



## Climate Council of Australia

### **Response to Draft Propositions from the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements from the Climate Council and supporters**

**Submission to:** The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

*September 2020*

#### **Response to Draft Propositions of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements from the Climate Council and supporters**

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Climate Council and our supporters in response to the release of the Draft Propositions by the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (Bushfire Royal Commission) on 4th September, 2020.

The Climate Council welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback and would like to thank members of this Royal Commission for their tireless work to date. The Climate Council represents over 500,000 supporters, many of whom want to ensure their voices are heard in the Draft Propositions feedback process, which is why we have made this an open letter.

Whilst we are supportive of many of the Draft Propositions put forward, such as the need for better national coordination, improved warning systems and investment in research, we respectfully request that the role of climate change in fuelling the 2019-20 bushfires and the importance of action is a central pillar of the Royal Commission recommendations.

**The final report of the Bushfire Royal Commission must clearly acknowledge the role of climate change in fuelling the 2019-20 bushfires.**

Irrefutable empirical scientific data, reinforced by observations of veteran firefighters and people on the land, confirm that a warming climate is resulting in worsening and more frequent extreme weather events such as the 2019-20 bushfires. Bushfire conditions are now more dangerous than in the past, and the risk to life, property and the environment has increased. Fire seasons have lengthened across Australia, and the number of days of Very High Fire Danger and above have increased, reducing windows of opportunity for land managers and fire services to conduct hazard reduction burns. Longer fire seasons now overlap with those in the Northern Hemisphere, reducing the ability of fire and emergency services to share resources nationally and internationally during major emergencies.

Extremely hot, dry conditions, underpinned by years of reduced rainfall and severe drought, set the scene for the unprecedented fires and losses during the 2019-20 summer. Failure to rapidly and deeply bring down greenhouse gas emissions is causing grave loss of life and property, severely damaging the economy and decimating the natural environment.

The nearest allusion to this reality in the Draft Propositions is Proposition A1:

***A1. Natural disaster risk is growing across Australia due to intensifying natural hazards under a changing global climate and increasing exposure and vulnerability of individuals and communities.***

This does not make clear the influence of climate change on the unprecedented Black Summer fires. The Commonwealth Letters Patent is even more forthright than the Draft Propositions in its statement “the changing global climate carries risks for the Australian environment and Australia’s ability to prevent, mitigate and respond to bushfires and other natural disasters.”<sup>1</sup> Every expert bushfire review this year so far has highlighted the climate change threat, and yet the Draft Propositions do not match the level of clarity and concern reflected across other bushfire inquiries. It is the Royal Commission’s duty to “make any recommendations arising out of your inquiry that you consider appropriate, including recommendations about any policy, legislative, administrative or structural reforms”<sup>2</sup>, a task only possible by clearly identifying the cause of the 2019-20 bushfires.

The Royal Commission has been tasked to consider Australia’s arrangements for improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions, as well as what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters. As a result of this mandate, we recommend that the final report clearly acknowledge that the 2019-20 bushfires were devastating and the worst in history for some jurisdictions, e.g. New South Wales, due to unprecedented extreme weather and cascading events including drought, heatwaves, dry thunderstorms, multiple days of Severe, Extreme and Catastrophic fire danger, and pyroconvective fires. Climate change was the driver of the record-breaking extreme weather conditions that led to the catastrophic

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<sup>1</sup> 20 February, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Commonwealth Letters Patent, 20 February, 2020.

bushfires.

Further, while a number of Draft Propositions allude to a changing global climate, none identify the cause of this change. This stands in contrast to the New South Wales bushfire review which noted “some of the factors that contributed to the 2019-20 [bushfire] season can be linked with changes in climate associated with increased greenhouse gas emissions.”<sup>3</sup>

We recommend that the final Royal Commission report provide this clarity by stating that rising greenhouse gas emissions will lead to worsening extreme weather such as serious bushfire conditions. It is the task of the Royal Commission to ensure Australia is better prepared for bushfires in the future, and this is only possible through an understanding that climate change is a key driver of extreme weather. Failing to acknowledge the key driver of Australia’s worsening fires, climate change, would be an oversight by this Royal Commission to accurately understand the nature and scale of the bushfire threat and therefore the appropriate mitigation and adaptation measures needed to address it.

**The final report of the Bushfire Royal Commission must recommend strong climate mitigation measures for all levels of government.**

The Royal Commission is required to consider “what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts of natural disaster” and whilst some of the Draft Propositions reference the need for adaptation measures in the face of a changing global climate, none reference the need for mitigation. That is, working to deeply and rapidly reduce emissions and tackle climate change.

It is well within the mandate of this Royal Commission to make these recommendations. The Commonwealth Letters Patent states that the Royal Commission is required and authorised to inquire into “Australia’s arrangements for improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions, what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters...” and to “make any recommendations arising out of your inquiry that you consider appropriate, including recommendations about any policy, legislative, administrative or structural reforms.”<sup>4</sup>

We need to tackle the root cause of the problem – climate change. We have the solutions at our disposal and Australia has enormous potential to benefit greatly from transitioning to renewable energy and a net zero emissions pathway, sooner rather than later. Indeed many States and Territories deeply affected by worsening bushfire conditions, such as South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory, are transitioning to renewables and storage technologies and other climate solutions.

Importantly, as a major emitter in our own right and one of the world’s largest exporters of fossil fuels, Australia can have a significant influence on global efforts to tackle climate change. By

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<sup>3</sup> *Final Report of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry*, NSW Bushfire Inquiry (2020), 78.

<sup>4</sup> 20 February, 2020.

taking action at home and supporting the global energy transition through the export of clean energy, we can help ensure a safer future for Australians and communities everywhere. The alternative - further denial and delay in taking action on emissions guarantees a worsening of disasters into the future. Taking action now will provide a chance to stabilise, then eventually reduce disaster risks for future generations.

We ask that the final Royal Commission report recommend that all levels of government adopt strong climate policies to rapidly and deeply reduce our emissions. Australia must accelerate and increase measures to tackle climate change. Federal Government, State and Territory Governments, must continue to step up to strengthen their climate policies and local government must continue to meet and exceed emission reduction goals and renewable energy targets. Because of our failure to act, past emissions have already locked in considerable climate impacts, and all levels of government will play a critical role in building community preparedness and resilience to cope with them.

**The final report of the Bushfire Royal Commission must ensure accountability and urgency in implementing the findings of the Royal Commission.**

The Royal Commission's Interim Observations reflected that many previous natural disaster inquiries have made recommendations that have not yet been adequately implemented.<sup>5</sup> The Draft Propositions that seek to establish an accountability mechanism for the implementation of these recommendations are a positive attempt to prevent this. In particular:

***B20. The Australian government should establish an accountability mechanism or process to promote continuous improvement and best practice in natural disaster arrangements...***

We support this Draft Proposition and its associated metrics. It is essential that the government is swift and comprehensive in their implementation to protect Australians from the impacts of extreme weather in the future.

**Conclusion**

The outcomes of this Royal Commission will have profound implications for emergency and disaster response in this country into the future, as well as Australians' understanding of climate change and the need to tackle its causes. Australians are relying on your findings to usher in a new era in how we prepare for, respond to and recover from destructive extreme weather events. This change cannot come without acknowledging that climate change is here, now, and that we must take action to stall it. Adaptation will not be enough to protect lives and property without urgent mitigation.

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<sup>5</sup> *Interim Observations - 31 August 2020*, Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (2020), 10.

I ask that you address the gaps we have identified in the Draft Propositions to ensure this Royal Commission holds every level of government to account on facing the climate crisis.

Thank you for taking the time to attend to this letter and I look forward to the final report.

Sincerely,

**Amanda Mckenzie**  
CEO - Climate Council

**Climate Council community members:**