

Senate Standing Committee on Economics
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education Portfolio
Additional Estimates Hearing 2011-12
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AGENCY/DEPARTMENT: COMMONWEALTH SCIENTIFIC AND INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION

TOPIC: Rising Sea Levels

REFERENCE: Written Question –Senator Bernardi

QUESTION No.: AI-63

In 1987 it was reported that a CSIRO expert had forecast “that by the year 2020 world temperatures would rise from one to six degrees, increasing ocean levels from one to 18 metres.” (‘Dire warnings about our fragile protective blanket’, *Sunday Tasmanian*, 8 February 1987, p.15). Does the CSIRO stand by this claim made by one of its own? If not, how does the CSIRO explain the failure of its prediction methods?

ANSWER

The cited article in the *Sunday Tasmanian* (8 February 1987) quotes from the Director of the Wilderness Society, a Mr Jonathon West, previously an advisor to the Hon Barry Cohen AM, environment minister in the Hawke Government, who was giving his recollection of what he thought was a briefing by an un-named CSIRO expert 18 months previously.

The article includes factual errors such as confusing the depletion of the ozone layer by chlorofluorocarbons with the greenhouse effect.

CSIRO (Pittock 1988) at a conference in 1987 reported on the findings of a key international science meeting (of the United Nations Environmental Programme, the World Meteorological Organisation, and the International Council for Science) stating that it was estimated that by 2030 global average sea level might rise by between 20 and 140 cm with a global surface warming of around 3.5 °C if current trends from the observations of atmospheric carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases were to continue. CSIRO noted that this climate scenario was plausible but far from certain. CSIRO also noted that any substantial sea-level rise from the full disintegration of the West Antarctic ice sheet, if it ever was to occur, would contribute five to seven metres of rise in sea level but that such a disintegration would take several centuries at least.

Thus CSIRO in 1987 was referring to and reporting on projected sea level changes that were qualitatively different to the claims quoted in the *Sunday Tasmanian* article. CSIRO disagrees that the claims as quoted in the extract from the *Sunday Tasmanian* article are a credible representation of CSIRO research or commentary at that time.

References:

Pittock, B (1988). Actual and anticipated changes in Australia’s climate. *In* Greenhouse: Planning for climate change, G.I. Pearman (Ed), CSIRO Australia.