

Press Release No. 56/2010

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Joint press release by the Federal Environment Agency, the Federal Ministry of the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, and the German Meteorological Service (DWD)

Extreme weather events require precautions and adaptation

German Environment Ministry discusses health impacts of climate change

Climate change leads to extreme weather events which pose health risks. On the occasion of an international symposium in Bonn Environment State Secretary Jürgen Becker said: "Taking precautions against climate change is our top priority. Adapting quickly to changed conditions is necessary, and it is feasible." Dr Srdan Matic, Environment and Health Coordinator for the WHO Regional Office for Europe, added: "In the last two decades, over 112 000 deaths have been reported in the WHO European Region as a consequence of natural disasters. Climate change contributes to an increase in the frequency of heat-waves, floods and droughts which will lead to an additional burden on health services and communities". Dr. Paul Becker, Vice President of the German Meteorological Service (DWD), commented: "The summer of 2010 turned out to be a season of extremes. Storms, floods and heat often have impacts on human health."

The international symposium "Climate Change, Extreme Weather Events and Public Health" coincides with the start of the Climate Change Conference in Cancún (Mexico). Together with the WHO Regional Office, the DWD and UBA, the BMU has launched a dialogue with all stakeholders at this early stage to identify and avert potential health impacts of extreme weather events.

The goal of the meeting, which brings together experts from 21 countries, is to improve interlinkages between international, national and regional activities and to establish efficient communication structures. "Lives can be saved by an intensive exchange of experience between experts, scientists, administrators and people who have to adapt to the changed conditions in their daily work", State Secretary Becker stated.

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The year 2010 has clearly highlighted the need for adaptation. Low-pressure storm system “Daisy” caused a snow chaos in January, especially in Northern Germany. “Xynthia” with its hurricane-force winds hit the West and Southwest of Germany particularly hard, with wind gusts of over 120 km/h even at low altitudes. Many roads and even highways had to be closed off, and a total of seven people were killed in Germany. Following unseasonably low temperatures in June, Germany suffered a heat wave in July with temperatures of up to 38°C and a subsequent period of intensive rain in August. Some regions were hit by heavy thunderstorms with extremely high amounts of precipitation, which caused severe local flooding.

As “Xynthia” demonstrated, storm-induced accidents frequently cause fatalities. Heat-waves often go along with an increase in mortality rates too. The heat also affected people indirectly in July 2010 when the air conditioning system of ICE trains failed and some passengers collapsed in the overheated cars.

Dessau-Roßlau, 29.11.2010