per capita emissions of greenhouse gases. The government has refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, saying it is meaningless because it does not impose restrictions on the two greatest emerging emitters, India and China.

Environmentalists say the time to tackle climate change is running out and that the major global economies need to commit themselves to radical cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

Both the United States and Australia have resisted efforts to set hard emissions targets, and have encouraged the development of technologies like nuclear and clean coal in an effort to improve the efficiency of carbon-based fuel sources.

The United States Studies Center survey relied on 1,213 telephone interviews conducted between July 13 and July 29, and had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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