

SPECIAL REPORT

Gloomy outlook for Blair

British prime minister Tony Blair hopes to make significant progress on climate change at the upcoming G8 summit. The United States is standing in his way, but his efforts may at least benefit climate research.

You could forgive Tony Blair for wishing he had never made climate change a priority for the G8 summit in July. The British prime minister's proposals for emissions targets got a frosty reception when he put them to US President George W. Bush last week. And mounting claims that the Bush administration manipulates climate science suggest that the United States is still some way from agreeing to concrete action (see 'Increasing the uncertainty', below).

But Blair's efforts have not been a complete washout. There is still talk of significant investment in climate-related research and technology. And Britain has a plan on the table to address one major scientific concern: Africa's lack of input to the global network of weather stations (see 'Solving Africa's climate-data problem', right).

Blair initially had three broad climate-related aims for the meeting of the Group of Eight industrialized nations, to be held in Gleanagles, Scotland, over 6–8 July. He planned to rely on science to set emissions targets; to agree on new technologies that could help to achieve that goal; and to build a climate consensus with the world's emerging economies.

Such lofty goals were always going to be a long shot, and a document leaked late last



The heat is on: Tony Blair and George W. Bush do not see eye to eye on climate change.

month seemed to confirm what many had believed to be the most likely outcome — there was as yet no agreement on setting stricter emissions targets.

The world's leading science academies were moved to lend their voices to the cause. The academies of all the G8 countries, along with those of China, Brazil and India, issued a strongly worded statement on 7 June calling for immediate steps to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. "The scientific understanding of

climate change is now sufficiently clear to justify nations taking prompt action," they declared.

Yet even a shared statement could not blur the sharp divide between the US and UK positions. The president of Britain's Royal Society, Robert May, criticized US climate policy as "misguided". And Blair's attempts to persuade Bush of the need to act were not rewarded.

After a meeting in Washington on 7 June, Bush reiterated his position that more research is needed before action can be taken on climate change. He did not budge on the issue of emissions targets; the United States remains the only G8 country that has not signed the Kyoto Protocol on climate change.

Blair has now turned his attention to leaders in Europe and elsewhere, starting this week by enlisting Russian president Vladimir Putin in the fight against climate change. But it is true, as ever, that without the United States, any emissions agreement will be weak at best.

Instead, the outcome of the summit seems most likely to be increased investment in sustainable and renewable technologies. The leaked statement, which purports to be an early draft of a G8 climate agreement, suggests spending money on relatively small fixes, such as improving the energy efficiency of buildings, encouraging the development of hydrogen and other fuel-efficient cars, and developing better methods to capture and store carbon dioxide emissions. It recommends an international 'carbon challenge' prize to stimulate such research. ■

Increasing the uncertainty

Fresh accusations that the Bush administration manipulates climate science for political ends could spell trouble during the G8 meeting.

Philip Cooney, a political adviser to President George W. Bush and a former oil-industry lobbyist, made hundreds of changes to a summary of research conducted under the Climate Change Science Program, the Bush administration's main climate research initiative. As the report was being finalized in 2002, Cooney added phrases such as "significant uncertainty" to describe the current state of scientific knowledge, and cut passages that were inconsistent with White House policies.

Administration officials say the changes were simply part of a routine vetting process. "The reviews were pretty standard," says John Marburger, Bush's science adviser. But critics charge that the net effect was to exaggerate the level of uncertainty about the evidence for climate change. The changes became public

after the Government Accountability Project, a Washington-based watchdog group, supplied copies of Cooney's edits to *The New York Times*.

Cooney resigned last week from his post as chief of staff for the White House's Council on Environmental Quality. White House officials say he left for reasons unrelated to the edits.

Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, an environmental think-tank in Arlington, Virginia, says the editing fiasco makes the Bush administration look insincere when it talks about the uncertainties of climate change. "This shows that the United States is isolated from the rest of the world," she says. Congressman Henry Waxman (Democrat, California) and Senator John Kerry (Democrat, Massachusetts) have called for an investigation into changes made by White House officials to climate-change documents produced by scientists.

Geoff Brumfiel, Washington DC

Solving Africa's climate-data problem

World leaders are poised to confront one of climate science's biggest problems — a gaping hole in global climate data left by Africa's dilapidated weather stations.

Nature has learned of a British proposal in which a relatively small investment in African data could dramatically improve models of global climate change and its impact on the continent. The plan will be discussed at next month's G8 summit.

But the proposal must tiptoe around some sensitive political concerns. Observers say that a few countries may be withholding weather data in order to sell it to Western research organizations — a charge strongly denied by African meteorological agencies.

Decades ago, Africa had a relatively dense network of stations to measure rainfall, temperature and other weather data. But some areas, such as the Sahara, have always been sparsely covered, and some weather centres have aged badly as cash-strapped governments have been reluctant to invest in trained staff and equipment.

Many of the stations now sit silent (see map), and their density in Africa is eight times lower than the minimum recommended by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). "This acts as a huge brake on climate science," says Richard Washington, a specialist on African climate at the University of Oxford, UK.

Africa suffers because weather data can help local health planners fight malaria, which is strongly influenced by periods of drought or heavy rainfall. The lack of data also hampers climate researchers around the globe, who need historical data and input from current events to improve their models.

Western meteorologists who have worked in Africa say some centres there fear that releasing data might allow outside companies

to generate forecasts for agriculture, aviation and other industries — a function currently performed by state-run agencies. "There is a degree of protectiveness," says Mike Harrison of the UK Met Office in Exeter.

Others argue that historical records are viewed as bargaining chips. "Some conclude that there is money to be made," says Richard Thigpen, a WMO official who works on access to African weather data.

African meteorological services contacted by *Nature* denied that political or financial pressures affect the data flow. Tony Anuforom of the Nigerian Meteorological Agency in Abuja accepts that data from his country's weather stations is not relayed promptly to the WMO. But he says the agency is installing a satellite link that should remedy the problem.

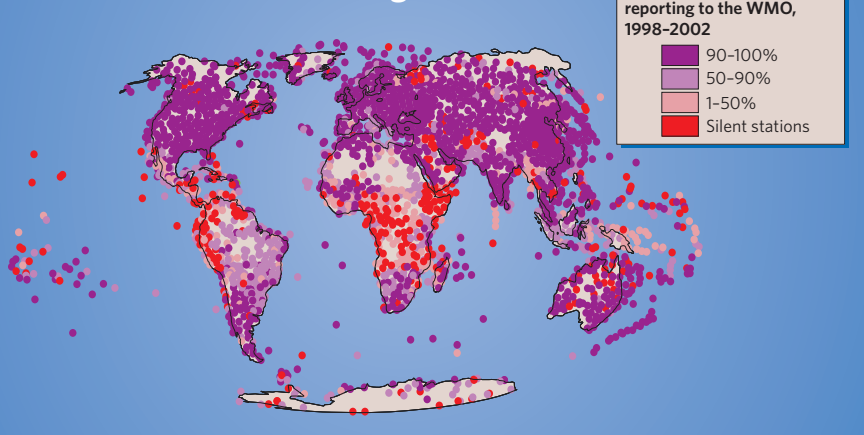
Some outside observers agree. The lack of data "is not a bargaining tool", says Steve Palmer of the UK Met Office. "It's because they can't make the data available." And some measurements, such as those from balloons, are often too expensive.

Meteorologists say the problem can be solved by wealthier nations getting involved. A US\$70-million investment over five years from rich countries could make "significant in-roads" into the problem, says an official at the UK Department for International Development. And there is no need for any new bureaucracy: a draft of a purported G8 climate-change agreement, leaked last month, said the money could be channelled through an existing WMO scheme, the Global Climate Observing System.

But the stations will need money from African governments if they are to survive. And in nations where the education and health infrastructures require major investment, that may be a lot to ask.

Jim Giles, London

Weather stations around the globe



SOURCE: WMO/UK DEPT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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