

Climate crisis: business, farming and environment leaders unite to warn Australia 'woefully unprepared'

Adam Morton

The Guardian

Friday 28th August 2020

An extraordinary statement by 10 groups says the nation's future prosperity is at risk without a coherent response

[Business](#), industry, farming and environmental leaders have joined forces to warn Australia is “woefully unprepared” for the impact of climate change over the coming decades and to urge the Morrison government to do far more to cut emissions and improve the country's resilience.

An [extraordinary statement](#) by 10 organisations, several with close ties to the Coalition, said climate change was already having a “real and significant” impact on the economy and community. The groups, representing the breadth of Australian society, called on the federal and state governments to act immediately to reduce and manage the risks.

Organisations including the Business Council of Australia, the Australian Industry Group, the National Farmers' Federation, the Australian Aluminium Council and the ACTU said public debate about the cost of doing more to reduce emissions had too often not considered the cost of climate change to the economy, environment and society. They cited [evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) that emissions would need to be net-zero by 2050 if the goals of the [Paris agreement](#) are to be achieved, and said Australia must adopt that target.

The statement, issued under the [Australian Climate Roundtable](#) banner, said Australia's future prosperity would be at risk unless it had a coherent national response to the crisis.

“The scale of costs and breadth of the impact of climate change for people in Australia is deeply concerning and will escalate over time,” it said. “It is in Australia's national interest that we do all we can to contribute to successful global action to minimise further temperature rises and take action to manage the changes we can't avoid.”

The groups, some of which have been involved in past campaigns to slow action on climate change, agreed to the statement after holding five climate-themed expert workshops. They heard from climate scientists and organisations including the [Reserve Bank](#), the [Australian Energy Market Operator](#) and Insurance Australia Group.

The statement said the expert advice made clear temperatures were increasing, extreme climate-related events such as heatwaves and bushfires were becoming more intense and frequent, and natural systems were suffering irreversible damage. Some communities were now in a constant state of recovery from successive natural disasters with growing economic ramifications.

It said inaction would lead to unprecedented economic damage to Australia and its regional trading partners, heightened risks to financial stability – particularly as the insurance industry became compromised – and significant threats to the agriculture, forestry, tourism and fishing industries.

There would be severe pressure on government budgets due to a dramatic fall in tax revenue and a rise in natural disasters that demanded emergency response and recovery spending and there would be major and long-lived social and health impacts, including loss of life.

The roundtable concluded Australia must play its fair part in international efforts to limit average global heating to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, or at most to well below a 2C increase.

That meant setting a target of net-zero emissions by mid-century and introducing policies to meet it that aimed to lift social equity and the country's global competitive advantage in a zero-emissions world.

The Morrison government has rejected calls that it back the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050. The target has been adopted by more than 70 countries, all Australian states and a growing number of business and investors, including fossil fuel companies. National emissions [have dipped 1.5% since the Coalition was elected](#) in 2013 after falling about 14% in six years under Labor.

The roundtable said even with ambitious global action Australia faced escalating costs due to unavoidable climate change from historical emissions, and must act swiftly to improve resilience. It said the country was “woefully unprepared” for the scale of threats that would emerge as it lacked a systemic government response at any level. The groups recommended climate change response become a standing item at national cabinet meetings and that the government order a biannual climate vulnerability assessment similar to that undertaken in the US and New Zealand. They said the climate crisis needed to be addressed as the country tackled the Covid-19 economic recovery.

Other members of the roundtable are the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Australian Council of Social Service, the Australian Energy Council, the Investor Group on Climate Change and the World Wide Fund for Nature.

Innes Willox, the chief executive of the Australian Industry Group, said the evidence was deeply concerning. “The urgency of (the risk of huge costs) should drive all Australian governments to lift our game on adaptation and put net zero emissions by 2050 at the heart of their plans for prosperity,” he said.

The business council chief, Jennifer Westacott, said: “Putting Australia on the path to net zero emissions by 2050 can be an opportunity to drive billions of dollars of new investment, create new jobs, create new industries, boost our resilience and build the stronger regions we’ll need to supercharge our recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.”

The roundtable said it planned a second series of workshops on what a successful transition to net-zero emissions would look like. It said the country risked losing investment to countries with clearer targets and transition roadmaps if it did not act.

“We are prepared to work with all stakeholders to help Australia rise above decades of delay and come together to address one of the greatest challenges the nation has ever faced,” it said.

A spokesperson for the emissions reduction minister, Angus Taylor, said the government was committed to the Paris agreement and its policies, including a [technology investment roadmap](#) and [recommendations by businessman Grant King](#), would help it beat its 2030 climate goal of a 26-28% cut below 2005 levels.

Scientists and analysts have found Australia would need to cut its emissions by at least 45% by 2030 to play its part under the Paris pact.

Labor’s climate spokesman, Mark Butler, said: “If Scott Morrison or the ‘moderate Liberals’ have any backbone they will listen to this statement and commit to net zero emissions by 2050.”

The Insurance Council of Australia said on Thursday the industry had received more than 297,780 claims relating to bushfire, flood and hailstorm catastrophes last summer, with losses totalling almost \$5.4bn. The chief executive, Rob Whelan, said it was the worst natural disaster season he had experienced in 10.5 years in the role.