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Time running out on climate

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February 22, 2008

AUSTRALIA may need to slash its greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 90% by 2050 as part of a massive global effort to avert the most devastating effects of climate change, the Rudd Government has been warned.

In an alarmingly pessimistic assessment of what is happening to the world, Canberra's chief adviser on climate change, Ross Garnaut, has declared that time is running out faster than almost anyone predicted.

Releasing his interim report, Professor Garnaut said existing targets for reducing greenhouse emissions may not be enough to save the situation.

"Australia should be ready to go beyond its stated 60% reduction target by 2050 in an effective global agreement that includes developing nations," Professor Garnaut said.

The veteran economist said inaction would be more costly than action, particularly for Australia, which would be "one of the most badly damaged of the developed countries if there is no effective mitigation".

But the Government, which came to power in November naming climate change among its top priorities, gave a guarded response to the report — welcoming it but not endorsing it.

Climate Change Minister Penny Wong said the economist's report would be an "important input" to government policy. "We welcome Professor Garnaut's input ... of course we will also be looking at other inputs, such as modelling from the Australian Treasury," she said.

Greens leader Bob Brown later lashed out at the Government's response, suggesting it may have fallen under the influence of the multibillion-dollar coal industry. "Penny Wong has reduced Ross Garnaut to an input. That sounds to me like the Rudd Government is subject to coal capture," he said.

The report increases pressure on the Government to set an ambitious emission reduction target this year for 2020, as well as for 2050. Professor Garnaut says that to have a 50-50 chance of limiting global temperature rises to two degrees — a target set by European countries — dramatic and immediate change would be required.



All geared up to send 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide underground near Warrnambool.

Photo: *Robin Sharrock*

Global greenhouse gas emissions would need to peak in just two years' time and be less than half 2000 levels by 2050.

If the world moved to a system based on per capita emissions — a system Professor Garnaut says would be most acceptable to developing countries like China — Australia would need to cut its emissions by 90% to achieve the two-degree increase goal.

"That would be a difficult target to meet and there would be no point if it wasn't part of an international effort," he told the ABCs *7.30 Report* last night.

If the world moved to a less ambitious three degrees target — which Professor Garnaut says would increase the risk of dangerous climate change — Australian cuts of 70% by 2050 would be required.

While the interim report contains no specific recommendations, it suggests a three-pronged strategy for developing emissions trading.

It says Australia should quickly establish a domestic system, followed by a regional system including neighbours like Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and Pacific island nations, as well as taking a leading role in developing a global system.

The report suggests that as a global negotiating position, Australia should adopt targets in keeping with those already established by other developed countries, while holding out the prospect of deeper cuts if global agreement can be reached.

At the same time, a regional trading system would help Australia to achieve dramatic cuts by purchasing emission permits created by re-forestation projects in PNG and Indonesia.

Within a domestic emission trading system, he also prefers that new permits be auctioned by the Government, and not given free to those industries most affected.

Energy suppliers would receive no special concessions, but low-income households should receive compensation for the increased energy costs this would entail.

Professor Garnaut said industries facing export competition in the years before a comprehensive global trading system can be set up should receive some sort of interim protection or subsidies. Those industries included cement, steel and aluminium.

The report supports compulsory use of solar and wind energy through mandatory targets, because they would have a more immediate impact than emissions trading.

Professor Garnaut says the mandatory targets would eventually be subsumed by an effective emissions trading system.

Conservation groups welcomed the strength of the report.

"I think what is interesting is that as an economist he's saying this issue is far more urgent than we realised and he's urging Australia to really strive towards deep cuts in greenhouse pollution," said Conservation Foundation chief Don Henry.

Business cautiously welcomed the report, with Australian Industry Group Chief Executive Heather Ridout saying it brought to bear some sensible thinking. The Australian Coal

Association welcomed Professor Garnaut's acceptance of clean coal technologies.

Professor Garnaut is scheduled to deliver a more substantial draft report in June and a final report, together with recommendations, by September.

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