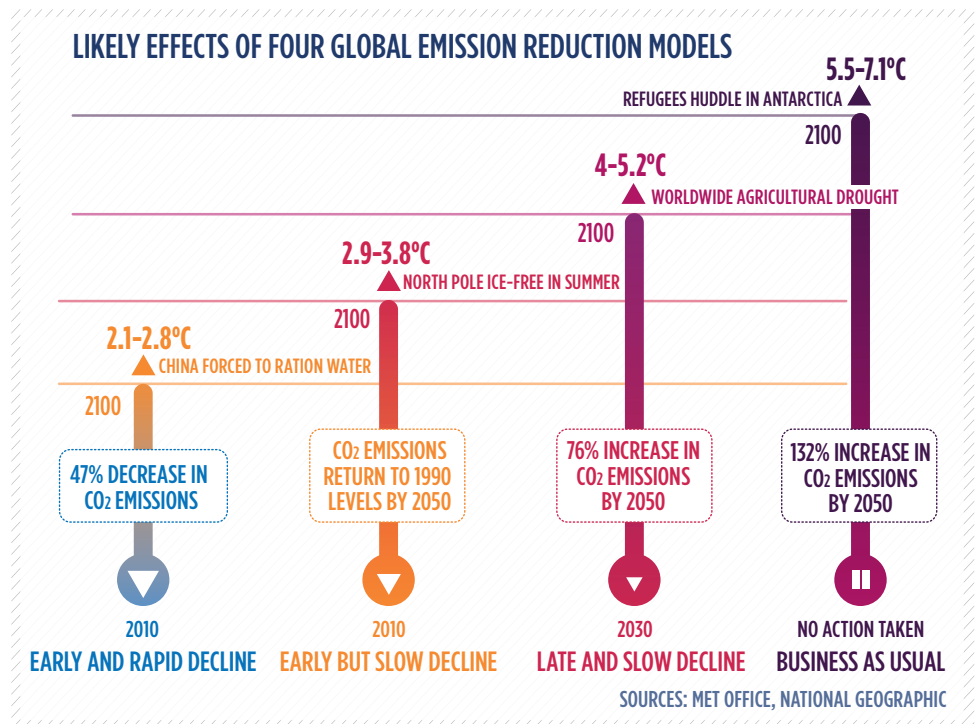


Tough choices on the road to climate safety

Politicians can't agree on how to deal with global warming. New ambitious targets have just been proposed. Will they help or will they hurt?



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The fight against climate change is speeding up. A new Low Carbon Roadmap, published this week, is calling for European Union countries to cut carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions faster than ever before. The old target, a 20% reduction by 2020, should be revised, says the report. Instead, we should make cuts of 25%, if not more.

It doesn't sound like a very big difference. But on a subject this important, even a small shift in policy has the potential to change the world. Even 5% less emissions could have a huge impact on our economy, our environment and our future.

First the context: scientists agree that the world is heating up. They also say it's our fault. 'Greenhouse gasses' like CO₂ are filling Earth's atmosphere and causing global warming.

If the world heats up too much, life for all of us is going to get a whole lot harder. Coastal cities could be flooded.

Deserts will grow. Freak storms will be more common. Tropical diseases could spread North to a new, warmer Britain.

So, to prevent that happening, we have to reduce the amount of CO₂ we produce. Scientists estimate that to prevent disaster, western countries will have to cut emissions by 80% before the year 2050.

The EU roadmap is meant to help us hit that target. But it's easier said than done. Almost everything we do produces carbon: making fertilizer to grow food; generating electricity to run our homes; using petrol in our cars.

Industry is the same. Manufacturing takes a lot of power, which in turn produces a lot of CO₂. For example, a single plastic shopping bag might be responsible for about 6kg of CO₂ emissions over its lifespan – enough to fill about 480 party balloons.

Industry provides goods, jobs and income. Our economies rely on it to

survive. Can we cut emissions without hurting industry?

NO EASY ANSWERS

Some business leaders think not. EUROFER, which represents European steel producers, says the new plan could 'deindustrialise' the continent. Even a 5% extra cut could force companies out of business, costing thousands of jobs.

Other companies may move outside the EU. If we import Chinese steel, say, instead of making our own, we're just shifting the same emissions from one continent to another – the result for global warming is the same.

But there are two sides to this story. Environmentalists say that the extra cut will give new impetus to green technology and energy saving. Not only will that save us all money, the new technology will create new jobs to replace those lost.

Q & A

Q How can 'green technology' create jobs?

A Green technology needs scientists for development, engineers for design, builders for construction, and a host of other specialists in other roles. Building an offshore windfarm, for example, would keep a lot of people busy for a long time.

Q But who's going to pay the salaries?

A Probably all of us, through higher taxes, electricity and gas bills. Polluters might pay too, through the fees they'll be charged for carbon credits.

Q For what?

A Carbon credits. They're like tokens that manufacturers can buy in order to be allowed to produce CO₂. The idea is that by making CO₂ emissions expensive, we can discourage them.

Q This all sounds incredibly complicated!

A It is. There are no easy answers with climate change. But avoiding the problem won't make it go away.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Why should I worry about climate change when it's so far in the future?'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?