Up Front

The Newsletter of the IABM

International Association of Broadcast Meteorology

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February 2002

View From the Chair

The New Year always brings new hopes and resolutions; a desire to leave behind past difficulties and renew optimism for the future. In 2002, this is more difficult than usual; we are still dealing with the fallout from September 11th, which affects us all. Nonetheless, my hope, and that of the committee, is for a peaceful and productive year for all our members.

In Europe we do have something of a new beginning in that most of the countries of the EU, along with some of the Balkan States, are now using a common currency, the Euro; a tangible sign of our common interest and shared heritage. Europe is embarked upon an experiment that seeks convergence in economic, political and technical matters, while encouraging diversity in language and culture. Only time will tell whether these aims can be achieved.

The weather, of course, brings its own surprises. The north-east US suffered from substantial snowfalls during December; our colleague Paul Gross has penned an article on this "Lake Effect" snow which is included in this issue.

The weather over Europe was dominated by high pressure for many of the last weeks of the year; this anticyclone brought very cold air through east and central Europe right across into France and down into Spain and Italy, bringing snow and freezing rain and night frosts. In contrast, the western fringes of the continent have had a very mild winter with little in the way of severe or cold weather. These mild winters are consistent with the trends suggested by global warming research.

Talk of Europe brings me to ECOMET. In our last newsletter, our Secretary apologised for the preponderance of articles concerning Europe; however this issue continues the trend! This is not necessarily by choice - we would love to get more content from our US and other colleagues.

However the weather business in Europe is in a state of upheaveal, and it is important that our members try to grapple with the issues. Thus you will find articles inside by Hans Sanderbring of the Swedish Met Service, by Rene Hoenson of ECOMET; by Harry Otten, Jan Dekker and Hiroyoshi Ishibashi from the private sector; articles with contradictory opinions and points of view. The IABM is committed to deepening this debate by giving space to those from all sides. They make the arguments; you make up your own mind.

There is also a report of a meeting held between the Association and a delegation from ECOMET. The ECOMET people asked us for specific examples of the difficulties that our members have experienced in sourcing and pricing weather data within Europe, and in particular any comparisons of "pre" and "post" ECOMET arrangements. Please write up your experiences and send them to our Secretary.

We have also received notice of the holding of the twelfth Festival International de Meteo in Issy-les-Moulineaux, France. Initiatives such as the Festival, the establishment of the European Meteorological Society and indeed the IABM itself provide weather broadcasters with increased opportunity to come together and exchange their experiences. We wish the Festival well. For details, see their website at www.weatherfestivalmeteo.org

Another initiative that deserves our support and recognition is the establishment of the Meteorological Observatory of Hong Kong, China of a unified web resource for world weather information, supported by WMO. This began with a pilot project to bring together into one website warnings for typhoons in the north Pacific. Now it is expanding to provide weather information for cities throughout the world. Unlike most websites, these city forecasts are not purely model-driven, but are collected from the relevant NMHS's and embody the local forecasting experience that only they can provide, together with relevant climatological background. You can find these sites via the Association website, or at www.worldweather.org and typhoon.worldweather.org.

Gerald Fleming, Chairman of the IABM and lead presenter on the Irish TV

Inside this issue:

Not to miss:

- *View from the Chair…..*
- A new feature on the back page - this issue its Steve Swienckowski's Back Page Comment…...
- Start of the new series of the Climate Change Debate…...
- *There's members news - Tammy Garrison writes about her future…..*

Links between providers of meteorological products, meteorological advice, and meteorological data in Europe - a perspective from existing NMHS's

Some of the tasks carried out at present by NMHS's are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future; these tasks would be:

Responsibility for the Infrastructure; Commercial services and the co-operation with other governmental authorities

Hans Sandebring, Director-General, Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI); Chairman of Ecomet.

"Both public and private sectors need to develop a deeper knowledge of the European market for weather forecasts and related products and services."

The scene of the crime!

What is Infrastructure?

Infrastructure covers the provision of general forecasts, warnings, and co-operation with civil protection authorities. It covers the maintenance of the observation network and of climate databases. Infrastructure includes the exchange of weather data within WMO, the responsibility for commercial undertakings under ECOMET regulations, and the distribution of weather data for research and education in accordance with Resolution 40 of WMO.

Why commercial undertakings by NMHS's?

The business concept suggests that ECOMET will develop from its present form, but will still guarantee a framework for the exchange of data and for free competition. The commercial parts of NMHS's will, more and more, come to be treated as other, private sector, Service Providers. This implies the creation of a distinct border between Infrastructure and Business within NMHS´s. One other "forecast" is that prices for weather data will become much lower than they are today.

There are a variety of models of operation regarding NMHS's and their commercial activities in different parts of the world. In the US and Japan, the NMHS is only responsibility for the Infrastructure - this arrangement is not without its problems. In European countries - except the Netherlands - commercial activities form a part of the responsibility of the NMHS. In many countries the consequent income forms a substantial part of their turnover, and in almost all countries this is a growing part. In the rest of the world - mainly in Africa and Latin-America, but also in Singapore - NMHS`s have begun to act on the commercial market. SMHI has been active in sharing its experiences. New Zealand is a special case in that it has everything in a (government-owned) company.

The effects of external competition on European NMHS´s can already be seen. Prices for weather data and for "Value Added Services" have dropped. A wider range of products is now available than heretofore. Their is a better focus on the needs of users. The creation of more efficiency through the generation of a "business-culture" represents a benefit for the taxpayers.

How is the development of the commercial sections of NMHS's in Europe likely to proceed over the next decade?

A few NMHS's will only provide services in response to demands; these are likely to generate income to about 5-10% of their turnover. Some more will be proactive in search of business, but only in their own country; these are likely to generate income to about 20-30% of their turnover. A few European NMHS's will be very active on the European -and perhaps the global -market, generating income representing more than 50% of their turnover. Some NMHS's may co-operate with private companies or have subsidiaries.

Development of the Private Sector

There will probably be a few Europe-based globally acting companies, owned by US or Japanese parents. There will be one or two European companies doing business in several countries. There will probably be many small companies operating only in their own country or region.

A vision for the future for European NMHS's.

The NMHS's should aim to provide a useful resource for climate and environmental activities in Europe. There will be an increasing focus on user-needs. This will encompass the provision of services that help customers provide efficiency and security in their operations. NMHS's should aim to provide the best possible forecast on all time-scales. They need to develop effective production-process from observations to forecasts to end-users. They should operate to a high scientific level, and develop close co-operation with other researchers. They will need either to become integrated with or develop close co-operation with the sister disciplines of hydrology and oceanography.

What will the weather market be like in the future? Delivery will be based more and more on Internet technologies, encompassing WAP, 3G etc. There will tend to be fewer problems with the use of different languages. Forecasts for the energy and environment sectors will prove increasingly important; and there will be a need

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generally to add more value to the forecasts. There will be an increase in the number and range of free forecasts that are available, as we move towards a concept of "Weather-on-demand".

There are mutual problems that are shared between public and private sectors. The dissemination of consistent warnings is one such issue, while forecast quality concerns us all. Delivery of data is still a difficulty, as are complaints to Competition Authorities about alleged unfair practices. Both public and private sectors need to develop a deeper knowledge of the European market for weather forecasts and related products and services.

To finish, a wish-list for the future, in which we all must live and work together. There should be a mutual respect for the different tasks of the public and private sectors, and a constructive dialogue to address the difficulties which still divide us.

It's a real hot topic!

The Private Sector View

Harry Otten, Founder and Director of Meteo Consult

Presentation for ECAM / EMS, September 2001.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure for me to stand here in Budapest, a town I have come to like very much over the past couple of years. I'm here to represent one of the major weather companies in Europe though compared to some national weather services we are still small. In my talk I want to outline a short history of private weather services, the response to the private initiatives from the state services and the current situation. I want to show you where the market is now and where the chances are. Of course you will want to know from me how the future might look like and at the end of my talk I will also fly some ideas how we could turn meteorology into a more efficient science. I will be a bit strident at times to prevent you from falling asleep.

History

I want to start with a quote. "There is a feeling among many Weather Bureau employees that encouragement of private meteorology is incompatible with growth of the national weather service. This is not in accordance with the American philosophy of private enterprise and competition. We believe the progress of one is indissoluble bound to that of the other. This concept should be stressed at all levels." This quote was made by the Department of Commerce Advisory Committee on Weather Services in the year I was born: 1948.

The European version of this quote might run like this:

"There is a feeling among many employees of national weather services that encouragement of private meteorology is incompatible with the growth or even maintaining their much too large service and their importance. This is in accordance with short sighted views of governments and the European Commission. Despite and much in contrary to the basis of the EU, the Treaty of Rome, they therefore founded an institution called ECOMET that has as one and only task to make life of the private sector as difficult as possible".

Talking about the European Commission, I would like to say that I'm very disappointed that the EU representative did not come to this conference, and apparently without valid reason. It shows the disdain of the EU with respect to meteorology and I would like to suggest that the President of EMS, Rene Morin send a letter to the EU expressing the great disappointment of the participants in this conference that no representative showed up.

Where have the different views I just expressed taken us? I can show it simply in the numbers: the private meteorology sector in the United States has grown into a $500M sector whereas the private sector in Europe is not much larger than $30M. This may be partly due to the fact that the private sector in the USA emerged 20-25 before that in Europe but it does not account for all of the difference.

A report by PIRA commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate General on Information Society gave numbers on the total turnover reached with public sector information. With public sector information I mean data that has been paid already by you and me through the tax system. Free available data leads to enormous markets. In the European community the present an-

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"the private meteorology sector in the United States has grown to $500M whereas the private sector in Europe is not much larger than $30M. "

Harry Otten, Founder and Director of Meteo Consult

Free pictures for all?

"It is my strong belief that the next generation of Meteosat satellites should not be encrypted and that the current encryption should end as rapidly as possible "

Meteosat

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nual turnover with public sector information is approximately 68 billion Euro whereas this market in the United States is around 750 billion Euro (slide). The difference may account for the substantial difference in the number of jobless people at both sides of the Ocean. Substantial number of jobs could be generated when, like in the US, public sector information is more freely available.

Despite almost everything the private meteorology sector has emerged in Europe as well and is growing. Meteo Consult has offices now in the Netherlands, the UK, Belgium, Germany, Spain and the United States employing all in total some 135 persons. From within some National Met. Services we hear doubts about the quality of the services we provide and that we are just repackaging the data we obtain from the observational networks and the computer models. Are national weather services better because they have such greater budgets and data available to them or can the private sector compete with them? Let me just give you two examples. In the Netherlands the private sector is responsible for Winter Road Maintenance. The winter of 2000-2001 was one with quite a number of days with ice and snow. Forecasts and warnings by the private sector resulted in a minimal number of fatal accidents. In the entire winter 17 people were killed in fatal accidents due to slippery roads. In the same period the numbers of deaths in Germany was 400. Another example comes from a company that is active in Weather Derivatives. By the way a market that in 2000 had a contract value of 7.3 billion $ in the USA compared to 120M in Europe. Our forecasts for a large number of locations in Europe were compared to those of the UK Met.Office and to those available from the BBC and these were the results (slide). More or less on the longer term we are about two days better than the Met. Office. We recently found out that our ideas of interactive meteorological databases that we have operational in our offices are about five years ahead of the national weather service implementations.

What is the big difference between the public and the private sector? Many people have asked me this over the past years. Is our quality better? Yes, but not always. Are we faster to respond? In most cases yes. Do we listen better to our customers? Yes, almost always. But I can define the big difference in five words: we work with real money. Or to say it differently: even yesterday I was told that we are just taken the raisins out of the bread. The amazing thing is that even if we did so, the number of raisins in the bread of the public sector would not change. The private sector opened up completely new markets and we do our fair share of research. For instance: MOS development, models for Winter Road Maintenance and Traffic Management, radiation forecasts for greenhouses as you can see in a poster presentation and interactive graphical meteorological databases. We spend at least 10% of our budget in research and development.

The point I very strongly want to make in this presentation is that the private sector offers services that are at least comparable in quality to those of the national weather services so quality is not an issue. This calls for a much more liberal data policy in Europe. States should not compete with their citizens and instead of trying to get money from the private sector directly, the revenue should come from the increased payments in taxes and social security. In my view the private sector in Europe could grow to a 200M Euro business in the next five to ten years. This will yield some 100M Euro in taxes and social security payments. Compared to the direct payment to ECOMET this is a large multiple.

Fortunately there is light at the horizon. In a number of countries the philosophy about the availability of data is changing rapidly. The Netherlands has the intention to declare all of its meteorological data WMO essential shortly. This means that all data is available to everybody at just the cost of dissemination and can be multiplied freely. In the UK synoptic data was declared WMO essential from January 2001. In Finland after a shameful period of tampering with data, the government will put the commercial department away from the National Weather Service in a split up. A logical step there would be to declare all data WMO essential. In Sweden the State is investigating the position of SMHI. It might well lead to the conclusion that there should be more room for competition and that data should be free. In Germany the new law on the weather service is not working and an evaluation might lead to completely different conclusions and even in France there is some movement towards a more liberalised data policy. Ultimately WMO 40 should be turned into a resolution declaring all meteorological data free. We should eclipse ECOMET as rapidly as possible and we will be rewarded by beautiful phenomena. It is my strong belief that the next generation of Meteosat satellites should not be encrypted and that the current encryption should end as rapidly as possible. The costs to do this are far larger than the direct revenues from it and business would grow so much faster without encryption.

With this in mind I expect the private sector to grow considerably though it may take quite a

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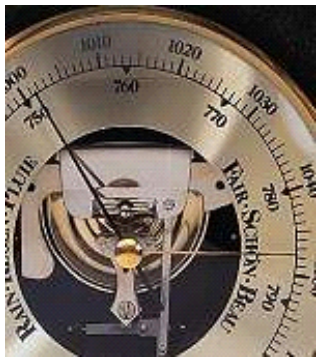
while to reach USA levels. We are very grateful to our American counterparts, the National Weather Service and the private sector to lead the discussion in Europe in a favourable direction. We sincerely hope that the European Meteorological Society will play a leading role in the European environment. The seniority of most of its leading members might play an important role. The private sector wants an excellent relation with the National Met. Offices. Each in our own role we can bring meteorology so much further to the benefit of all people paying for meteorological data through taxes.

I would like to conclude with some ideas for the future of meteorology. My background is in nuclear physics and the scene there is so much faster than in meteorology. New articles and ideas appear on the web the day they have emerged. In meteorology it normally takes more than a year before new ideas come into print. The EMS could help to organise a web environment for the exchange of scientific ideas and papers. I also see a much more active role for the World Meteorological Organisation. Many countries have different practises for coding their data. WMO should see it as one of its important tasks to make decoding programs available that can handle all the different formats used in the entire world. It would have great value for all organisations active in meteorology. And ECMWF: a splendid initiative that needs to go beyond its current borders. ECMWF should not only be a centre for medium and long range weather forecasts but also for the very short term. The centre has the computers and the knowledge to be a centre of excellence for short-term forecasts as well.

In the end it is our goal to find the ideal public private partnership. We can than serve the entire community so much better and take meteorology to a much higher level. Rene Morin, with the EMS you have taken an excellent initiative to bring all these people together in this conference. I hope that many conferences are to follow in our common goal of achieving excellence in meteorology. Thank you for your attention!

Wageningen, September 2001

Harry Otten



The pressure can only rise!

….and what is the view of the Association?

The IABM and ECOMET

The world of Meteorology encompasses many different activities; observing, forecasting, research, Climatology, and so on. For the great majority of the ordinary people, though, the world of Meteorology means only one thing; the weather forecast on radio and television. The weather broadcast is the main point of contact between meteorology and the outside world. How the populace - and those who are the decision-makers in society - view our science will be greatly influenced by what they see on the small screen and hear on their car radios. It is important for the overall good of meteorology - if for no other reason - that weather broadcasting be conducted to the highest possible standards. Anything less will reflect poorly on our chosen field of endeavour.

What makes a good weather broadcast? Opinions, of course, will vary from country to country, from culture to culture, and even from person to person. Weather broadcasting is essentially about the transmission of information - information that can be detailed and complex at times; information which contributes to the efficient and economic conduct of society; information that is needed for the protection of life and property when the elements turn really nasty. Good weather broadcasting, then, is built on two foundations; quality of information and quality of presentation.

Historically, the problems of weather forecasting have revolved around the efficient collection of vast amounts of weather data; the organisation of this data into a coherent synoptic view of the atmosphere; the preparation of maps and charts showing the likely evolution of the atmosphere over time, and then the interpretation of this evolution into the details of the expected weather at a specific location.

The weather broadcaster needs to be able to talk about the weather with authority and credibility. To do this, they do not need to involve themselves in all the steps of weather

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"Weather broadcasting is essentially about the transmission of information - information that can be detailed and complex at times; information which contributes to the efficient and economic conduct of society"

IABM
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BROADCAST METEOROLOGY

Serving the business of broadcasting meteorology to the public.

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forecasting, but they do need an understanding of why the forecast is evolving in a particular direction. They need this both to explain properly the upcoming changes in the weather (one cannot explain what one does not understand) and also to correctly interpret the developing weather, as seen in observations and in radar and satellite imagery, in the context of the overall forecast.

Vice Chairman Dieter Walch at a recent committee meeting debating the policy.

Only by having weather broadcasters who are meteorologically trained and who have access to a continuous supply of weather observational data can the highest levels of weather broadcasting be achieved. Broadcasts which are badly presented, or which are simply out of date, reflect badly upon the meteorological community as a whole.

It is the belief of the IABM that current ECOMET pricing structures militate against good weather broadcasting, and act against the long-term interests of European meteorology in general and European NMHS's in particular.

"It is the belief of the IABM that current ECOMET pricing structures militate against good weather broadcasting…."

Before explaining why we hold this belief, we would like to make a few general points. We do not have a difficulty with the concept that some income should flow from broadcasting to support the meteorological infrastructure. We are, however, aware that developments within broadcasting - specifically the development of digital broadcasting and the proliferation of television channels - is putting enormous pressure on broadcasters to produce more content for less revenue. The costs of broadcast content are being driven relentlessly down.

We would like also to emphasise that we do not see this as being primarily a public versus private sector issue. There are many NMHS's in Europe which are active in the field of broadcasting. Most, if not all, of them want to retain a presence in this market, but this will only be possible if they can produce a keenly-priced package for their broadcasters. The ECOMET pricing structures make this very difficult.

Tomas Molina, who met with ECOMET

If a broadcaster wishes to produce a weather forecast of high quality, the first thing they will need to do is to engage the services of a meteorologist or an experienced forecaster. They may employ this person directly, or they may have a secondment arrangement with an NMHS or a private sector weather supplier. This person may go on screen directly, or may work in the background briefing, and preparing material for, a non-met presenter.

The key point here is that there is a substantial cost to the broadcaster in employing someone with this skill and experience. Contrary to popular belief, presenters chosen purely on the basis of their appearance or presentational ability are frequently not well paid. There is a large supply of such persons, and limited demand. They tend to be young, without dependants and therefore willing to work for lower pay than an experienced professional. A broadcaster who employs an experienced meteorologist is already making a significant investment in quality.

A meteorologist or forecaster, however experienced, cannot work without information; the broadcaster now must make a second investment and acquire a stream of weather data with which the meteorologist can work. It is the cost of this data in Europe which is the nub of the problem. The pricing structures of ECOMET put a high value on raw data and a (relatively) low value on end products. The broadcaster who wishes to invest resources in quality weather broadcasting is penalised by these pricing arrangements. It is simply cheaper for a broadcaster to buy in a forecast product and employ eye candy to present it. With the pressure on content costs this will soon be the only affordable option for European broadcasters. Authoritative weather broadcasting will simply disappear from European television screens.

There is another aspect of this situation that deserves consideration. The free availability of weather data in the US has spawned a vigorous private sector there dedicated to the provision of weather forecast packages for broadcasting. This is a mature market, with strong and well-resourced companies. These companies have been handed a competitive advantage by ECOMET in that they can supply turn-key packages of graphics and model data to European broadcasters at a substantial discount to the costs that must be charged by those who base their services on European products. In order to compete, European weather companies are now integrating US data into their packages and services. We may yet get to a stage where the output from ECMWF, HirLam, Arpége, UKLam, Aladin etc simply disappear from the television weather broadcast, to be replaced by products based on the AVN or the MRF.

We in the IABM are aware that many European NMHS's have, in recent years, been forced to put considerable effort in findings creative ways "around" the ECOMET regulations in order to continue to supply weather

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information to broadcasters. That this should happen is in itself an indication that there are severe problems in this area. One of the reasons that NMHS's want to retain broadcast clients is that it provides them with visibility to the public and to the decision makers. Indeed such visibility through broadcasting is strongly encouraged through WMO as a capacity-building measure for all NMHS's. It is curious, however, that no monetary value is put on this exposure when contracts between broadcasters and NMHS's (or private-sector companies) are being worked out. If it is important to NMHS's to retain visibility, then a value needs to be put on this exposure, and this amount explicitly accounted for in contracts with broadcasters.

The IABM understands that ECOMET was established out of the necessity to regulate the European market in weather data and the relationships between European Met Services, and to bring these into line with EU competition law. However, the effects of ECOMET rules and pricing structures on broadcasting have been to create many difficulties between NMHS's and broadcasters in Europe, who are being forced to look to other suppliers for their weather data. This situation is worsening as broadcasters grapple with the need to produce ever more content with ever more limited resources.

The IABM strongly supports the public service role of NMHS's, its members want to work with NMHS's to help deliver their forecast and warnings services to the public. ECOMET policies have made this work more difficult, and have put severe pressure on long-established relationships that have existed between NMHS's and the media for many years. ECOMET needs to re-evaluate its role in, and impact upon, broadcast meteorology. ECOMET needs to examine how it can actively support quality weather broadcasting in Europe, and it needs to do this now.

Board of the IABM

Committee Member Phillipe Jeanneret tells of data problems in Switzerland.

"weather broadcasting is the "shop window" of the meteorological community it does no favours to anybody in that community - from the public or private sector - for weather broadcasting not to be as good and as accurate as possible"

The logo of the organisation

.....and then there was a meeting between the IABM and ECOMET

Report of a meeting between representatives of IABM and ECOMET, Brussels

November 29th 2001

Representing IABM	Gerald Fleming
	Tomas Molina
Representing ECOMET	Hans Sanderbring, (Chairman, Sweden)
	Rene Hoenson (Director)
	Alex Rubli (Switzerland)
	Dave Shaw (UK)

As this meeting was informal in nature it is appropriate to give just a general overview of the discussions, which of necessity are just our own impressions and have not been agreed as a joint record.

At the outset of the meeting, the IABM representatives presented the ECOMET delegation with copies of the position paper as agreed by the IABM committee at the committee meeting of November 24th. IABM discussed the difficulties that its members faced in getting access to good quality European weather data, with which to assess the developing weather and prepare forecasts for broadcasting. They emphasised that weather broadcasting was the "shop window" of the meteorological community and that it did no favours to anybody in that community - from the public or private sector - for weather broadcasting not to be as good and as accurate as possible.

ECOMET questioned the IABM representatives regarding their constituent members; pointed out that IABM accepted as members individuals who were not qualified meteorologists, and that among IABM members there may be those who were not interested in quality weather broadcasting. IABM countered by stating that the aim of the organisation was to raise the standards in weather broadcasting; we know that people come into this business from both the journalistic and meteorological traditions, but we need to help all of them to do their work as well as possible. To that end, the IABM representatives explained the initiative in certification that was currently under discussion; pointed to the involvement of IABM members in WMO training programmes, and also to the joint organisation of the WMO50 seminars in Geneva in

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March 2000.

ECOMET claimed that its members were under instruction from their governments to recover a proportion of infrastructural costs from users; that the aim was to recover just 3% of costs, and that as the user base grew the cost to each individual user would fall significantly. They pointed out that data costs in Europe had already decreased substantially since the establishment of ECOMET, while extra data had been declared essential and put into the free public domain. It was pointed out that some countries, such as Sweden, had a long tradition of broadcasters paying the NMHS for weather broadcasts, and in these scenarios the introduction of ECOMET-regulated tariffs had not resulted in any difficulties. It was suggested that the greater difficulties arose in countries where the provision of services to broadcasting had historically been cost-free. The IABM representatives responded by noting that official European weather data was still not affordable to many broadcasters, who were forced to go to service providers outside Europe or in some cases to set up their own weather observing networks.

The WMO will in the end have to find a solution.

"ECOMET claimed that its members were under instruction from their governments to recover a proportion of infrastructural costs from users"

There was some discussion on whether broadcasting constituted a commercial enterprise, or whether it had other dimensions above and beyond the purely commercial. The IABM representatives pointed out that the NMHS did have a responsibility to communicate the forecast message; that the media acted as its partner in doing this, and that there were considerations of service to the public that had to be taken into account. It was our impression that this point was registered as valid. Pursuing this point, IABM representatives argued that the forecast on radio or television helped to give visibility to NMHS's; that there was a value in this visibility and that this value should be represented monetarily in the contracts between NMHS's and broadcasters. It was noted that there was nothing in the ECOMET regulations to prevent this.

The ECOMET representatives went to great lengths to argue that they were not a "cartel"; that they did not set prices, but that they merely existed to regulate and oversee competition between NMHS's themselves and also between public and private sector organisations. As evidence to this point they said that the price of one synoptic observation, for example, varied from country to country by a considerable amount; at least a factor of two in some instances. They did not try to argue that there were no problems, but that ECOMET was not the appropriate forum to discuss such difficulties, as it had no power to regulate pricing. The IABM team pointed out that there were still fixed prices for synoptic data; that it was not real competition when synoptic observations from one country cost less than from another, as it was not possible to substitute one for another. As there was effectively only one supplier for synoptic observations in each country, there were no market forces to moderate price and service in any real sense.

There followed some discussion as to what was the best forum for such a discussion; the option of using a meeting of WMO Region 6 (Europe) was suggested, as was a meeting with the Informal Conference of Western European Directors (ICWED) and its Central European counterpart, ICCED. Following some consideration, it seemed that the Region 6 meeting might be too formal in its structure, and that a meeting with a sub-group from ICWED would present the best opportunity for advancement. Mr Sanderbring undertook to make soundings within ICWED and to come back with more concrete proposals for such a meeting. While welcoming the decision to meet with ICWED representatives, the IABM re-iterated its request to

Was the meeting icy?

MEMBERS NEWS

After 21 years in broadcast meteorology, our own member of the IABM Board of Directors, Tammy Garrison has decided to shift her career in another direction.

In September 2001, Garrison left WDRB-TV in Louisville, KY., after 12 years of service. *"I am taking a year off of work, which is much deserved, and in that time I want to begin pointing my career toward teaching broadcast meteorology at the collegiate level. I also will likely do fill-in broadcast weather for local stations, but do not want a chief meteorology position. I fully intend to maintain my professional ties and uphold my professional responsibilities."*

After nearly 8 years of answering weather questions in Kentucky's largest newspaper, Garrison also stepped down from writing her column in The Courier-Journal. *"I had become unchallenged and even bored with my professional career. It and I needed shaking up so my husband and I are making sweeping changes,"* says Garrison. Raising and showing her much loved quarter horses is consuming much of Garrison's time right now, along with another project.

She and her husband, Dr. Terry Likes, are building a home in Bowling Green, KY., where Terry has been teaching broadcasting for 14 years at Western Kentucky University. Their new home should be ready for them in March. If you want to email Tammy her new address is magnoliaqh@hotmail.com.

Rene Hoenson, Chief Executive, ECOMET

from a talk given at ECAM/EMS in Budapest, September 2001.

Rene Hoenson, Chief Executive, ECOMET

What is ECOMET? It is defined as an Economic Interest Grouping of NMHS's, and it has been established under Belgian law with a headquarters in Brussels. It was founded in 1995, and has been approved by DGIV, the Directorate for Competition of the European Union.

ECOMET has at present 20 members; these differ greatly in respect to size, structure of funding, financial and accounting systems, legal status, and degree of commercial activity. A number of the NMHS's in east and south-east Europe have indicated an interest in joining the organisation.

Why was ECOMET founded? It was an attempt to respond to a number of developments which were going to affect the commercial activities of NMHS's in one way or another. These developments can be divided into three categories:

1. Developments of the market
2. Legislation of the European Union
3. Resolution 40 passed at the Twelfth Congress of WMO.

"The objectives of ECOMET are to preserve the free exchange of data and products between members in accordance with WMO Resolution 40"

Development of the market:

After a slow start the 1990's saw the rapid expansion of a private sector in meteorology within Europe, and a consequent development of a mixed private sector / public sector market throughout the continent. There was now competition between NMHS's and the private sector, and indeed the beginnings of competition between NMHS's themselves as they began to look beyond their own national borders for commercial business. Underpinning all this was the threat of the loss of the free exchange of data and products between NMHS's, a fundamental part of the infrastructure of meteorology.

A flag of convenience?

Legislation of the European Union

The EU has developed a considerable body of legislation to regulate equal competition in the marketplace. Among these are Article 81 of the European Community Treaty, which prohibits unfair competition in the areas of price fixing, concerted action and market sharing, and Article 82, which deals with the abuse of a dominant position through discriminatory actions. The establishment of a Single European Market ended the traditional agreement between NMHS's whereby they had limited their commercial activities to their own national territories only.

The concept of a level playing field, whereby private and public sector could compete on an equal footing, imposes obligations on each and every NMHS. Among these are the obligation to make available to the private sector all data and products which are used commercially; the requirement to ensure no cross-subsidy from core to commercial activity, the need for NMHS's to include in their commercial pricing all direct and indirect costs of production and delivery, including ECOMET tariffs, and the need for separate and transparent accounting systems to be maintained and audited.

Implications of WMO Resolution 40:

Resolution 40 recognises the need for the free and unrestricted exchange between WMO members of data sets essential for the safety of life and property. It calls for the free provision of data and products needed for pure scientific research, and for education. It recognises the commercial value of "additional data and products" and allows conditions to be attached to these.

The objectives of ECOMET are to preserve the free exchange of data and products between members in accordance with WMO Resolution 40; to help members to maintain and improve their infrastructure; to expand the availability of weather information within the ECOMET territory; to increase the use and improve the distribution of data, products and services of its members; and to create the conditions whereby members could develop and improve their commercial activities.

In trying to enhance the economic interest of NMHS's while recognising and protecting the role of the private sector, a balance must be struck. This balance is between obtaining a reasonable contribution to the meteorological infrastructure from commercial services, while ensuring fair prices for meteorological information.

The achievements of ECOMET.

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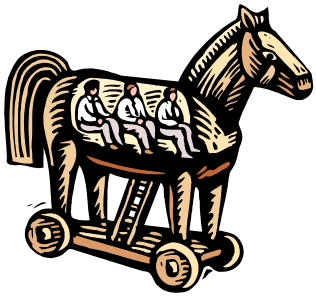
The achievements of the organisation in its six years of existence can be listed as follows:



Is this a Trojan horse?

- The continuation of the unrestricted exchange of WMO data and products
- the creation of a level playing field
- guaranteed access to data and products; one-stop shopping
- a fixed catalogue and related tariffs
- increased market potential
- improved customer choice and standards of service
- reduced costs of the meteorological infrastructure.

There has been some recent activity at EU level relating to Public Sector information and access to environmental data. A Green Paper (discussion document) on Public Sector information was published in 1999. There was a public hearing to collect the comments of interested sectors. This was followed by a report on the commercial exploitation of Europe's Public Sector information. The process culminated in European Council Decision 2001/48/EC of December 22nd 2000. This decision was to adopt a community programme to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks and to promote linguistic diversity in the information society.

"The prices for synoptic data have decreased on average by 15% in the past six years, while the average price of an NWP unit has decreased by 20%."

A number of principles underlie the EU approach to the greater dissemination and exploitation of Public Sector information. Among these are the need to respect the intellectual property and labelling of works as preconditions for the increased distribution and exploitation of digital content on global networks. Access to information originating from the public sector must respect the particular obligations of public authorities. The use of public sector information should respect provisions set by member states on the intellectual property rights of digitised material.

In relation to the access to information on the environment, there was a Council directive in 1990 (90/313 EEC) and a Council decision in 1997 (97/C 282/04).

In terms of the evolution of the European private meteorological sector, there has been a substantial growth during the years of ECOMET's existence. The number of service providers has grown from 18 to 45. The estimated turnover has jumped from €7m to €29m. The numbers employed have risen from approximately 100 to 400. There has been a year-on-year growth in ECOMET transactions; these totalled €2.5m in the year 2000.

The prices for synoptic data have decreased on average by 15% in the past six years, while the average price of an NWP unit has decreased by 20%. There has also been an increase in the volume of "essential data" made freely available to all.

In summary, ECOMET has achieved many of its objectives. It has guaranteed the free exchange of data and products between WMO members. It has created equal conditions for all commercial operators in the ECOMET territory, in compliance with EU legislation. It has facilitated the availability of meteorological information, and it has seen an increase in the meteorological market of a factor of at least four.

It is worth asking - what would happen if ECOMET ceased to exist? The disappearance of NMHS's from the public media and from the meteorological market would repre-

Logo of the WMO

New publications from WMO for broadcasters

The Public Weather Services (PWS) division of WMO has recently published three separate but related guides which deal with different aspects of weather and the media. These are short, readable documents written by experienced broadcasters whic aim to provide reference material and guidelines for all those who come into the world of weather broadcasting.

"Guidelines on graphical presentation of PWS products" is well-illustrated and gives an overview of graphical techniques in both television and the print media. "Guidelines on Weather on the Internet and other New Technologies" reviews the range of meteorological information that can be communicated across the Web and by other developing technologies. "Guidelines on the improvement on NMHS-Media relations" gives practical advice on how to smooth the way between meteorology and the media.

Weather and the customer

From a talk given by Hiroyoshi Ishibashi, Weather News International to the ECAM/EMS meeting in Budapest, September 2001.

There are three interest groups to be considered in the world of meteorology; the Government bodies, the private sector, and the academic sphere. In trying to make sense of how meteorology should develop, we have to look for a solution where each of these three interest groups can win; can succeed in their objectives.

Its all about partnership

New Zealand were the leaders in showing us a new way forward in how to organise meteorology. The keys to success were to get the correct operational framework; to improve co-operation with Government, and to transform the management.

In Japan, the Japanese Meteorological Agency is the mainstay of the world of weather. It is not involved directly in commercial activity, but it runs the Japan Meteorological Business Support Centre, set up in 1994. The JMBSC acts as the link between the private weather companies and the JMA. The two major private companies in operation are the Japanese Weather Agency (JWA) and Weather News Inc (WNI), but there exist about 40 other smaller companies.

WNI sees itself as a Risk Communication (RC) service rather than a weather service. It's marine work, for example, has evolved from a service aimed primarily at safety into a total ship management service.

For each RC service we have a centralised database, a Risk Communicator (forecaster) and an Expert System for each customer. The services are optimised and adapted for each market, e.g. Agriculture, Oil Companies, Air Travel, Retailing etc.

This a what comes through demand-side thinking. NMHS's typically practice supply-side thinking; they need to move towards more demand-side thinking.

Customers have different intentions in regard to what they want, what they think, and what they can pay! Business must deal with the unpredictability of what the customer wants. Commercialisation is not just about money-making, but about satisfying the customers and the market. We call it customerology!!

"Customers have different intentions in regard to what they want, what they think, and what they can pay! "

Holland Weather Services - a case study in privatisation.

Jan Dekker, Chief Executive, Holland Weather Services.

The first weather services provided to the media in The Netherlands were the provision of forecasts to newspapers by Buys-Ballot in 1878. From then until 1986, the Dutch Meteorological Service, KNMI, was the sole supplier of weather information to the Netherlands market. Services were provided at limited cost, and there was no eagerness to develop new products.

At this point it was possible to take two opposing views of the situation. The first was that there was no viable market, because there was such a small turnover. The second was huge opportunity, because there was such a small turnover - yet!

Its all in the wind….

Harry Otten, who had begun his career within the KNMI, took the latter view and set up his own private sector company, Meteo Consult. KNMI became more active in response, but suffered from a lack of professional marketing. There was no money invested in product development, in advertising, in marketing expertise, in the development of business plans.

There was therefore only one element of competition left; which was price. Prices were under pressure and dropped, in some cases dramatically. This damaged not only the competition, but also KNMI itself.

Meteo Consult complained to government bodies and politicians of unfair competition in the Dutch market. A government commission, the Cohen Commission, was set up, and reported in February 1996. Consequent upon this report, the Dutch government told KNMI in November 1996 to end its commercial activities. Because the simple cessation of such activities would have led to a monopoly situation for Meteo Consult, the existing commercial activities were transferred to a new company; Holland Weather Services, which was founded on April 1st, 1999.

Taking a public organisation and transforming it for the private sector is difficult and painful. Automation of the forecast process was not

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This is a tax-payer.

(Continued from page 11)

well advanced; the costs were in some cases 400% higher than those projected; the efficiency of employees was not high enough due to poor systems. HWS have spent two years re-building software; two years of re-shaping processes; have endured two years of losses. The organisation is now at about 80% through the first stage of change and development.

At the end of 2000, the Dutch government decided to sell its shares in HWS, and after negotiation the company was sold in July 2001 to Japanese company Weather News International.

Who has benefited from these changes and developments? The taxpayer has seen more development of weather services, has received incoming tax, and has been given increased choice. The professional client has been provided with an improved service, a better understanding of their particular problems, and a more immediate response. KNMI has been able to focus more directly on its core competencies. It now has more control of its income side, and is not involved in any more battles with clients.

"HWS would like to see the implementation of a free data policy within Europe, with only a limited charge being imposed for delivery. "

HWS would like to see the implementation of a free data policy within Europe, with only a limited charge being imposed for delivery. It belies that NMHS's should withdraw from all markets.

There are consequences if these developments do not happen. Commercial companies will move away from using European data and NWP products. There will be less consistency and homogeneity in forecasts. This will lead to confusion among the public, who often feel that the forecast is wrong in any case. The public and private sectors will not be on speaking terms.

There are consequences for the private sector too. Stand-alone European weather providers will lead a marginal life. Companies will only survive and thrive if they become subsumed into US or Japanese conglomerates. They will have very limited capability to carry out research. There will be no real development of the market.

In the USA there are about 500 weather companies, as against 50 in Europe. The largest US companies have turnover approaching €100m. Total US turnover is about €500m, as against €200m in Europe.

Why has change come so slowly in Europe? Perhaps because of a misplaced feeling of power within NMHS's. Holland Weather Services believe that the Dutch experience suggests that NMHS's might learn that there is a better life without commercial activities. It believes that there can be no honest competition while NMHS's are active in the marketplace. It believes that it is in the taxpayers interest to end the commercial activities of NMHS's.

HWS today continues to rationalise its operations. It is using new US NCEP data as the basis for its forecasts. It must evolve towards

Weather information on the new media

A presentation given by Rupert Collins-White, an IT journalist at the ECAM/EMS meeting in Budapest, September 2001

Where is the new media pot of gold hiding?

The problems of how best to provide weather information to the public on the evolving new media, and to do this in a manner that will provide revenue, were addressed by Rupert Collins-White.

He started by defining some "ground rules". Information provided to the consumer must be of high quality; this is basic. In looking at the prospective revenues, a long-term approach must be taken. Experience has shown that short-term revenues are just not yet available through the provision of information on the Internet and other new media.

He posed the question - should we regard information as a consumable or as a currency? In looking at information as a consumable, we must recognise that we are all consumers. In considering weather information, we consume it via radio (free), television (mostly free - as yet), the internet (mostly free) and print (payable, but for a broad package of which weather is only a small part).

It is very difficult to get people to pay for information. In order for this to occur, two factors must be satisfied:

1. People must want to pay, and

2. A method of payment collection must be in place.

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Young people are turner more to the web for weather information.

"Alternatively, information can be treated as a currency; as something to be traded so that the income does not accrue directly from the consumer. "

A payment collection scheme can piggy-back on someone else's system (as in telephone services) but this hands over a substantial degree of control to the third party. Or, we can provide the information for free, but associate it with advertising for some related products or services which provide the necessary revenue stream.

Alternatively, information can be treated as a currency; as something to be traded so that the income does not accrue directly from the consumer. Advertising is a step in this direction; a more complete scheme would be whereby weather information is swapped for other information, which can then be sold on to generate revenue.

This information could well be profile information of weather consumers, whether they be individual or corporate. By allowing them to access weather information for free, we can gain information about consumers (geographical spread, access patterns etc) which may be useful to another party. A weather provider can then act as an intermediary between this third party and its own consumers, which puts it in a strong position.

In terms of getting consumers to accept the notion of payment, it is clear that people are more willing to pay for services that are aimed at them specifically. The new generation of mobile phones and related devices is providing the technology that can allow this to happen. Whereas WAP was a failure because of the problems of network infrastructure, SMS or text messaging remains a very efficient and widely used new medium.

The possibilities are growing with the convergence of mobile phones and PDA's, or personal digital assistants. The provision of computing power at the other end of the phone line not only allows for improved storage and presentation of the message; devices increasingly know where they are, and can transmit this knowledge in such a manner as to allow targeted information to be directed to them.

What kind of targeted information? Mobile services at the moment are crying out for content, but that content must be (from the users perspective) of high quality, inexpensive, and timely. Weather forecasts are an obvious product, but they may need to be tailored more carefully. Sunburn warnings are an example of location-sensitive information that would work well in this scenario. Drying conditions - for drying washing, for farming etc - would also be suitable "derived" products that might be worthy of consideration.

It will be important to think beyond the basic weather forecast. We need to think about the effects that the upcoming weather will have on the users/consumers, and issue warnings and advisories accordingly.

Looking ahead 5/10 years, three developments can be forecast with confidence:

1. All communications will go digital.
2. There will be a massive growth in digital information.
3. There will be more acceptance of the con-

Get typing now!

Comment from the Editor

I am continuing to develop our Newsletter and this edition is the first with the new name of **Up Front**. I am sure you all noticed the pun - but its real purpose is to provide a platform to present views that have 'attitude'. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Association, but they are here to get our readers thinking and more importantly reacting.

But I need your input. In particular from those members outside Europe and the USA who tend to dominate the debate. Within reason I will print any article that relates to our business. I also want to here from members that are having successes or problems with their careers.

Simply email with your article at: secretary@iabm.org

John Teather, Editor and Honorary Secretary

INCREDIBLE CHRISTMAS SNOW IN THE NORTH EASTERN U.S.A!

By Paul Gross, WDIV-TV, Detroit

What a dump!

After a record warm and nearly snow less November and December, parts of the north-eastern United States underwent one of the most significant and abrupt changes in the weather that has ever been recorded in these areas. The continuous intense snowfall that began Christmas Eve and persisted until New Year's Day is called "Lake Effect" snow, and is the result of very cold air travelling over the large, relatively warm waters of the large lakes in this region called "The Great Lakes." The cold air warms a bit and evaporates moisture as it flows across the smooth waters, then crashes into the higher terrain along the leeward shoreline, which enhances lift and generates intense snow squalls. The exact location of the snow bands depends upon the exact direction of the cold wind flowing across the lake. In this case, the wind direction changed very little during the entire week, and the intense snow fell continuously over the same locations.

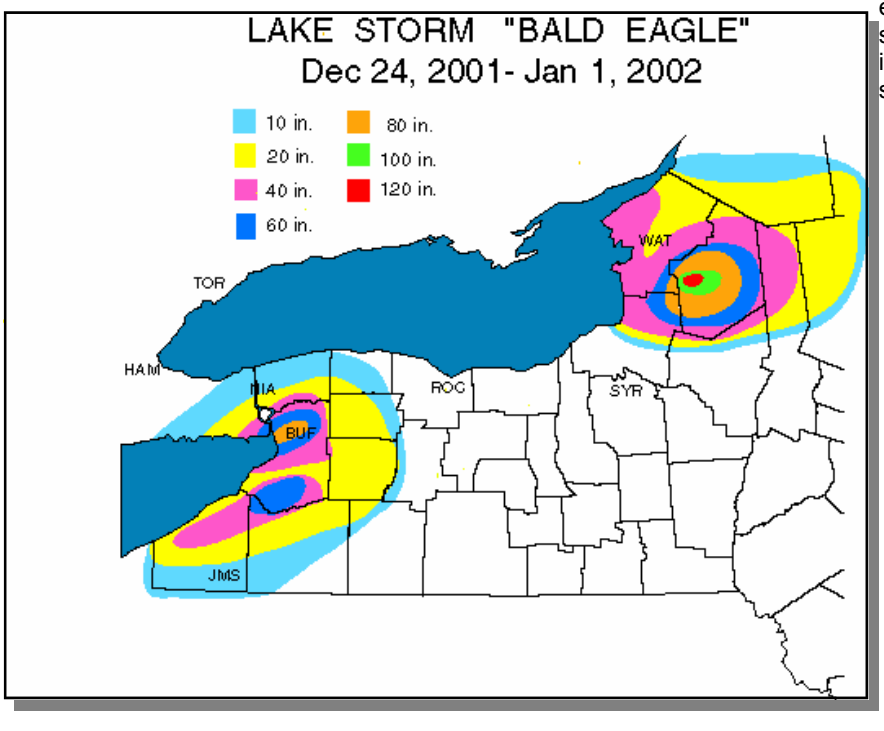
As you can see, the snowfall amounts are almost unbelievable …..

If you look at the map below (created by the National Weather Service in Buffalo, New York), you can very clearly see the effects of the cold west wind that blew over Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. The air temperature was around 25F / -4C, and the lake temperatures were around 38-40F / 3-4C. As you can see, the snowfall amounts are almost unbelievable (the chart on the map gives the snowfall in inches…the conversion to centimetres is 2.25 cm per 1.00 inch). The most intense snow bands produced snow at the rate of 2 to 4 inches / 4.5 to 9 cm PER HOUR, with one location receiving 48 inches / 108 cm in TWENTY-FOUR HOURS! Notice on the map how rapidly the snowfall diminishes the further away you get from the lake, and keep in mind that these areas that received snow are NOT mountain areas.

Here are the cities in New York state that received the highest official snow totals from the entire event:

Montague	127 inches / 286 cm
Highmarket	104 inches / 234 cm
Buffalo	86 inches / 194 cm
West Seneca	71 inches / 160 cm
South Lancaster	64 inches / 144 cm
Arkwright	56 inches / 126 cm

Although most of the news coverage focused on New York, some locations in the northern part of my state, Michigan, also received enormous snow totals from the same weather event. Specifically, Emmet County received lake effect snow off of Lake Michigan, and had 92 inches / 207 cm of snow. Although lake effect snow is very common here in the Great Lakes region of the United States, a lake effect event of this duration is almost unheard of. Obviously, lake effect snow is sig-



Paul Gross, WDIV-TV, Detroit

Climate Change Debate

Climate Change and its Consequences by Bill Giles O.B.E., Director of The Weather Index, London, England. www.wpindex.com

The climate of the Earth is continually changing. The big difference this time around is that the major component of the change is not the natural variation but the activities of the predominant animal on the planet, namely the human race.

The Earth's gravity enables it to maintain an atmosphere in which the oxygen enables animal life to exist but it also contains many other gases including carbon dioxide and methane. These gases have the property of allowing the sun's short wave radiation to pass through almost unhindered but are only translucent to the returning longer wave terrestrial radiation reflecting some back to the Earth.

Far from being detrimental to life on Earth the naturally occurring greenhouse gases maintain the average global temperature at around 15 C. This is an ideal temperature for the human race, amongst others, to breed and to develop. Without this naturally occurring greenhouse shield it has been estimated that the average global temperature would be some 33 C lower at Minus 18C which, almost certainly would have inhibited our development and probably made sure that it didn't even start.

However, by burning fossil fuels at an escalating rate, we are putting more and more of the greenhouses gases into our atmosphere which in turn heat up the atmosphere to such an extent that the last decade was the warmest ever recorded. As far as the average temperature for Central England is concerned (and this is the longest continuous meteorological record in the world dating back to 1659) it did not vary very much from 9.1 C but in the last ten year has jumped dramatically by 1C to 10.1C-a significant change. Assuming this to be mainly due to the increase of carbon gases and methane there is no reason why this trend should not continue and this is the basis of all the predictions from the International Panel for Climate Change.

Now it really matters little about whether the predicted increase in global temperature is 5 C by the end of the century or 8 C because there will be wide regional variations and even if we drastically cut back our carbon output we will still warm up since once in the atmosphere carbon can last up to 100 years. It has been suggested by a Royal Commission that the UK would have to cut back its carbon emissions by 60% to stop the warming getting out of control and the rest of the world would have to follow suit. Unless there is a radical change with a clean substitute for the industrial combustion engine and cleaner power stations this decrease in carbon output seems most unlikely.

So how is this going to affect the climates around the world?

Well in the temperate regions, where most people live, we are likely to see a change to a more Mediterranean climate with milder wetter stormier winters and longer drier warmer (but not necessarily sunnier) summers. Over the past couple of years I have been looking at combining the weather elements of temperature, rain, sunshine and wind to give a single index. The beauty of this is that the index enables comparisons from place to place and also a single place with time. I have found that the index in London for mid summer in 2030 is the same as Nice, France, of today and that by the turn of the century the summer climate in London will be similar to that of Athens at the beginning of this century.

If your dependants are in London in 100 years time the climate looks great, hot dry and sunny but what about the people living further south because as northern Europe warms up so it will further south (perhaps by not quite the same amount admittedly) and I put forward the hypothesis (which I postulated in The Weather Show over five years ago) that more heat arriving in the equatorial regions will make the upper level winds flowing north and south stronger. This in turn will allow them to move further away from the equator before they slow down and descend. At the present the descending upper winds which form the semi-permanent anticyclones is at about 30 N and looking on a world atlas that is where the hot deserts are situated. If the wind is a little stronger then the anticyclones could form at 35 N, which is the Mediterranean where a great number of people live. They would have to move and I see the huge migrations of climatic refugees, as being the major problem the World will face in the second half of the 21 century.

One last thought. As the weather warms up and dries out in the USA the country will find it difficult to grow enough crops to feed its own population. We have already seen great problems in the grain producing areas over the last few years and this is likely to get much worse. One of the main reasons that the USA became a super power is because for the last seventy years or so they have always had enormous grain stocks, which they could sell or not sell as their political masters decided and with this gained great political power. If, however, in a few years time cannot even feed themselves they could well lose a great deal of their world dominance.

As the USA's agricultural potential decreases so it could increase in Canada, Russia and many parts of China shifting the political power base away from USA in favour of the new agricultural giants.

So purely by driving your car on short journeys instead of walking, not recycling efficiently, chopping down enormous areas of tropical rain forests and not developing energy efficient buildings we could leave an absolute nightmare for our grand children to live in. And to do this will need the co-operation of every single nation upon Earth, it cannot be done alone and I would hasten to add that it cannot be done without the USA.

Climate Change Debate

- *This special feature will regularly appear in **Up Front**.*
- *Its your page to debate the effects of climate change.*
- *It is designed to help provide useful background for the times when the News Anchor throws that question "was this bad weather the result of global warming?"*
- *Please email your contributions to Bill Giles at bill@billgiles.co.uk*

"Unless there is a radical change with a clean substitute for the industrial combustion engine and cleaner power stations a decrease in carbon output seems most unlikely"

A stormy future for the world and mankind…...

International Association of Broadcast Meteorology

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Back Page Comment

The rumours started flying in November: a major American broadcast company was researching the viability of "centralised" weather forecasts for its TV stations.

The suspect: Sinclair Broadcast Group which owns or provides programming services pursuant to local marketing agreements to more television stations than any other commercial broadcasting group in the United States.

The motive: greed. Five years ago, Sinclair enjoyed the reputation of having the highest profit margins in the industry, about 50% according to annual reports to shareholders. Now, Sinclair moans about margins closer to half that amount as broadcasters struggle through an economic downturn and evaporated advertising revenues since September 11th.

The plan: feed weather segments to Sinclair stations throughout the U.S. which would originate from the Baltimore studios of WBFF-WNUV and would include generalized forecast info for each of the 36 Sinclair-served markets. Initial reports indicate several Sinclair managers dumbfounded and concerned that a centralised system could not possibly handle severe local weather in an adequate fashion.

Then, in January, TV columnist David Folkenflik reported in the Baltimore Sun that Sinclair was studying whether it could not only centralise weather, but how it might create news programming from a central location for its stations that do not currently offer newscasts.

Joseph DeFeo, news director for Sinclair stations WBFF and WNUV in Baltimore, started working as a consultant on the project at the company headquarters. *"I'm up here to help research ways to put news on where there is none, and re-establish news where we no longer have it,"* DeFeo said. A Washington bureau that could produce original reports for Sinclair stations could be in the works, too.

As for centralized weather, it seems Sinclair would ignore the wisdom of broadcast consultants who for years have been preaching the benefits of "Localize, Localize, Localize!". Many viewers in the states have nearly one hundred channels from which to choose. With so many choices it stands to reason that the only way to compete with national networks is to offer something the big guys can't: local news, local sports and local weather.

To that end, some presenters have introduced the ultimate in localization: the "micro-cast", a forecast presented on a scale of mere kilometres (or a few city blocks!).

Still, you needn't be a bean counter to see the writing on the wall: axe several dozen presenters plus all the capital, data and maintenance costs associated with running weather departments at all your TV stations, and the end result is to stem the mounting tide of red ink. But, the question is, at what cost?

Naturally, vigilant press reporters who see the changes at their local Sinclair station will alert their readers. Will viewers really care if the man or woman on the tube each evening is actually in Baltimore, perhaps 2,000 miles away? What will become of the presenter as goodwill ambassador of the TV station? It will be awfully difficult for a Baltimore-based talent to make the occasional public appearance on behalf of a Sinclair station in Texas, for instance.

Nothing concrete has yet been announced, but just the thought of centralised weather forecasts by Sinclair is a worrisome bellwether: desperate measures by desperate people in desperate times.

Meteorologist Steve Swienckowski is a former presenter of eighteen years and past winner of the "Best Presenter" Trophy at the annual Festival de Meteo. He is now President of the David Crane Agency representing news, sports and weather talent in the U.S. and Canada.