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Climate change making Christmas fare a real turkey

Ben McNeil
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UNTIL now images of melting icecaps and future sea-level rises submerging millionaires' coastal properties have not cut through to the suburban hip-pocket voters who swing elections. Food price rises due to extreme weather events, however, are transforming the climate-change battleground and may leave Prime Minister John Howard vulnerable to those Aussie battlers who have been crucial to his electoral success.

Anyone who loved bananas before March of this year has become acutely aware of how extreme weather can affect the cost of living. Cyclone Larry demolished northern Queensland's banana crop, resulting in a 250 per cent price surge.

Scientists know that hotter oceans feed more energy into cyclones, as was the case in the Gulf of Mexico, which stoked hurricane Katrina's destructive path in the US last year. Nine of the 10 warmest years on record have occurred in the past decade, and the Bureau of Meteorology released figures this month showing the period between August and November in Australia to be the hottest since 1950 and one of the driest on record.

The CSIRO predicts temperature rises up to six degrees and an exacerbation of events such as cyclones, droughts and floods in many regions around Australia. Bushfires are expected to become more frequent.

You may be someone who doesn't like bananas, or has ceased to buy them because \$12 a kilogram is just too much. But the drought is hitting food prices across the board, with not even the most food-selective Australian able to escape its grasp. In the past year food prices have soared 10 per cent, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Lamb and beef prices could leap by up to 25 per cent in the next few months, while bread becomes 10 per cent more expensive due to a 40 per cent surge in flour prices. Australian citrus growers declared recently that orange prices had risen from \$80 a tonne to \$200, with inevitable price hikes on orange juice.

Vegetables will be hard hit, with AusVeg chairman Mike Badcock saying he expects average prices to rise by 30 per cent by Christmas, and by the end of January they could be double or even more. Food price rises because of extreme weather events already have the potential to radically alter the dynamics of the typical climate-sensitive voter. Last month an Ipsos McKay survey of 1000 people found that nearly half believed the drought was the result of climate change.

Aussie battlers will not look kindly on higher food prices exacerbated by climate change, particularly since other polls suggest that more than 80 per cent of Australians believe the Howard Government is not doing enough to tackle the issue. Although prices may eventually

come back to normal for a period of time, climate pressures on food prices are just a signal of things to come.

Current models suggest that by energising the water cycle, climate change leads to arid Australian regions being more prone to drought while wetter regions become more prone to flooding. Our last devastating drought was only four years ago, and there is no doubt drought severity will be intensified because of future hotter temperatures.

A related underlying concern for the Prime Minister is that according to the Australian Food and Grocery Council, food makes up about 18 per cent of the basket of goods used to calculate the Consumer Price Index, the second most important item after housing prices.

Any underlying knock-on effects from food to other sectors, such as wages, would accelerate inflation — an especially damaging consequence to any leader's economic credentials.

Extreme weather events since cyclone Larry have shifted the climate-change battleground to the hip pocket of every Australian. As we move into the food-friendly festive season, Australian families may start to look at their grocery bill and rightly wonder what the Prime Minister has done to tackle climate change in the past 10 years. His argument that any action must avoid damaging the economy must sound hollow given the rising cost of living.

I couldn't imagine a more damaging political impact than for something like the meat pie to become too expensive.

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