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LAWYERS

DROUGHTS



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April 2007

Drought is nothing new to Australia, nor for that matter, to the author of this paper who was born at Manangatang in the Victorian Mallee during the course of the infamous 1933-45 drought which ravaged inland southern Australia through the years of the Depression and World War II.

That was a period when it seemed to us, that the drought might never end. Dust storms occurred so frequently and almost invariably obscured the house next door from view even though it was less than 20 metres away. Not, of course that dust storms are a necessary part of droughts, they are far more the result of deforestation and bad farming practices but it is still the lack of rainfall that triggers them off.

My mother and grandmother, as I recall, once cleaned out our house on three successive days removing daily the equivalent of two plastic buckets full of fine dust (i.e. one full kerosene tin) in the process. On the fourth day, however, they gave it up as a bad job and waited for the winds to eventually subside.

For us kids at school, gravel rash was by far the most common football injury and almost all of us suffered from heat rash whatever that might have been. Looking back on it, having experienced nothing except drought since birth it all seemed pretty normal at the time and up until 1946 when the drought eventually broke and we finally experienced the change that good seasons brought.

On the more humorous side my mother told me later she had the house painted brown because, with the slow-drying paints of those days, the next dust storm would have made it permanently that colour anyway. In fact it took years to persuade her that with improvements in the weather and the paint industry it

was at long last feasible for her to risk a re-painting in more appropriate colours.

Rain did fall from time to time and in one or two years crops were grown but the returns were way below what the farmers anticipated. Families, one by one, sold out or simply walked off the land and moved 'down south' to Melbourne or anywhere else where it still rained and they could make a living.

Falling rain was something we children soon became expert at. Rainfall, in some droughts commences far more frequently than you might imagine, and so it was then. In '33-'45, however, the rain almost invariably petered out as quickly as it had arrived. Less than 15 minutes of rain on our iron roofs was close to useless, particularly if it occurred in the summer. Half an hour, however, was promising providing the intensity of the rainfall kept up. An hour of steady rain and we would be outside enjoying it, but those occasions were rare indeed. My most vivid memories of the period are all of the rain falling on the roof at night because that was what we all looked forward to. However it never seemed to last for more than 10 minutes or so.

The '33-'45 drought was, it now seems, what the scientists call an event of 'abrupt climate change' along the same lines as the Sahel Drought that lasted in Africa for a dozen years from the late 1960s or the Midwestern droughts in the United States of the 1930s. The Sahel Drought was of course the more severe killing directly at least a million people and adversely affecting 50 million more.

An 'abrupt climate change' drought is more likely than not to be the kind of drought we are now experiencing. It is thought to be an event which is caused by a range of factors including sudden changes in sea temperature and human activities such as deforestation and bad farming practices. The current big dry in Southern Australia seems to fit most of the criteria for an abrupt climate change drought and so it must be regarded.

Scientists, however, have concluded that although this dry is primarily an 'abrupt climate change' drought and unlikely to have been caused solely by

global warming, it still seems far more likely than not that it has been exacerbated by global warming. After all droughts are now occurring in areas right around the globe and on every continent except South America. Even Antarctica is experiencing relative drought in that it is losing ice as the melting of the ice cap exceeds the snowfall to the extent of almost 60 cubic kilometres per annum and increasing all the time. This is contrary to scientific expectations that the ice sheet would grow because higher temperatures would increase the snowfall enabling it to produce new ice at a rate in excess of the ice lost through melting.

For the same reason the Arctic (Greenland) ice cap has shrunk to the smallest area ever recorded leading to the prediction that the Arctic Ocean could be ice free all summer well before the end of this century.

Global warming itself, however, is still thought to be something that will occur more gradually than what we are currently experiencing although in the process it will announce itself ahead of its ultimate arrival by exacerbating occurrences such as 'abrupt climate change' droughts.

'Abrupt climate change' droughts, by the way, are far more frequent than we might previously have imagined. A recent scientific review of droughts in the twentieth century showed that some 30 regions of the earth experienced similar precipitate climatic changes as the Sahel Drought during that century. These included the '33-'45 drought in inland Australia. It seems likely that it is these areas that will become drier and experience longer and drier droughts as global warming advances.

So although our expectations regarding the onset of global warming remain as stated above, the reader would be unwise to disregard the many recent scientific warnings which all indicate that global warming is arriving much faster than we previously anticipated. New evidence, particularly from the polar regions indicates a melt of fresh water ice at a rapidly accelerating rate each year whereas, the anticipation in the 1990s was generally to the effect that we need not anticipate any melt of either the Greenland or the Antarctic ice caps for the reason given above. The melting of the permafrost is another instance where we are experiencing an event that scientists previously did not believe would occur and at a time well in advance of when it would previously have even come under consideration.

As has been said frequently in previous articles posted on this website, the manifestations of global warming inevitably occur when it is too late to reverse them.

So the current drought probably does not represent the commencement of Global Warming as such. It does; however, appear to herald the inevitable onset of Global Warming and to be, at least partially, an exacerbator of conditions initially caused by other factors.

What all this means is that Australians need to be prepared for Global Warming as it develops during the course of this century as if it will be similar to the dry we are currently experiencing. It is likely there will be substantially less rain, particularly in autumn and spring than has currently been the case. On the other hand it is likely we will be subjected to heavy and destructive summer storms that will bring substantial rainfall as well as a great deal of damage to buildings and other property.

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