

Headline: Heat stroke?

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Published Date: 01:44 AM November 08, 2014

Section: opinion

Word Count: 5308

Content:

Are there times just ahead when working on a farm or even playing house in the sun can be lethal?

In its fifth updated report, released in Copenhagen, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that all components of the climate system have altered, "increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts on people and ecosystems...."

Climate change has jacked up the risk of severe heat waves and other extreme weather. Worse is to come, including food shortages and violent conflicts, although there are available and affordable ways to skirt the peril. "Science has spoken. There is no ambiguity in the message," says the United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon.

It is the first IPCC report since 2007 to stitch together all aspects of tackling climate change. Carbon emissions, mainly from burning coal, oil and gas, are currently rising to record levels, not falling. But remedies are economically affordable, the Guardian writes.

The report comes at a critical time for international action on climate change, with the deadline for a global deal just over a year away. Lord Nicholas Stern, a professor at the London School of Economics, asserts that the report's conclusions "cannot be simply wished away by politicians who lack the courage to confront the scientific evidence." The lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people are at risk.

"This is another canary in the coal mine. We can't prevent a large-scale disaster if we don't heed this kind of hard science," adds John Kerry, the US secretary of state, Bill McKibben, a high-profile climate campaigner with 350.org, says: "For scientists, conservative by nature, to use 'serious, pervasive, and irreversible' to describe the effects of climate falls just short of announcing that climate change will produce a zombie apocalypse plus random beheadings plus Ebola." Breaking the power of the fossil fuel industry would not be easy, McKibben says. "But, thanks to the IPCC, no one will ever be able to say they weren't warned."

The new overarching IPCC report builds on previous reports. Increasingly, there is stress that many effects will last for hundreds of years even if the planet's rising temperature is halted. "Already, heat waves and extreme rain storms causing floods are felt on all continents. This will have knock-on effects."

Undermining food security jacks up the risk of wars: "Climate change can indirectly increase risks of violent conflicts by amplifying well-documented drivers of these conflicts, such as poverty and economic shocks."

Two-thirds of all carbon emissions permissible have already been pumped into the atmosphere, the IPCC found. The lowest cost route to stopping dangerous warming would be for emissions to peak by 2020—an extremely challenging goal—and then fall to zero later this century.

Delaying significant emission cuts to 2030 puts up the cost of reducing carbon dioxide by almost 50 percent, partly because dirty power stations would have to be closed early. "If you wait, you also have to do more difficult and expensive things," says Jim Skea, a professor at Imperial College

London and an IPCC working group vice chair.

Carbon capture and storage (CCS), the new kid on the block, aims to bury CO₂ underground and is deemed extremely important. "Without CCS, it is entirely possible for fossil fuels to continue to be used on a large scale."

The focus on CCS is not because the technology has advanced a great deal in recent years, says Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, a professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium and vice chair of the IPCC, but because emissions have continued to increase so quickly. "We have emitted so much more, so we have to clean up more later," he says.

Abandoning nuclear power or deploying only limited wind or solar power increases the cost of emission cuts by just 6-7 percent. Behavioral changes, such as dietary changes that could involve eating less meat, can have a role in cutting emissions.

What has ethics got to do with this?

"[Carbon emission cuts] and adaptation raise issues of equity, justice, and fairness," says the IPCC report. "The evidence suggests that outcomes seen as equitable can lead to more effective [international] cooperation."

These issues are central to the global climate change negotiations, and their inclusion in the report was welcomed by campaigners, as was the statement that adapting countries and coastlines to cope with global warming cannot by itself avert serious impacts.

"Rich governments must stop making empty promises and come up with the cash so the poorest do not have to foot the bill for the lifestyles of the wealthy," says Harjeet Singh of ActionAid.

Observers played down the moves made by some countries with large fossil fuel reserves to weaken the language of the IPCC report.

However, the statement that "climate change is expected to lead to increases in ill health in many regions, including greater likelihood of death" was deleted in the final report, along with criticism that politicians sometimes "engage in short-term thinking and are biased toward the status quo."

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