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## Rich countries and climate change

### Hot, wet and costly

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#### Officials in America and Britain report on how a changing climate could batter their countries

AFP



IF YOU want to persuade voters to make difficult choices in order to tackle climate change, it helps to make clear precisely how their own homes might be affected by shifting weather patterns. Although climate change is widely expected to do most damage in poor countries, where large and vulnerable populations are most likely to be battered and displaced in the coming decades, rich ones will be affected too. This week two governments, in America and in Britain, set forth reports detailing what changes might be in store at home.

In America, on Tuesday June 16th, a team of scientists representing different federal agencies offered some grim reading. Their report begins with a gloomy but plausible assumption that politicians will fail to agree upon mandatory caps on emissions of greenhouse gases, such as carbon, which are helping to warm the planet. It then sketches out different scenarios, which vary according to economic and population growth at home and abroad, and by the development of technology. Broadly, these are pessimistic. Temperatures across the United States are expected to rise, on average, within a range of 2.2-6.4°C (4-11.5°F) by the end of this century.

That might sound manageable, but it implies some dramatic and painful changes at certain times of year and especially in vulnerable corners. The south-east of the country, for example, could endure prolonged summers, of 100 days or more, in which temperatures reach 32°C (90°F) and above. The region would become much drier, as would the west. The centre of the country would become much hotter and even Alaska would lose much of its permafrost. The impact of hotter summers on human health is likely to be significant, with the elderly, for example, notably at risk.

As in other parts of the world, a rising sea would inevitably threaten low-lying areas, such as the Florida Keys. Stronger storms, and bigger surges of sea water, are expected to threaten the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic and Alaska, carrying obvious threats to bridges and ports constructed in times when the weather was more clement. The north of America is likely to get wetter, but some cold bits of the country might benefit from longer growing seasons and less harsh winters.

The report in Britain, to published this week, makes similar points, and is more pessimistic than previous government predictions. British scientists point to wetter winters (and thus the risk of more river flooding), especially in the north of the country, and to hotter and drier summers, which could become particularly harsh in larger cities in the south, notably London.

Is there a political purpose for the release of the two reports? In America the report stresses that some change to the climate is inevitable, and proposes that the government and individuals need to start preparing for adaptation to a harsher climate. But both governments are especially keen to prepare voters for the idea that sacrifices may need to be made in order to cut carbon emissions, to mitigate future impacts. An international agreement to this end will be hammered out in Copenhagen later this year, as countries seek a successor to the Kyoto protocol.

In America a bill, known as Waxman-Markey for its two sponsors, is snaking its way slowly through the House of Representatives. It proposes a cap-and-trade system to limit carbon emissions, in which companies would be issued with a diminishing supply of carbon credits, which could be traded. This bill is far from perfect—critics point out that too many credits, some 85%, are likely to be issued free to polluters—but even its passage is being hampered by representatives from states with large coal industries. Opponents of the bill also claim that it would impose greater costs for consumers. Passage through the Senate is expected to be even harder to achieve. In this context, the publication of reports by scientists who set out some of the costs of inaction on climate is more necessary than ever.

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