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Report Predicts Global Disaster

Climate change challenge could secure long-term market for clean technology.

By Jennifer Kho

The first volume of a United Nations climate report is expected to predict disaster for billions of people because of a temperature rise of 2 to 4.5 degrees Celsius by 2100, according to *The Age*, an Australian newspaper that got hold of a draft of the volume.

The volume, expected to be released Friday, concludes global warming would result in 1.1 billion to 3.2 billion people suffering from water scarcity, 200 million to 600 million people who would go hungry, and up to 7 million homes at risk from coastal flooding by 2080, according to *The Age*.

The other two volumes of the report, discussing the impacts of climate change and the costs of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, are expected to come out in April.

The global warming prediction marks a bigger rise in temperature than forecast by previous reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (This year's report is the fourth such report by the IPCC.)

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It is bringing international attention to climate change due to greenhouse gases and highlights the need for clean technologies. The dire challenges in the report imply that cleantech will be relevant for decades to come.

"The warning we're getting from the international scientific community just keeps getting stronger and stronger, and it should be a message to all of us that we can't continue on the current path when we've got clean energy solutions at hand," said Jana Milford, a senior scientist at the environmental nonprofit Environmental Defense.

Ms. Milford is also a member of the Science Advisory Board for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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It Could Be Worse

Robert Wilder, CEO of WilderShares, which manages cleantech indices, said he'd heard the conclusions don't take into account the melting of ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica, which would make sea levels rise even more.

"This report is in no way a worst-case scenario," Mr. Wilder said. "Scientists are by their nature conservative and not prone to wild-eyed hyperbole. In fact, this report has been watered down by those who are the most skeptical because it has already been vetted by countries like Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Australia, which are basically opposed to the notion of global warming. It should be very alarming."

The public has been misled to believe the scientists are overstating things, but that's not the case, he said. "It's almost invariable that the public is more alarmed than the scientists about most problems," he said. "But with climate change, the scientists are more worried than the public. That is worrisome. To me, global warming is much more alarming even than global terrorism."

Even the most conservative scientific journals now are accepting the notion of climate change, and the fact that, at a 2 degree Celsius change, there are tipping points that are not reversible, he said. "Climate's been called an angry beast, and we're poking it with sticks," he said.

Political Climate Change

Still, the report is unlikely to affect people's day-to-day decisions, because they still are being influenced by messages from fossil fuels industries that downplay the risk, he said.

"The fact is that climate change produces losers, and the most pronounced

are the oil and coal industries,” he said. “They’re not about to say, ‘oh, I was wrong.’ But more and more, I think the clean-energy voices will be seen as speaking truth, and there will be lots of winners that aren’t at the table today.”

Mr. Wilder pointed to news Tuesday that a Union of Concerned Scientists survey of 279 U.S. government climate scientists suggested that Bush administration officials censored scientific papers to soften language about global warming.

According to the survey by the environmental group, which came out at a House panel led by Representative Henry Waxman, a Democrat from California, nearly half of the scientists said they had been told to delete references to “global warming” or “climate change,” and two in five said their scientific papers had been edited in a way that changed their meaning.

The fact that this has come to light is another sign that the political will is changing, and that—along with scientific evidence—could lead to government policies that support clean technologies, he said.

If the public can be convinced that climate change is here, that clean energy actually improves the quality of life and isn’t a sacrifice, and that clean energy is a smart thing to do, it will land clean energy a huge, stable market, he said.

“Just a few years ago, those of us who speak up about clean energy had a tiny microphone,” he said. “We’ve seen it grow bigger and bigger, and now I feel as if we’ve been handed a large megaphone. It’s the same message, but the context has changed.”

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