

Global carbon output spikes to record high

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Greenhouse gas emissions jumped to a record high last year, resulting in the highest carbon output in history, according to unpublished estimates from the International Energy Agency.

Most scientists agree the threshold for potentially "dangerous climate change" is a temperature rise of more than 2 degrees Celsius. But given the IEA's findings, preventing this is likely to remain just "a nice Utopia," said Fatih Birol, chief economist of the IEA.

A record 30.6 gigatons of carbon dioxide was emitted into the air last year, mostly from burning fossil fuel. It amounted to a rise of 1.6 gigatons from 2009, according to IEA estimates.

"I am very worried. This is the worst news on emissions," Birol said. "It is becoming extremely challenging to remain below 2 degrees. The prospect is getting bleaker. That is what the numbers say."

If the pattern continues, the results will be dire, said Nicholas Stern of the London School of Economics, who wrote the influential Stern Report on climate change economics in 2006. The new IEA figures and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's projections suggest a 50 percent chance that the average global temperature will rise by 4 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, Stern said.

"Such warming would disrupt the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people across the planet, leading to widespread mass migration and conflict," Stern said. "That is a risk any sane person would seek to drastically reduce."

If governments heed the warning, the disaster can be avoided, Birol said. "If we have bold, decisive and urgent action, very soon, we still have a chance of succeeding," he said.