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'Drastic effect on agriculture'

Agriculture in Otago and Southland could be drastically affected by a nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere, according to a recent publication by the New Zealand Planning Council.

New Zealand After Nuclear War is the result of a study in October 1986 by the council on behalf of the Ministry for the Environment. It examines the likely effects of nuclear war on New Zealand's environment, society and economy.

The senior investigating officer for the ministry in Dunedin, Mr D. Brash, commented on the report yesterday. He said the impact of a nuclear winter on the growing season and on crops was particularly relevant for Otago and Southland.

A predicted temperature drop of three degrees in spring and one degree in

summer constituted a "mild" nuclear winter compared to that predicted for the Northern Hemisphere, but such changes in temperature are likely to have major effects in the Otago-Southland region, Mr Brash said.

FROSTS

Frost incidence in Central Otago and pasture production in Southland would be affected.

"A Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries computer model estimated a 36 percent loss in Southland's pasture production in the first year, with a 66 percent loss in spring production alone."

During the first year after a nuclear war, kiwifruit and citrus fruit would mature only in the far north, maize yields would be reduced and wheat would fail in Southland. Canterbury wheat crops would be marginal.

Since grains are grown primarily in Canterbury and further south, supplies could be insufficient for national needs.

Relatively small drops in temperature would reduce food production in New Zealand, the report concludes, but the magnitude of such changes probably would not put people at risk of starvation.

"The impact of radiation fallout following a northern hemisphere nuclear war would most likely be minimal, but such a war could have significant effects on our climate and effectively halt trade and communications," Mr Brash said.

EQUIPMENT

"The picture becomes worse if south-eastern Australia was a target for a nuclear strike, as the resulting electromagnetic pulse would severely damage electrical equipment here, crippling communications, energy,

banking and transport systems."

Mr Brash said a breakdown in communications would probably lead to greater local and regional self-reliance. "This could mean much greater emphasis on local and regional government."

The ministry is inviting the public to comment on the findings of the book, particularly on what a

second phase of investigations might involve.

"We want comment on what further study and action is needed - should we be stockpiling supplies of medicines for example, and who should be responsible for any planning required?"

Mr Brash said submissions on the book, which is available at most book-sellers around the city, should be directed to the ministry's offices in Wellington.