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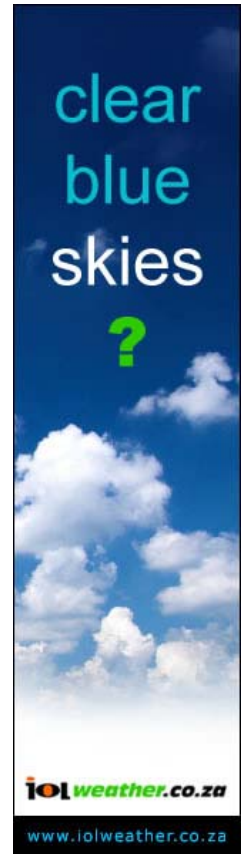
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 Environment

Drought-hit Australia battles climate change

November 01 2006 at 11:00AM

By Michael Perry

Sydney - Australia is already feeling the heat from climate change with a five-year drought devastating rural life, severe early season wildfires and record unseasonal temperatures.

Every four days, a farmer commits suicide under the stress of failing crops, dying livestock and debt as the worst drought in 100 years bites deep into the nation's psyche and erodes economic growth.

"The current drought highlights how vulnerable we are to climate change," said farmer Mark Wootton. "We will never solve the drought if we don't solve climate change."

'Experiencing rapid climate change'

water supplies.

Neighbouring New Zealand is also experiencing climate chaos, with a severe spring snow storm recently killing livestock on the same day hundreds of bushfires burnt parts of southeast Australia.

South Pacific island states, which have for years battled rising sea levels and more frequent storms believed caused by global warming, were last month hit by Cyclone Xavier. The storm was the first of the cyclone season and formed two months early.

Australian scientists and environmentalists say climate change is no longer a future threat and are urging Australia to sign the Kyoto Protocol aimed at lowering greenhouse gases.

Many scientists say carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels and methane from agriculture is causing the atmosphere to warm. Kyoto obliges about 40 nations to cut emissions by at least 5,2 percent below 1990 levels by 2008-12.

However Australia, a major coal and gas exporter and the world's 10th largest greenhouse gas emitter, negotiated a rise in emissions, setting a Kyoto target of limiting emissions to 108 percent of 1990 levels.

Australia's cities are also suffering, with every major centre imposing strict water usage restrictions as reservoir levels fall. Sydney, the largest city, is examining a desalination scheme to guarantee future

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"If the rest of the world led the kind of lifestyles we do here in Australia, we would require three-and-a-half planets to provide the resources we use and to absorb the waste," WWF-Australia CEO Greg Bourne said in a statement.

Howard's solution to climate change revolves around using new technologies to produce cleaner fossil-fuel energy, burying greenhouse gas emissions underground, and nuclear energy.

Howard refuses to consider reducing fossil fuels, saying it would cost jobs in the lucrative coal industry. The Queensland Farmers Federation says a new report has found more than 39 000 rural jobs had disappeared since the drought started.

"An effective and credible response requires Australia's national greenhouse gas emissions go down, not up," said Corin Millais, chief executive of the Climate Institute.

"We Don't Love a Sunburnt Country Anymore" read a newspaper advertisement by the institute, referring to a classic Australian poem which romanticises a country frequently ravaged by drought.



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Greens Senator Christine Milne criticised Howard's backing of geosequestration, underground storage of carbon dioxide, saying it was an "unproven technology".

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"We need to start making major cuts to our greenhouse gas emissions now. The best way to do this is to use proven, safe renewable energy," she said. Citing the growth of solar and wind energy in Europe, Japan and the United States.



More than one in 200 in Australia's power needs are already supplied by clean energy and gas-cogeneration. Last month, the government announced Australia would build the world's biggest solar power plant as part of a A\$500-million (\$378-million) Low Emissions Technology Demonstration Fund.

"The challenge is to reduce the cost of these technologies so that a range of competitively priced low-emission technologies is available," said Treasurer Peter Costello.

- This story is part of a package of stories on climate change issued on November 1 ahead of a UN environment conference next week.

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