



Australia's parched future

Farmers, many facing disaster from the failure of spring rains, are warned of worse to come from climate change

By **RACHEL KLEINMAN**

AS VAST areas of rural Australia teeter on the brink of a devastating crop failure, a CSIRO report has predicted worse droughts to come and added to questions about current government policies on climate and agriculture.

National Australia Bank, a major lender to the rural sector, has warned that massive losses are looming on farms as their winters crops wilt after the failure of this year's spring rains.

NAB economist Skye Dixon said yesterday the outlook for stressed crops in the vast wheat belts of Victoria, South Australia and NSW was worsening.

"Lack of follow-up rains have lowered production estimates by around 7 million tonnes, with current conditions dictating that there is further downside risk," Ms Dixon said.

The warning came as the Bureau of Meteorology and the CSIRO, in a major new report on climate change, signalled the current drought was a foretaste of things to come.

Confirming scientists' worst fears about the impact of climate change, the report said Victoria faced a 10 per cent reduction in average rainfall and a four-degree average temperature rise over the next 60 years if carbon emissions were not slashed.

And even if immediate action to cut emissions is taken, it says temperatures will increase, drought will become more frequent and rainfall will decrease over the next six decades.

The report, *Climate Change in Australia*, provides the most comprehensive assessment of the country's climate to date, and

is based on the work of more than 50 scientists. Its grim projections of more droughts, heatwaves, bushfires and severe weather were released in Sydney yesterday at the Greenhouse 2007 conference.

Addressing 700 assembled scientists, Dr Tim Flannery said urgent action was needed ahead of upcoming climate talks in Bali. "I respectfully and publicly ask our Prime Minister to ratify the Kyoto Protocol so we have a seat at the table in those negotiations," he said. "And furthermore to use his great influence with his friends in the United States in the Bush Administration to urge on them a similar course of action."

Britain's chief scientist, Sir David King, said there was no choice but to adopt globally binding greenhouse gas emission targets. "I do not understand how we can manage a global problem with an aspirational set of targets," Sir David said.

An author of the report, CSIRO's Dr Penny Whetton, said: "Some climate change for Australia is certainly inevitable, so we're going to need to adapt to its impacts."

While farmers are already battling long-term drought and the Federal Government spends billions of dollars to bail them out, harsher conditions are ahead, according to the report.

Dr Whetton said the amount by which rainfall decreases could reach up to 10 per cent by 2030, 20 per cent by 2070 under low-level emissions or 30 per cent with higher emissions.

"These decreases in rainfall

are also likely to mean more drought as we know drought today," she said.

"However, this doesn't mean that the drought that some areas are suffering now will continue. There will still be wet years in the future, but dry conditions will occur more frequently."

The report says Australia will get hotter by another degree by 2030 and faces bigger increases by 2070 — 3.4 degrees if greenhouse gas emissions are not slashed and 1.8 degrees under a low-emissions scenario.

Melbourne could face an average of 25 days a year over 35 degrees, compared to the present nine days, bringing more heat-related deaths and bushfires.

Greens climate change spokeswoman Christine Milne called on the Federal Government and Labor to withdraw support for major greenhouse emitters such as the coal, forestry and aluminium industries.

Labor environment spokesman Peter Garrett said the projections raised the greatest ever threat to agriculture and called on the Government to act.

Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull said the report's predictions showed the need to reduce greenhouse emissions and would provide vital information for decision-makers.

Predictions of a drier future come as Melburnians face tough water curbs for at least another three years, with stage 3A restrictions to remain throughout summer regardless of rainfall.

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