

Pre-Budget Submission 2024-2025



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Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) is an independent, self-funded, non-government organisation of medical doctors in all Australian states and territories.

DEA's work is based on the premise that humans need a future with clean air and water, healthy soils capable of producing nutritious food, a stable climate, and a complex, diverse and interconnected humanity whose needs are met in a sustainable way. We are therefore interested in environmental protection and restoration to promote human health and social stability.

DEA welcomes the opportunity to provide a Pre-Budget 2024 Submission to the Australian Government at a time when human health and the environment are facing massive challenges which were unforeseen several decades ago.

Introduction

2023 was the hottest year in recorded history¹ with global heating and climate change causing immense harm to human populations in Australia and across the globe.² These harms include the direct effects of heatwaves, fires, droughts, extreme weather events, floods and storms and also the indirect effects of loss of infrastructure, pressure on health and emergency services, food and water insecurity, displacement and increased cost of living.³

Our nation must prepare for our hotter world. To protect health the Australian Government needs to properly fund the implementation of the 'National Health and Climate Strategy'⁴ and close the gap between aspiration and action by properly funding its implementation. We also need to green our cities and towns to reduce local temperatures and adequately support emergency services to combat the inevitable fires, floods and extreme weather events⁵.

Fossil fuel combustion and use are the primary drivers of global heating⁶ and have extreme detrimental health effects from pollution⁷. To protect the wellbeing of the Australian people our nation has a responsibility to rapidly transition to sustainable energy domestically. Australia must also jettison our fossil fuel exports in recognition that emissions produced by our products overseas still add greenhouse gases to our atmosphere⁸ and cause harm to Australia, its people, environment and economy.

Other key drivers of climate change are deforestation and habitat destruction⁹ and here too, Australia has a responsibility to protect our natural resources recognizing that healthy ecosystems in turn support our own health and wellbeing and are proven mitigation tools to buffer against global heating.¹⁰

2024 is a critical juncture in our nation's response to climate change and DEA calls on the government to mitigate global heating and accelerate our adaptation efforts in order to protect our nation's rich biodiversity and the health of our people.

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1: Provide sufficient funding to implement the National Health and Climate Strategy, and to support the leadership, engagement and coordination functions of the National Health, Sustainability and Climate Unit, in recognition that climate change is the greatest public health problem facing humanity¹¹.**
- 2. Support a just transition to renewable energy, enhancing the uptake of renewables domestically and reducing our reliance on fossil fuel exports, acknowledging the negative health impacts of fossil fuel combustion from pollution¹² and global heating¹³.**
- 3. Support biodiversity by protecting 30% of our land, freshwater and ocean ecosystems as per the Global Biodiversity Framework¹⁴ and stopping deforestation, acknowledging the health harms of biodiversity loss and habitat destruction¹⁵.**
- 4. Support policies and actions that increase local resilience to climate change and protect health i.e. greener cities, cool refuges and rooms, active transport infrastructure, local energy resilience and fire safety.**

1. Provide sufficient funding to implement the National Health and Climate Strategy, and to support the leadership, engagement and coordination functions of the National Health, Sustainability and Climate Unit, in recognition that climate change is the greatest public health problem facing humanity.

As a medical organisation we welcome the government's National Health and Climate Strategy (NHCS) ¹⁶ as an important step forward in our nation's preparedness for climate health impacts which are putting an ever increasing load on our already overburdened health system.¹⁷

As the strategy highlights, Australians are already experiencing the impacts of climate change on their health and DEA supports the strategies vision statement of providing “healthy, climate-resilient communities and a sustainable, resilient, high-quality, net zero health system”.

DEA recognises the validity of its four objectives of health system resilience, health system decarbonisation, international collaboration and health in all policies.

To be successful it is vital that the strategy and its supporting National Health Sustainability and Climate (NHSC) Unit receive financial support commensurate with the size and scope of the challenge. As such, DEA recommends the following:-

1. Provide \$30 million over three years for the NHSC Unit, building its capacity to do the important work of operationalising the National Strategy, including further measurement and analysis of the health systems' greenhouse gas emissions and implementation of decarbonisation pathways.
2. Provide \$8 million over four years to support First Nations leadership via the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health as per Principle 3 and Actions 3.2 and 3.6 of the NHCS.
3. Establish a \$500 million contingency fund to enable a National Health Systems reduction trajectory as per Action 4.3 of the NHCS with a focus on the important and extensive work of hospital decarbonisation, including retrofitting the current health estate.
4. Support primary care to decarbonise, and strengthen the role of primary care in emergency disaster response, recognising that primary care has a vital role in building climate resilience.
5. Enable the Health in All Policies objective of the strategy by funding a \$5 million per annum unit within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to recognise and coordinate policy decisions between multiple sectors (such as energy production, mining, transport, agriculture, water) and health outcomes.

To reiterate, Doctors for the Environment Australia commends the government's National Health and Climate Strategy and its recommendations that will enable doctors and other health professions to continue to offer high quality health care to Australians. However, without sufficient funding, its objectives will not be realised.

Australia is signatory to the COP28 UAE Declaration on Climate and Health¹⁸ which recognises the health impacts of climate change, the health gains from mitigation and adaptation strategies and the need to transform our health systems to be climate ready.

DEA calls on the Australian Government to provide the necessary funds in the 2024 budget to support implementation of the NHCS and the supporting NHSC Unit, in keeping with the UAE Declaration and to protect the health of the Australian people.

2. Support a just transition to renewable energy. Enhance the uptake of renewable energy domestically and reduce our fossil fuel exports, acknowledging the negative health impacts of fossil fuel combustion from pollution and global heating.

The primary driver of global heating is fossil fuel combustion¹⁹ and the resultant change in our climate is the greatest health problem of our time²⁰, an escalating threat to international security²¹ and considered the greatest risk to the global economy we face²². All governments, including ours, therefore have a responsibility to mitigate against climate change by rapidly and urgently transitioning away from all forms of fossil fuel combustion and embracing the health and economic benefits of renewable energy.

DEA supports the government's domestic renewable energy target of 82% renewable energy by 2030²³ and calls for investment in renewable energy and its associated infrastructure in order to realise the target. We note the UAE Consensus to triple global renewable energy capacity (also by 2030), to transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems and to accelerate zero and low emissions technologies²⁴ and call on our government to address these commitments in the 2024 budget.

We further note the UAE Consensus to phase out fossil fuel subsidies and implore our government to meet its commitment do so, recognising that ongoing subsidising of the fossil fuel industry is antagonistic to the transition to renewable energy and costs the Australian tax-payer \$65 billion per year in explicit and implicit subsidies²⁵. Removing this money would go a long way towards funding Australia's renewable transition.

Furthermore it would improve the health of Australians in two fundamental ways:-

1. It would reduce the impact of pollution from fossil combustion on health, noting that this pollution has multiple negative effects including increased respiratory, cardiovascular and neurological diseases, delayed cognitive development in children, poor pregnancy outcomes and multiple cancers²⁶.
2. It would reduce the multiple impacts of climate change on human health, including the direct health harms of heatwaves, fires, floods, storms and extreme weather events, plus their associated harms from loss of infrastructure, power outages, increased pressure on and inability to access health services, displacement, mental illness, food and water insecurity and increased cost of living²⁷.

Removing financial subsidies for fossil fuels and providing support for a renewable energy transition will therefore improve health outcomes for Australians and their associated financial costs. It would show that our government is protecting our health and wellbeing, putting the health of our people and our environment above the financial interests of the fossil fuel industry.

3. Support biodiversity by protecting 30% of our land, freshwater and ocean ecosystems as per the Global Biodiversity Framework and stopping deforestation, being conscious of the health harms of biodiversity loss and habitat destruction.

Australia is a signatory to the global biodiversity framework²⁸ that strives to halt extinction and meet the “30x30 target” by restoring 30% of degraded ecosystems and ensuring 30% of terrestrial, inland water, and of coast and marine areas are protected by 2030. The framework further aims to reduce the impact of invasive species, reduce the impacts of pollution on biodiversity, minimise the impact of climate change and ocean acidification on biodiversity and ensure biodiversity is considered in decision making in government²⁹.

We request the government provide the required financial support to realise this commitment due to our concerns about the impacts on human health that biodiversity loss and land use change are causing. These planetary health boundaries are both considered outside of the safe operating zone for humanity³⁰ and warrant urgent attention.

Loss of biodiversity disrupts ecological functioning and undermines the ability of ecosystems to support humankind. In Australia, our ecosystems are in a perilous state with well founded research indicating that nineteen of our iconic ecosystems are collapsing, including the Murray Darling Basin, the Great Barrier Reef and the kelp forests of the Great Southern Reef.³¹

This has serious implications for our health with negative impacts on our food security, our water security and the capacity for ecosystems to protect us from infectious diseases.³² Habitat destruction is linked with viral spillover, meaning humans are at increased risk of contracting serious infections e.g. Hendra virus³³ and Japanese encephalitis virus³⁴.

Intact ecosystems protect us from pandemics³⁵ and considering the recent experience of the Covid-19 pandemic the importance of adequate financial resources to support biodiversity cannot be overstated.

DEA further recommends supporting First Nations led environmental protection programmes to improve resilience to the compounding threats of climate change, loss of biodiversity and habitat destruction, recognising First Nations connection to country enables a deep understanding of how our land and seas can be made healthy for the benefit of our ecosystems, our First Nations peoples and non-indigenous Australians³⁶.

We request ongoing budgetary support for Australia’s Indigenous Protected Areas Program³⁷ to enable it to continue its effective and healing programmes across our country.

4. Support policies and actions that increase local resilience to climate change and protect health ie. greener cities, cool refuges and rooms, active transport infrastructure, local energy resilience and fire safety.

All communities in Australia are at risk from the threats of climate change and it is important that we provide local solutions to increase resilience and protect health.

There are many things that our government could do that would help our people in the face of heatwaves, bushfires, extreme weather events and their impacts on local infrastructure. Many of these climate solutions are low-carbon alternatives³⁸ and thus represent opportunities for adaptation and mitigation and would empower our communities to be part of the solution to the climate crisis.

DEA requests the government work with state and local governments to support active transport infrastructure, local energy resilience and fire safety.

DEA in particular recommends support for local communities and governments to combat the effects of extreme heat noting its significant impact on human health:-

- Create greener cities. Green cover and open spaces reduce urban heat³⁹ and decrease the impact of heat and heatwaves on physical and mental health. Heatwaves are Australia's most deadly natural disaster, increasing our risk of heat related illness, heart attacks, strokes, renal disease and mental health exacerbations⁴⁰ so we can improve public safety by increasing green cover.
- Establish cool refuges. For many people, cooling their home is either unaffordable or unobtainable. This is especially true for renters who are not able to alter their homes. The government has a responsibility to provide safe, free and accessible places that offer a cool haven during heat waves and we recommend a nationwide heat refuge strategy. There are multiple overseas ^{41 42} and local government ^{43 44 45} examples to draw upon.
- Cool rooms. For those who find accessing cool refuges difficult, either through distance, lack of public transportation, or disability, homes can be retrofitted to create a cool room. Geelong's Climate Safe Room project⁴⁶ provided funding to retrofit homes for vulnerable residents and could be expanded to support more people across the country.

Conclusion

In summary, DEA requests that the budget supports strategies that protect our nation's health from the impacts of climate change. We are seeing these impacts now with heat waves, floods, cyclones, extreme weather events and fires impacting on our patients health and our health systems capacity to provide quality care.

DEA commends the government's National Health and Climate Strategy and calls for the necessary funding required to enable its implementation. We support a just transition to renewable energy citing the extreme health harms of global heating and pollution from fossil fuel combustion

and use. We recommend support for biodiversity in recognition of the health harms of biodiversity loss and habitat destruction. Lastly, we request support for actions that improve local resilience to climate change in order to protect the health of our communities.

DEA thanks the Department of Treasury for the opportunity to put forward our pre-budget submission and trusts that it will be given due proper consideration.

Endnotes

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- ⁶ IPCC AR6 Synthesis Report 2023 Summary for Policy Makers
https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf
- ⁷ Producing and burning fossil fuels creates air pollution that harms our health and generates toxic emissions that drive climate change. Harvard TH Chan, School of Public Health <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/subtopics/fossil-fuels-health/>
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- ¹⁰ Ecosystem carbon sequestration service supports the Sustainable Development Goals progress
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- ¹⁵ Why losing Australia's biodiversity matters for human health: insights from the latest State of the Environment assessment
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- ¹⁷ IPCC 6th Assessment Report Impacts Adaptation and Vulnerability. Ch 7 Health, wellbeing and the changing structures of communities
<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-7/>
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- ³⁵ Australia State of the Environment Report 2021 <https://soe.dcceew.gov.au/biodiversity/outlook-and-impacts#outlook>
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- ³⁷ Australia's Indigenous Protected Areas Program <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/land/publications/australia-indigenous-protected-area-program#:~:text=The%20IPA%20program%20supports%20First%20Nations%20people%20to%20lead%20biodiversity.ownership%20or%20control%20of%20land.>
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