

The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change

Policy brief for Australia

2022



Acknowledgment

The *MJA-Lancet* Countdown on Health and Climate Change extends respect to the Traditional Owners of Australia's lands, seas, and waterways. We celebrate First Nations Peoples' enduring connection to, knowledge, and custodianship of Country, and recognise their outstanding leadership in the fields of health and climate change. We acknowledge the impacts of racism and colonialism on First Peoples, and appreciate that addressing these impacts is key to the health and environmental challenges that this brief discusses.

Introduction

In the three years since the start of the Black Summer bushfires, Australians have been shocked by the brutal realities of climate change. As a nation, we have been left reeling as the warning issued by *The Lancet* in 2009 – that “climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century”¹ – has become our lived reality. Across the country, people have coughed and wheezed as bushfire smoke polluted the air.² They have fled from floods destroying their homes and carrying disease into waterways. They have paid record prices for fresh food as farmers' crops fail after months of unseasonable rain.

In response, the Australian community has demanded urgent climate action. Previously, there has been no national climate and health strategy for Australia (although development of the National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy 2021-2025 was a crucial step forward). But at the 2022 federal election voters drove a clear shift in Australia's parliament towards representatives with more ambitious climate policies.³ The new government has acted swiftly to update Australia's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement, and legislate a more ambitious emissions reduction target. It has also made a commendable commitment to develop Australia's first national strategy on climate, health and wellbeing.⁴ The government's climate targets and policies must still be much strengthened to be consistent with climate science; but the steps taken so far have begun to steer Australia down the path to a healthier future.

Since 2018, the *MJA-Lancet* Countdown on Health and Climate Change has presented a growing body of evidence and policy recommendations on the health impacts of climate change in Australia.^{5,6,7,8} This has largely gone unaddressed to date, making recommendations increasingly relevant and urgent as the climate crisis exacerbates. In this year's report, we found that Australia is still grossly unprepared to manage the impacts of climate change on human health, and that people are already paying the price.⁹

Key findings include:

- **The health of people in Australia is being jeopardised by increasing exposure to extreme fire danger, life-threatening heat, and severe drought; and more people are being affected and internally displaced by weather-related disasters;**
- **Australia's healthcare systems are largely underprepared for the impacts of climate change, and are showing signs of strain from increases in climate change-related healthcare demand adding onto the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Australia's health emergency management capacity deteriorated in 2021; and**
- **Australia's energy, transport, food, and healthcare systems remain carbon-intensive and polluting, threatening the health and wellbeing of present and future generations.**

These findings demand timely, coordinated, and strategic policy responses from all levels and sectors of Australian government. In this briefing, we present three recommendations to guide policymakers in navigating a path to a healthy, equitable, and sustainable future for Australia. These recommendations have been developed in consultation with experts and stakeholders in response to new evidence on select indicators in this year's Australian *MJA-Lancet* Countdown report and the global *Lancet* Countdown report.^{9,10}

In implementing these recommendations, we urge governments to seek, fund, and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership. This should occur in recognition of the positive outcomes that are generated through First Nations-led approaches to climate and health challenges; and of the fact that climate-related impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Countries and cultures are pervasive, complex, and compounding.^{11,12}

Recommendations

1

A plan for health resilience: build Australia's resilience to climate emergencies by developing coordinated health and climate change plans at all levels of government. This planning should be informed by national climate vulnerability and health risk assessments.

2

Healthy energy investments: align energy investments with the decarbonisation objectives of the Paris Agreement. State and federal fiscal policies must drive a rapid, fair transition to renewable energy to protect human health.

3

A sustainable food system: incorporate environmental sustainability principles into the updated Australian Dietary Guidelines, and align food and agriculture policies (such as the Food Standards Australia New Zealand Act) with these guidelines, to capitalise on potential climate and health co-benefits.

Planning for resilience to climate-health emergencies

Australia has been rocked by multiple climate-related disasters over the past three years. Fires, droughts, and floods, in tandem with the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in "altered social networks, disrupted health and social services, and internal population displacement" across the country.⁹ Concerningly, as the health risks and impacts of climate change escalate, indicators of our national capacity to respond to health emergencies have declined. In 2021, Australia's health emergency management capacity score (measured under the World Health Organization (WHO) International Health Regulations) dropped below 100% for the first time.⁹ This is an important indication that Australia's national health and climate change coping capacity is currently suboptimal. Remediating this, and planning to build Australia's resilience to climate-health emergencies, must be an urgent policy priority.

Commendably, the new Federal Government has committed to developing Australia's first national climate and health strategy, and a number of state governments have already developed climate and

health adaptation plans.^{13,14} A country-wide coordinated climate and health strategy will bring Australia in line with many countries worldwide that have already established such plans, and with the WHO's recommendations on managing the health risks of climate change.¹⁵ Fortunately, there are significant synergies in the measures required to simultaneously achieve efficiency, equity, and climate-resilience objectives for Australian healthcare systems.¹⁶ Moving forward, coordinated state and federal health and climate change planning must occur as part of the National Cabinet's broader climate and health reform agendas. The development of a national climate vulnerability and risk assessment with a health lens (such as that planned by the Australian National University's Healthy Environments and Lives Network) should underpin this policymaking, and funding and support must be given to monitoring progress on key climate and health indicators.¹⁷

For more information, see Indicators 1.5, 2.1 and 2.3 in this year's MJA-Lancet Countdown report.

Investing in a healthier energy future

Australian governments' energy investments are not aligned with the goals of the Paris Agreement. Despite the welcome announcement that emissions reduction will become a priority under the national energy objectives, governments continue to subsidise the country's largest fossil fuel producers and consumers with billions of taxpayer dollars each year. In 2018, Australia's total fossil fuel subsidies were measured at \$8.7 billion.⁸ These subsidies distort the energy market in favour of ageing, polluting, and unhealthy modes of energy production, keeping populations vulnerable to volatile fossil fuel markets. This comes at an opportunity cost of funding renewable generation, transmission, and storage projects that could power Australia with clean, affordable, and reliable energy, that could reduce energy poverty and its associated health impacts. Meanwhile, the negative externalities associated with fossil fuel extraction, processing, and consumption go unaccounted for. These include significant human health impacts, such as heart and lung disease in adults; childhood asthma; and birth defects.^{18,19} The vast (and often unseen) costs of investing in fossil fuels are unjustified on financial, climate and human health grounds.^{20,21}

As governments look to shore up energy security, reliability, and affordability in the years ahead, Australian taxpayer dollars must be used consistently to drive a fair and rapid transition of our energy systems

towards healthy, clean renewable energies. Any further government investment or support for oil, coal or gas exploration, extraction, or consumption would be a short-sighted response that could put Australia's climate commitments irreversibly out of reach, undermining the lives and livelihoods of present and future generations. Instead, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and International Energy Agency (IEA) have urged, countries such as Australia "should accelerate investment in sustainable energy infrastructure and the creation of green jobs...to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all."²² Phasing out existing fossil fuel subsidies could save billions of taxpayer dollars that could be reallocated to renewable generation, transmission, and storage projects (such as measures in the forthcoming First Nations Clean Energy Strategy), financing the transition towards a net zero-carbon energy system.²³ This would in turn help prevent the most catastrophic health impacts of future climate change, while delivering immediate health benefits to Australian populations by reducing air pollution and energy poverty, and supporting sustainable development.

For more information, see Indicators 4.2 and 4.5 in this year's MJA-Lancet Countdown report.

A healthier diet for Australians and our planet

In Australia and worldwide, food systems are driving a "global syndemic" of obesity, undernutrition, and climate change.²⁴ The average Australian diet – which typically features excessive carbon-intensive processed foods, meat, and other animal products, with inadequate fresh fruit and vegetables – is a major factor driving high population levels of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes.²⁵ It has led to a 25% increase in diet-related deaths in Australia since 2010.⁹ Agriculture contributes about 13% of total greenhouse gas emissions each year in Australia while consuming vast quantities of land, fresh water, and chemicals.²⁶

Fortunately, minimising diet-related harms to both human and planetary health are highly compatible policy objectives.²⁶ Broadly speaking, diets that are better for human health are also better for the planet. For example, a diet that is consistent with the existing Australian Dietary Guidelines (ADGs) already has a 42% lower climate footprint than the current average Australian diet; there have been similar findings from studies in New Zealand.²⁷ There is significant scope to leverage climate and health co-benefits through incorporating sustainability

considerations explicitly within the ADGs as part of the National Health and Medical Research Council's current review and update, due to be released in the second quarter of 2024.²⁸ National dietary guidelines are an important lever for driving healthy, sustainable shifts in food production and consumption.²⁹ Updating Australia's guidelines would bring them in line with a growing number of countries worldwide with guidelines that incorporate sustainability.^{30,31} In addition to updating the ADGs, it is crucial to implement coherent, equitable food and nutrition policy measures that empower all Australians – particularly those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage – to have access to healthier foods in accordance with current and future guidelines. To that end, the current review of the *Food Standards Australia and New Zealand Act* presents a further significant opportunity to better align Australia's food and nutrition policies around human health, equity, and sustainability objectives.³²

For more information, see Indicators 3.6 and 3.7 in this year's MJA-Lancet Countdown report.

Conclusion

There are promising signs that, after decades as a climate and health laggard, Australia's Government is pivoting towards policymaking that is more consistent with climate and health science. Moving forward, we urge all governments to continue realising the opportunities and obligations of its resounding climate election mandate, and set Australia on a path to a healthier future for both people and planet.

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THE LANCET COUNTDOWN

The *Lancet* Countdown: Tracking Progress on Health and Climate Change exists to monitor the links between public health and climate change, and the transition from health threat to opportunity. We are a global collaboration of over 300 leading experts from academic institutions and UN agencies across the globe, bringing together climate scientists, engineers, energy specialists, economists, political scientists, public health professionals and doctors.

Each year our findings are published annually in medical journal *The Lancet* ahead of the UN climate change negotiations. Our data makes clear how climate change is affecting our health, the consequences of delayed action and the health benefits of a robust response.

THE MJA-LANCET COUNTDOWN AUSTRALIA

The *MJA-Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change was established in 2017, produced its first Australian national assessment in 2018 and updated in 2019, 2020 and 2021. The reports examine indicators across five broad 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. The 2022 report is the 5th assessment produced by the team.

THE MEDICAL JOURNAL OF AUSTRALIA

The *Medical Journal of Australia* (MJA) is the leading peer-reviewed general medical journal in the Southern Hemisphere. It has been publishing groundbreaking research, perspectives on health care delivery and informed analysis on policy since 1914.

THE ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) trains, educates and advocates on behalf of over 18,800 physicians and 8,800 trainee physicians in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand across a broad range of medical specialties. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing health and social policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients.

AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) is the peak professional body for doctors in Australia. The AMA promotes and protects the professional interests of doctors and the healthcare needs of patients and communities. Representing doctors, the AMA works with governments to develop and influence health policy to provide the best outcomes for doctors, their patients, and the community.

AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS DOCTORS' ASSOCIATION

The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) is the peak body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students in Australia. Our purpose is to grow ethical and professional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors who will lead and drive equitable and just health outcomes for all our people. Our vision is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have self-determination and equitable health and life outcomes in a culturally safe health system.

AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF NURSING

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is the leading non-industrial professional nursing organisation in the country. ACN is a for-purpose organisation working to make real and lasting change for the profession by helping to shape health care by advancing nursing. ACN works to achieve its mission through the pillars of world-class professional education, community engagement and development, championing nurse leadership, ensuring a positive social impact, performing Advocacy at all levels, and effective policy development.

AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

The Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) is the peak representative body of Australia's 17,000 medical students. AMSA's mandate is to connect, inform and represent medical students through national and grassroots advocacy, annual conferences, projects and publications.

PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. PHAA's mission is to promote better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.