



NATIONAL RURAL
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ALLIANCE INC.

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Why climate change research must focus on rural issues

The National Rural Health Alliance has called for urgent focus on rural and remote issues in the wake of yesterday's announcement by government of \$10 million for research into the human health impacts of climate change.

"Climate change will affect many aspects of life in rural areas, including the economic base, the incidence of disease and the frequency and severity of extreme events," said Alliance Chair, Dr Jenny May.

"People in communities that are already under-served will be most vulnerable – and in Australia this means those who live in rural and remote areas. Individuals and families will be exposed to new diseases while facing the stress of major change that will transform the economic and social status of entire communities."

In welcoming additional research funding, Dr May urged consideration of community strategies to reduce risks and manage events. Research will need to cover issues such as:

- responses to extreme weather events;
- housing and building standards;
- the physical structure and operation of resource management systems like reservoirs;
- a range of policy responses to the likely relocation of food production; and
- how best to prepare health professionals for new challenges, improve mental health and provide health-related infrastructure.

A recent paper in the *Medical Journal of Australia* by Donna Green, Ursula King and Joe Morrison argued that Aboriginal people will feel the impact of climate change more than others because of their particularly close ties to the land and environment.

The paper reported that temperatures in the tropical north and interior are tipped to rise by three degrees Celsius by 2050, increasing the urgency of the need for improved Aboriginal health and housing. Indigenous Australians generally suffer poorer health than the wider population, including cardiovascular and respiratory disease, which makes them particularly vulnerable.

Further evidence of the vulnerability of people in rural areas was provided in a paper by Peng Bi and Kevin Parton in the January 2008 issue of the *Australian Journal of Rural Health*.

The paper predicted that climate change will trigger extreme events such as heatwaves, droughts, flooding, cyclones and landslides – which will impact on food production by disrupting agricultural cycles.

These altered weather patterns will also bring changes in the distribution of vector-borne diseases, such as Ross River and Barmah Forest viral infections, food-borne diseases and variations in daily mortality and hospitalisation rates, emergency department visits and the use of ambulances services.

Dr May said because rural and remote regions play a critical role in agricultural production, mining, biodiversity, environmental security and heritage protection, government should treat them as national assets that demand protection.

Climate change and its effects on health are priority topics for deliberation at the 10th National Rural Health Conference to be held in Cairns from May 17-20.

Further Contact

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