

WORLD

Global warming blamed for heat

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This year has been the second warmest year on record, say NASA scientists in the United States who monitor global air temperatures.

A record-breaking spell of warmth in recent years - with 2001 going down as the third warmest year on record and 1998 still holding the record - has scientists and climate experts concerned that greenhouse gases are heating up the planet more quickly than previously expected.

"Studying these annual temperature data, one gets the feeling that temperature is rising and that the rise is gaining momentum," said Lester Brown, an economist and president of the Earth Policy Institute in Washington.

This year the Earth's average temperature was 14.64C, compared with the long-term average of 14C, said James Hansen, of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, who analyses the data collected from thousands of weather stations around the world.

The meteorological year runs from December to November. During that period, 2001 temperatures were 14.51C. The record remains with 1998, when global temperature rose to 14.67C - the highest since records were first compiled in the late 1800s. The string of warmer years provides evidence that humans are largely to blame for changing the climate, said Peter Frumhoff, an ecologist and senior scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"It's important we pay attention to this drumbeat of evidence as the signal of human impact starts to emerge from the noise of natural climate patterns," he said.

The warm temperatures of 2001 and 2002 are especially significant when they are considered in the light of El Nino weather patterns that alter global climate, Mr Hansen said.

Some of the heat of 1998 can be attributed to a large El Nino event that year, which warmed the waters of the Pacific. But last year there was a La Nina event, which kept temperatures from soaring even higher. There is a weak El Nino developing now, but it is not generating nearly as much heat as one of 1998. "The fact that 2002 is almost as warm as the unusual warmth of 1998 is confirmation that the underlying global warming trend is continuing," Mr Hansen said.

Los Angeles Times