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WMO to provide guidance for heat health warning systems

GENEVA, 11 MAY 2007 (WMO) – The World Meteorological Organization, under the guidance of its Commission for Climatology and the World Health Organization (WHO), are at an advanced stage of preparing a Guidance on Implementation of Heat Health early Warning Systems (HHWS).

The European heat waves in the Northern Hemispheric summer of 2003 were responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people. This year, at the end of April and beginning of this month, at least five people died and hundreds – especially children – were treated throughout India for heat-related ailments as temperatures soared above 40°C, sometimes reaching as high as 45°C, during a two-week period.

Research has shown that the most vulnerable sections of society to heat are the elderly, the very young, the ailing and those engaged in outdoor activities.

Recently there has been recognition that heat-related risks can be reduced through HHWS which alert decision-makers and the general public to impending dangerous hot weather, and to serve as a source of advice on how to avoid negative health outcomes associated with hot weather extremes.

The purpose of the Guidance is to outline, for National Meteorological and Hydrological Services (NMHSs) and national health services, the issues surrounding the threat of heat waves and to show how an understanding of the biometeorology, epidemiology, public health and risk communication aspects of heat as a hazard needs to be integrated within early warning systems for heat waves.

WMO Secretary-General, Mr Michel Jarraud, said: "Because they lack the spectacular and sudden violence of say, a tropical cyclone or a flash flood, and because the related death tolls are not always obvious at first, heat waves rarely receive adequate attention.

"However, heat waves are amongst the most dangerous of natural hazards. The Guidance will act as a catalyst for bringing together key players from climate, health, emergency response agencies, decision-makers as well as the general public for initiating action concerning the overall management of heat as a hazard."

The Guidance considers who is at risk to heat, outlines approaches to assessing heat stress, presents the science and methodologies associated with the development of HHWS, overviews heat intervention strategies which are a necessary part of any truly integrated HHWS, considers the problem of communicating heat risk and how to evaluate HHWS and draws attention to the essential elements of summer heat plans within which HHWS are nested. The climate component of HHWS is the responsibility of NMHSs and WMO. Much of the responsibility concerning the societal response component lies with the health and social service sectors.

Planning for a number of demonstration projects is underway, with the expectation that regionally-applicable practical advice for implementation and operation of HHWS will be developed. WMO Members including India, France and others have expressed an interest in hosting these important research initiatives.

The IPCC Fourth Assessment Report released this year states that, over the last 50 years, hot days, hot nights and heat waves have become more frequent.

It projects that heat waves are very likely to continue to become more frequent and could affect the health status of millions of people in some parts of the world, particularly those with low adaptive capacity.

Longer term initiatives for managing heat as a hazard are also presented in the Guidance.

The current draft of the Guidance will be made available to Members of the Fifteenth session of the World Meteorological Congress, as part of the discussions on the activities under the World Climate Programme (WCP), on 14 May at Geneva's International Congress Centre.

WMO is the United Nations' authoritative voice on weather, climate and water

For more information please contact:

Ms Carine Richard-Van Maele, Chief, Communications and Public Affairs, WMO.

Tel: +41 (0)22 730 83 15.

Mr Mark Oliver, Press Officer, Communications and Public Affairs Office, World Meteorological Organization. Tel: +41 (0)22 730 84 17.



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