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Stern admits report "badly underestimated" climate change risks

Climate change expert calls for toughening of emission reduction targets

James Murray, BusinessGreen 17 Apr 2008

Nicholas Stern has implied that UK and European efforts to cut carbon emissions could prove well short of what is required after admitting yesterday that he "badly underestimated the degree of damages and risks of climate change " in his ground-breaking 2006 report.

The Stern Review has been widely employed as the basis of much of the UK government's climate change policy, with ministers repeatedly citing its conclusion that it would be more cost effective to cut emissions now than attempt to adapt to rising temperatures.

The report argued that emissions would need to be cut to at least 25 per cent below current levels if a dangerous temperature rise of over two degrees is to be avoided – a scenario the report argued would trigger an economic crisis on the scale of the Great Depression. Such a reduction would require a cut in emissions from developed economies in the region of 60 per cent, a target the government subsequently adopted as part of its climate change bill.

But speaking in an interview with *Reuters* yesterday, Lord Stern admitted the report underestimated the scale and pace of climate change and urged politicians to step up action to curb emissions.

He said that the latest climate science showed that not only were emissions rising faster than thought, the ability of the earth to absorb carbon dioxide in so-called carbon sinks was deteriorating faster than expected.

"Emissions are growing much faster than we'd thought, the absorptive capacity of the planet is less than we'd thought, the risks of greenhouse gases are potentially bigger than more cautious estimates, and the speed of climate change seems to be faster," he said.

Stern added that to minimise the risks of dangerous climate change, the original target for global emissions would have to be doubled to a 50 per cent cut by 2050. He said that such a target would require the US to cut its emissions by up to 90 per cent by then.

Friends of the Earth welcomed Lord Stern's new stance, which is expected to increase pressure on the government to set a more demanding emissions reduction target as part of the climate change bill.

"Lord Stern is rightly calling for a massive step-up in the effort to tackle climate change,"

said Friends of the Earth executive director Tony Juniper. " The UK government urgently needs to ramp up investment in energy efficiency and renewables and strengthen the Climate Change Bill to include 80 per cent cuts in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050."

Prime minister Gordon Brown has said that the new climate change committee will undertake a review of the current 60 per cent target and recommend whether or not it should be changed.

Lord Stern's comments came a day after a the results of a new computer model from a Finnish UK team of oceanographers predicted sea levels could climb by between 0.8m and 1.5m by the end of the century.

The research from the Proudman Oceanographic Laboratory suggests that estimates from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that sea levels will rise by between 28cm and 43cm are far too conservative.

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