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Climate change has lengthened growing season, says report

FRANK McDONALD
Environment Editor

EUROPE'S TRADITIONAL agricultural growing season "is now longer, especially in the north" as a result of climate change, with crop yields likely to become more variable because of "extreme weather events", according to a new report.

The report, compiled by the European Environment Agency (EEA), the World Health Organisation and the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, also forecasts more floods and droughts, losses of biodiversity and threats to human health.

"Increasing temperatures, changing precipitation, rising sea level, more intense and frequent extreme weather events and melting glaciers, ice sheets and Arctic sea ice are some of the challenges for Europe already triggered by global climate change", it says.

According to the report, vulnerability to climate change varies widely across regions of Europe. The main vulnerable areas in Europe are mountainous regions, coastal zones, the Mediterranean and the Arctic, where polar bears are threatened by the retreat of sea ice.

"The reduction in Arctic sea ice has accelerated," its authors say.

"In September 2007, the minimum surface was only half the normal minimum measured in the 1950s." As a result, Arctic species such as seals, whales and polar bears are under threat. "Uncertainty in the rate of melting of Greenland's outlet glaciers makes projections of future sea level rise uncertain. Sea level rise can cause coastal flooding, coastal erosion and increased risk of salt water intrusion that could damage coastal ecosystems and wetlands.

"Glacier retreat in Europe's mountain systems, and the changes in temperature and precipitation, will have widespread consequences. Projections show an overall increase of river floods across Europe, but an increase in river droughts in the south," the report says.

It also found that plants, birds, insects and mammals are moving further north and uphill. "By the end of this century, plant species may have shifted several hundred kilometres to the north and up to 60 per cent of mountain plant species may face extinction.

"A northward movement of certain fish species – 1,000km in the past 40 years – can have adverse effects on fisheries," it says, adding that earlier phytoplankton blooms in lakes "may favour harmful cyanobacteria threatening human health and ecosystems."

The report says the 70,000 excess deaths reported from 12 European countries during a heatwave in 2003 could be an example of human health impacts to come if global warming is unrestrained by concerted efforts to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions.

Increasing water demand for agriculture in the Mediterranean region was likely to lead to "unsustainable competition" for water between tourism and households, while the changing climate would also increase the danger of forest fires in southern Europe.

The report underlines the need for "pro-active adaptation measures" to moderate the effects of global warming.

"Many of today's adaptation activities are focused on flood management and defence, so there is scope for more action in other sectors," it says.

It also calls for a co-ordinated effort by countries, the European Commission and other organisations to fill key information gaps in monitoring and reporting climate data and impacts as well as better information on vulnerability and good practices in adaptation.

"This report makes strikingly clear that many regions and sectors across Europe are vulnerable to climate change impacts," said EEA executive director Prof Jacqueline McGlade. "Implementation of adaptation actions has only just started."