

Australia must adapt to climate shift

For a senior Australian scientist selling doom and gloom scenarios on climate change, Bryson Bates is upbeat about how governments and authorities are dealing with the issue. He says climate change is now widely recognised as a force to be reckoned with socially, economically and environmentally.

“In the last three years, Australian water agencies have made big investments in understanding climate change. Governments are lifting their focus beyond economics to plan a future for communities which face change. Western Australia’s government, for example, is to be commended on its long-term approach in dealing with climatic change in the country’s south-west,” he says.

Bryson will outline new ways to detect and model climate change at the International Riversymposium in Brisbane. He says that while changes are likely in Australia’s future climate, an adaptive management approach will help to deal with risk.

“Australians need to be mindful that variability in climate will be superimposed on continued warming and changes in rainfall. This will have a big affect on our rivers and water supply.”

“We cannot afford to wait for full scientific certainty about climate change because that may never come, or simply come too late. We must take action on a balance of evidence approach.”

Bryson says that recent evidence is compelling. “There are well-documented atmospheric circulation changes in mid to high latitudes, most glaciers on the West Antarctic Peninsular are retreating, Arctic sea ice is retreating rapidly, the surface of the Greenland Ice Sheet is melting, and permafrost melting is widespread.”

“In Australia, like many countries, water resources are likely to be further stressed due to projected growth in demand and climate-driven changes in supply for cities, irrigation, industry and environmental flows,” he says.

The Murray Darling Basin is experiencing its driest five-year period on record. It’s one reason why the South Eastern Australian Climate Initiative was established. The goals of the Initiative are to improve our understanding of current and projected climate change and to develop and implement more reliable seasonal forecasting methods. The research will help to inform public policy and decision-making.

“We need to find fair, cost-effective ways to minimise adverse impacts, understanding that the impacts of climate change extend far beyond economic theory and into the web of Australian community life,” says Bryson.

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