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News release

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Beyond Kyoto – 60% emission cuts by 2050

Australia could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60 per cent within 50 years according to a new report, which also looks at the prospect of an 85 per cent reduction over a longer term.

The latest Australia Institute report, *Long-Term Greenhouse Gas Scenarios*, is a detailed study of how Australia can achieve so-called “deep cuts” in greenhouse gas emissions.

The new report concludes that policy measures will need to be implemented soon if Australia is to cut emissions by 60 per cent by the middle of the century at reasonable cost.

While the first phase of the Kyoto Protocol mandates small reductions for rich countries – and an 8 per cent increase for Australia – climate scientists last year confirmed that the world will need to reduce emissions by at least 60 per cent to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

“Given the strength of warnings from the world’s most authoritative scientists on climate change in relation to global warming and sea-level rise, it is becoming increasingly urgent to adopt the long term strategies needed to ensure a shift to a low-carbon future,” Institute Director Dr Clive Hamilton said today.

“Our new report examines the feasibility of cutting Australia’s emissions by 60 percent of 1998-99 levels by 2050 using existing technologies. The report shows that we do not have to wait for new technologies to emerge.

“The research concludes that the target is both reasonable and achievable.

“But there may need to be significant trade-offs. Even allowing for substantial progress in energy efficiency, supplying much of our energy needs from renewable sources will require intensive exploitation of Australia’s wind resources and allocation of a substantial share of Australia’s arable land to biomass crops and plantations.”

Dr Hamilton said the Institute study followed ground-breaking work in Britain which examined how a 60 per cent reduction in emissions might be achieved.

“The Blair Government found a 60 per cent cut in emissions by 2050 feasible but concluded that large changes would be needed in the energy system and in society to achieve it”, he said. “Our findings endorse this and likewise pose some challenging scenarios.”

Under the scenario developed in the new report, wind power would supply 50 per cent of Australia's electricity needs, and would require 11,000 turbines or 500 to 600 wind farms. The critical question is whether so many sites – on the coast, inland and offshore – are available.

“Under the scenario we have explored, Australia would need to devote 6-7 million hectares of arable land to biomass crops”, said Dr Hamilton. “That would transform the rural landscape and pose its own environmental challenges.”

The Australian study involved a detailed analysis of the industrial, transport, residential, commercial and services, agricultural, waste and energy sectors. It concluded that Australia might need to cut emissions by 85 per cent in the longer term.

The study states that achieving emission cuts of this order will require major policy intervention, but there had been too much short term thinking on the greenhouse issue; governments had to start planning for the long term.

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