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Don't go soft on climate, PM warned

Marian Wilkinson Environment Editor | September 29, 2008

IN A move that will test the Rudd Government's climate credentials, Australia's leading climate scientists have written an open letter to the Prime Minister urging him to impose deep cuts to greenhouse gas emissions and back a tough global agreement that will avoid dangerous climate change.

The 16 scientists, who all worked with the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, warn "there is no time to lose" and call on Mr Rudd to slash Australia's emissions by at least 25 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020.

Their intervention comes on the eve of tomorrow's final report by the Government's climate change adviser, Ross Garnaut, and challenges one of his central findings. Professor Garnaut has already advised Mr Rudd to make a slower start to cutting emissions - 10 per cent by 2020 - even though he recognises the risk of weaker targets globally.

In their letter sent to Mr Rudd on Friday, the scientists, some of whom are leading climate experts for the CSIRO, argue against the slow start.

"Failure of the world to act now will leave Australians with a legacy of economic, environmental, social and health costs that will dwarf the scale of national investment required to address this fundamental problem," they warn.

The scientists include John Church, an authority on rising sea levels who recently stepped down as chairman of the joint scientific committee of the

World Climate Research Program. Dr Church is also a senior CSIRO researcher but he and other scientists from the organisation signed the letter as individuals.

Also among the signatories are Dr Roger Jones, from the CSIRO, who is advising the federal Treasury and Professor Garnaut's climate change review; Professors Nathan Bindoff and David Karoly, who worked on the most recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; Professor Tony McMichael, from the Australian National University, who advised the panel on the human health impacts of climate change; Professor Matthew England, joint director for the Climate Change Research Centre at the University of NSW; and Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, a global expert on climate change and the Great Barrier Reef.

The scientists say an Australian target of 25 per cent would be "an equitable contribution" to the global effort to avoid dangerous climate change. "As a group of Australia's leading climate change scientists, we urge you to adopt this target as a minimum requirement for Australia's contribution to an effective global climate agreement," they write.

The letter poses a major dilemma for Mr Rudd and his Climate Change Minister, Penny Wong, who is due to attend a critical round of UN climate talks in December. In his last report, Professor Garnaut advised the Government to support a global agreement that would stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at 550 parts per million, even though this risked dangerous climate change.

Professor Garnaut acknowledged the scientific consensus argued that a lower target of 450 parts per million was necessary to keep the global temperature from rising above 2 degrees and avoid dangerous climate change. But he argued that world powers were not ready to make such cuts and that supporting the 450 target now, rather than in the future, could scuttle the UN climate talks.

The scientists' letter, however, warns: "In the long run, greenhouse gas concentrations need to be stabilised at a level well below 450ppm. In order to stay below 2 degrees C, global emissions must peak and decline before 2015 so there is no time to lose."

One of the letter's signatories, Professor Bindoff, told the *Herald* the scientists had enormous respect for Professor Garnaut's work, but he said: "We're deciding now what the future climate will be at the end of this century. The question about acting now is really important. The cost of procrastinating is at the heart of this problem."

Read the letter: www.science.unsw.edu.au/ruddletter

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