

UK 'should cut greenhouse gases by 80 per cent'

By Emily Beament, PA

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The UK should cut its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80 per cent by mid-century, the Government's climate change committee recommended today.

The committee said a more stringent target than the 60 per cent cut currently in the Climate Change Bill was needed, because new information suggested the dangers of global warming were greater than previously thought.

In a letter to the new Energy and Climate Change Secretary Ed Miliband, the committee's chairman Adair Turner said the tougher target would be "challenging but feasible", and could be achieved at a cost of 1 per cent to 2 per cent of GDP in 2050.

He also said a cut of 80 per cent on 1990 levels by 2050 should cover all emissions - not just carbon dioxide - and all sectors of the UK economy including shipping and aviation.

But because of practical problems in allocating emissions of international transport to the UK, they should not be included in the Climate Change Bill's five yearly carbon budgets, he said.

Instead the overall target should be "at least 80 per cent", with greater reductions in sectors covered by the Bill if aviation and shipping do not make sufficient cuts by mid century, he said.

The committee made its initial report today on whether the Climate Change Bill's long range target needed to be strengthened, following a request by Prime Minister Gordon Brown at Labour's party conference last month.

The committee was first asked last year to assess whether the 60 per cent target - which was based on a report by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution in 2000 - was sufficient.

It was due to report on the 2050 target in December, after the Bill became law, but moving it forward raised the possibility the tougher target could be incorporated into the Bill.

The committee said meeting the target would require improvements in energy efficiency and "decarbonisation" of power, transport and heating.

This would include measures such as replacing fossil fuels with renewables, nuclear new build and carbon capture and storage technology, introducing hydrogen vehicles and electric cars, and the introduction of technology such as ground source heat pumps to heat homes.

Lord Turner said: "Climate change poses a huge potential threat to human welfare. If we do not act soon in developed and developing countries, it will become too late to avoid serious and potentially catastrophic consequences.

"That is why it is so vital that a global deal is reached on climate change and that the UK contributes significantly towards this.

"But we have the potential to reduce our emissions by 80 per cent or more by using energy far more efficiently, by investing in developing new energy sources and by making relatively minor lifestyle changes."

He said new scientific information since the 2000 Royal Commission report had led the committee to make a judgment that a stronger target was needed.

This included research which showed that carbon sinks - natural resources such as oceans and forests which absorb and store carbon - become less effective with warmer temperatures.

The committee also took into account the melting of the Arctic sea ice which is happening more quickly than predicted, the impact of pollution on masking the full extent of climate change and higher than expected global emissions trends because of economic growth.

The UK's 80 per cent target should be its contribution to a global cut of at least half by 2050, in the hope of keeping emissions from rising much above 2C by 2100, the committee said.

Lord Turner said: "We based the target on what the science says but also double-checking that this is achievable and affordable, and we're absolutely confident that it is."

Mr Miliband, who was appointed to the role of Energy and Climate Change Secretary on Friday when the new department was created in the Cabinet reshuffle, said he welcomed the report.

"We need to act now to avoid dangerous climate change and the action we take must be guided by experts. That's why we asked Adair Turner to examine the level of our target," he said.

"This is a pressing issue and we'll respond to the recommendations swiftly.

"Setting an emissions target in the Climate Change Bill and establishing my new Department of Energy and Climate Change sends out a strong message, but the hard work will be for us all to make emission reductions a reality over the coming decades."

Opposition parties also welcomed the recommendations.

The Tories' new shadow energy and climate change secretary Greg Clark said he was "delighted" at Lord Turner's proposals.

"Meeting an 80 per cent reduction target would present major challenges, especially given the Government's poor performance in recent years," he said.

"However, with the right policies, there would be clear economic benefits from ensuring that Britain plays a leading role in creating a greener and safer world."

Liberal Democrat environment spokesman Steve Webb said it was vital to achieve a tough Climate Change Bill to ensure the UK had a strong hand in forthcoming international negotiations.

Andy Atkins, executive director of Friends of the Earth, which has led the campaign for a Climate Change Bill, said the committee's recommendation was "fantastic news".

Greenpeace's chief policy adviser Benet Northcote said 80 per cent was the level of emissions cuts needed to combat climate change, but warned plans for new coal-fired power stations and a third runway at Heathrow would "doom the target to failure even before it has been adopted".

David Nussbaum, chief executive of WWF-UK said the conservation charity was "delighted" that the committee recognised emissions from aviation and shipping had to be included in any credible target.