

Climate science

Background

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines climate change as 'a change in the state of the climate that can be identified by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties, and that persists for an extended period'. The IPCC says that it is very likely (over 90%) that man-made greenhouse gas emissions caused most of the observed increases in global average temperatures since the mid 20th century (2007 Fourth Assessment report, IPCC).

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines climate change more specifically as says 'a change of climate that is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and that is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods'.

So far, international agreements have had limited success in setting global targets for emissions reductions. The Copenhagen Summit in December 2009 failed to reach global agreement on greenhouse gas emissions reductions, despite increasing evidence that rising temperatures are already having a harmful impact worldwide. This means that in the near future, the initiative on climate change policy will be led at the national and regional level.

In the UK, the 2008 Climate Change Act provided a legally-binding, long-term framework for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 34% by 2020 and 80% by 2050. The full domestic strategy has been outlined in the Energy and Climate Change white paper in July 2009.

A UK Met Office report predicts that weather damage in the UK is likely to double by the 2040s-2060s, with hotter summers, wetter winters and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather such as heat waves and storms. The Energy Saving Trust website states that by the end of the century, the average yearly temperature of the UK could be between 1°C and 4.5°C hotter than today, depending on how high greenhouse gas levels rise.

Our View

We share the widespread disappointment with the inconclusive outcome of the Copenhagen climate change conference 2009 and are frustrated by ongoing controversy over climate science. We firmly believe that man-made climate change is a problem which requires urgent and sustained global action if we are to avoid severe social, economic and environmental consequences. We want to see a robust climate change agreement that provides a clear and sustainable framework for EU and US energy policy. Decarbonising energy is key to addressing the issue of climate change and meeting CO₂ reduction targets.

The Accord reached at Copenhagen does not give business the clear framework necessary against which to make decisions on investment on low carbon energy technology and services. We believe this is likely to slow but not halt the rate of change in both the UK and North America. However, it is highly likely that for reasons of affordability and energy security, Governments will continue to see measures such as energy efficiency as an important component of energy policy and this gives us significant commercial opportunities.

We are committed to be the leading supplier of advice and services on low carbon solutions for our customers – from micro generation to efficient, low carbon heating installations. And we are committed to targets for reducing the carbon intensity of the energy that we source and generate through our upstream operations. We are investing billions in renewables development and, in 2009, we also purchased a 20% stake in nuclear generator British Energy. These opportunities underpin our commitment to a low carbon future.

In addition, it is essential that our employees are committed to and engaged in our climate change initiatives so that we can deliver on our ambitious agenda and maximise the opportunities available to us in a low carbon world.

Please see www.centrica.com/environment for more information on our climate change agenda.