

Antarctic climate facing 'rapid' changes

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Australia's chief Antarctic scientist says claims by climate experts about [rapid] environmental changes in the southern continent are not alarmist.



The Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) told a Senate estimates hearing today "rapid changes" taking place across the icy land mass would have significant impact on global climate.

Changes in ocean flows and shifts in Antarctic ice cap levels were occurring at rates faster than at any other time in history, chief scientist Nick Gales said.

"That's the part that is the most dramatic about the information we're receiving," he told the hearing.

Scientists were detecting major changes in the circulation of deep, dense salty water off Antarctica.

This water, which drives the circulation of the world's oceans and in turn climate patterns, was reducing, while becoming warmer and less salty.

Meanwhile, parts of the Antarctic ice caps were melting at unprecedented rates.

"The findings around changes in Antarctica and the southern oceans are critically important to driving world climate," Dr Gales said.

"That is the engine room of a large amount of world climate, so changes there are important."

He dismissed suggestions the claims were alarmist, adding scientists were "by definition" sceptics and based their conclusions only on testing data.

Australian scientists "overwhelmingly" report on the basis of their findings, and strive to make clear statements about uncertainties.

There was "no doubt" scientists were observing rapid environment and climatic changes in

Antarctica, Dr Gales said.

"The role of scientists are not to be alarmists, and not to downplay the data, but simply to report it.

"We take that responsibility, certainly through the Antarctic program, really seriously."

The hearing was told a major, multinational research operation was under way to measure any changes occurring to the enormous expanse of Antarctic sea ice.

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