

Water shortfalls mean we can't wait for 2050

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Net-zero emissions by 2050 will be sold as the success story of the Glasgow climate conference next month, but this may be at the expense of commitments for deep emissions cuts this decade that are of primary importance in preserving human and global security.

The problem is that 2050 is too far away and an excuse for procrastination. The chief executive of a large financial institution recently was reported as saying it was “easy for bosses to commit their companies to net-zero carbon emissions because it was ‘next, next, next, next management’s problem’”. Ditto politicians. In reality, what the world does in the short term matters most, especially when it comes to maintaining human and global security, based on water and food security, in a climate-disrupted world.

You can't grow food without water. The World Meteorological Organisation recently [warned](#) of a looming global water crisis. In Australia, the CSIRO says average annual Murray-Darling inflows have almost [halved](#) since 2000, and according to an Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences report in July the average Australian farm is losing \$30,000 a year because of climate change, mostly because there is less water.

India's national water supply is forecast to fall 50 per cent below demand as early as 2030, and a World Bank report on China foresees “catastrophic consequences” unless water use and supply can quickly be brought back into balance. Both countries have allowed massive over-pumping of their groundwater aquifers.

Chatham House, Britain's eminent international affairs think tank, has released its climate

change risk [assessment](#) 2021, warning that without a sharp emissions decline before 2030 – far steeper than any likely at COP26 – impacts “will be devastating in the coming decades”.

Those likely to be locked in for the period 2040-50 unless emissions rapidly decline include a 30 per cent drop in crop yields by 2050, while food demand will be 50 per cent higher. The average proportion of global cropland affected by severe drought (greater than 50 per cent yield reductions) will likely rise to 32 per cent a year.

The report says that by 2040, almost 700 million people a year are likely to be exposed to droughts of at least six months’ duration, nearly double the global historic annual average.

The consequences of such outcomes would be catastrophic, triggering global food shortages, escalating prices, conflict and the large-scale displacement of people. Food and water insecurity, worsened by climate warming, have been at the heart of recent conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa and in Syria; global wheat shortages driven by fires in Russia and extreme droughts were a trigger for the Arab Spring uprisings.

The Chatham House report says cascading climate impacts will “drive political instability and greater national insecurity, and fuel regional and international conflict”.

From this standpoint, big emissions cuts before 2030 are of greater practical relevance for human and global security than 2050 aspirations. Former British chief scientist Sir David King says “it is the short term which matters most, what global leaders do in the next three to five years will determine the future of humanity”. He says we also need to remove large amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and provide cooling to preserve critical parts of the Earth system while we still can.

In Australia, the urgency of the need to assess the real risks of climate change to human security is under-appreciated. Unimaginable new climate extremes confront us for which we have been ill-prepared – record-breaking droughts and floods, cruel heatwaves, unstoppable bushfires, broken infrastructure and coastal inundation – and responding adequately to the climate threat is now fundamental to the survival of our nation.

Australians increasingly recognise that climate change is and will undermine their security: their safety, wellbeing, prosperity and health. They are deeply concerned, and they and the

states are acting, but a whole-of-nation response needs leadership from Canberra as well.

[Missing in action](#), a recent report from the Australian Security Leaders Climate Group found that “Australia is falling behind its allies, and is failing its responsibilities as a global citizen and its duty to protect its own people”, and urged a national climate and security risk assessment as a matter of urgency, as President Joe Biden did soon after assuming office.

Australia repeatedly has ignored the risks and is ill-prepared for the security implications of devastating climate impacts at home and in the Asia-Pacific, which will place great pressure on the Australian Defence Force to pick up the pieces in the face of accelerating climate impacts.

There is an adage in the military that “time is never on our side”, and it is also true in the present case. Urgency is the climate currency that matters most, as much in Canberra as in Glasgow.

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