

CLIMATE CHANGE: AUSTRALIA LAGS THE WORLD AND "OUT ON A LIMB"

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WHILE Australians at the individual, local, state and territory levels have responded positively to the oncoming threat of climate change, this is "severely undermined" by national policies and action that are "contrary and increasingly place Australia out on a limb", according to the authors of the *2021 MJA-Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change*, published today.

The report represents the work of seven Australian institutions in collaboration with University College London, brought together by an evolving partnership between *The Lancet* and *The Medical Journal of Australia*. The collaboration tracks the links between public health and climate change across five domains: climate change impacts, exposures and vulnerability; adaptation, planning and resilience for health; mitigation actions and health co-benefits; economics and finance; and public and political engagement.

Led by Associate Professor Paul Beggs from Macquarie University's Faculty of Science and Engineering, the report's authors said the continued absence of a national health and climate change plan was a "glaring gap" which continued to put the health and lives of Australians at risk.

"With a change in the US Government, and countries such as Japan and South Korea and major trading partners enacting climate change strategies, Australia is becoming isolated due to its inaction," wrote Beggs and colleagues.

"As the rest of the world moves ahead, the relative advantages Australia has now will be lost with stranded assets like coal and poor preparedness for the worsening health impacts.

"Australia now stands at a crossroads and has an opportunity to set a course redirection in both its continued COVID-19 economic recovery and its climate change response."

Beggs and colleagues outlined impacts across five domains:

1. Climate change impacts, exposures and vulnerability

- Vulnerability to extremes of heat;
- Indigenous health and climate change;
- Health effects of heatwaves;
- Heat impact on physical and sporting activities;
- Change in labour capacity;
- Cold- and heat-related mortality;
- Bushfires;
- Health effects of drought;
- Migration, displacement and environmental change; and,
- Mosquito-borne diseases.

2. Adaptation, planning and resilience for health

- Australian adaptation plans for health;
- National assessments of climate change impacts, vulnerability and adaptation for health;
- City-level climate change risk assessments;
- Climate information services for health;
- Detection, preparedness and response to health emergencies;
- Urban green space; and,
- Bushfire adaptation.



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3. Mitigation actions and health co-benefits

- Carbon intensity of the energy system;
- Coal phase-out;
- Zero carbon emission electricity;
- Clean household energy;
- Exposure to air pollution in cities;
- Premature mortality from ambient air pollution by sector;
- Sustainable and healthy transport;
- Emissions from agricultural production and consumption;
- Diet and health co-benefits; and,
- Mitigation in the health care sector.

4. Economics and finance

- Costs of heat-related mortality;
- Investment in new coal capacity;
- Investments in zero carbon energy and energy efficiency;
- Employment in low carbon and high carbon industries;
- Funds divested from fossil fuels; and,
- Net value of fossil fuel subsidies and carbon prices.

5. Public and political engagement

- Media coverage of health and climate change;
- Coverage of health and climate change in scientific journals;
- Government engagement in health and climate change in Australia; and,
- Health and climate change research funding.

"The 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in late October 2021 should be the moment to showcase a much stronger emissions reduction commitment and clear transition away from fossil fuels towards renewable energy – the strategies for which could support the COVID-19 economic recovery through government support of the renewable energy sector," Beggs and colleagues concluded.

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CONTACTS: Sonia Bluhm
Senior Science Communicator, Scientell Pty Ltd
Ph: 0416 078 138
Email: sonia@scientell.com.au