

Australians the 'world's worst polluters'

By Simon Lauder for the The World Today

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A report by a British risk analysis company says Australians have overtaken Americans as the world's biggest carbon dioxide polluters.

The report relies on US Energy Department data to highlight the risks business would face in Australia under a global emissions trading scheme.

UK risk assessment company Maplecroft has puts Australia at the very top of the chart when it comes to per capita emissions of CO₂.

Maplecroft finds Australia's heavy reliance on coal makes for an average output of 20.58 tonnes of CO₂ per person per year, compared to 19.78 tonnes in the USA.

China, which recently overtook the US as the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitter overall, has a per capita average of about 4.5 tonnes per person.

The assessment illustrates how much work Australia will have to do if a global emissions reduction target is introduced.

It also means Australia will have a more difficult time convincing developing countries to take responsibility for cutting emissions.

Whether you look at Australia's emissions in total or per head of population, it is really just another way of illustrating how hard global climate negotiations are.

Poor countries have more to gain by continuing to pollute and rich countries have more to lose by reining it in.

The chair of climate change at the University of Adelaide, Professor Barry Brook, says even compared to other developed countries, Australia would have a lot more to cut.

"The whole idea of per capita emissions means that for each person you're responsible for more carbon reduction than someone in an economy which has a lower carbon production such as France for instance, which has about a third of the amount of carbon emissions of an Australian," Professor Brook said.



The report puts Australia at the top of the list when it comes to per capita CO₂ emissions. (AFP: Joe Raedle/Getty Images, file photo)

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'Damaged brand'

The Australian Conservation Foundation's Tony Mohr says Maplecroft's ranking of Australia will be noted by the international business community.

"This new report has been produced by a business for businesses and that really shows that the leading businesses are interested in what's going on," he said.

"Most businesses in Australia already understand that it's a matter of when, not what if we have a price on greenhouse pollution."

Dan Atkins is managing director of the Shaper group, which gets paid to help companies cut their carbon footprint.

Mr Atkins says the top polluter status Australians have gained will damage the Australian brand overseas.

"It's certainly not going to increase our reputation if we remain that way in the next five to 10 years," he said.

He says growing awareness of "food miles" is something that will directly impact on countries which use coal-fired electricity.

"With Australia being so high in terms of CO₂, that's going to put us at a competitive disadvantage; both in terms of brand but also in terms of the actual volume of those carbon labelling systems," Mr Atkins said.

"So that's going to put Australian companies who export at a competitive disadvantage."

But not everyone buys the argument that business is damaged by Australia's ranking as the number one carbon emitter per capita.

The chief executive of the Minerals Council of Australia, Mitch Hooke, says the climate change argument should be about commitments to solutions, not seeking concessions.

"Not getting into this business where the developing countries who have a lot more people and therefore lower per capita emissions think there should be less obligation on them to reduce emissions than the developing countries," he said.

"That's why we have this continuous per capita debate. It's about trying to shirk blame, it's about trying to shirk responsibility, yet in actual fact everybody has got to focus on solutions to managing climate change."

Mr Hooke says even if the Australian economy was shut down, it would only contribute to a lessening of global emissions by 2 per cent.

"The accent should be on technologies and developing the solutions to managing climate change, not getting into this warfare about who has the greatest degree of responsibility," he said.

"I'm saying to you even if we accepted that we're the highest per capita, and therefore that means we should be doing more, you still can't do it if you don't have the technologies.

"And you still can only shut down the Australian economy to the tune of contributing to about 1.5 per cent of emission to the global problem.

"It begs the question, what more do you want?"

The UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen is just months away.

Professor Barry Brook says the two different ways of deciding who is the biggest polluter is likely to be the biggest stumbling block.

"So it's a bit of a political game like that. Australia has about five times the per capita emissions of China for instance but China produces over 20 times the carbon emissions of Australia because China has such a huge population," he said.

"So you can play around with these numbers all you want but ultimately what matters is the total global carbon budget and unless humanity as a whole can find solutions to that problem, then all of that petty bickering amongst nations

about who's more or less responsible isn't really going to be very helpful."

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