

ALGA General Assembly Roundtable

26 June 2025

The Hon Matt Kean – Chair, Climate Change Authority

Check against delivery



I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which I am joining you from today, and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.

I'm sorry that I can't be with you in person today. I've got a month-old baby at home – I'm sure all the parents in the room will be able to relate to the juggle we do.

Let me acknowledge Tony Mahar, who has been a great partner in both his current and former roles, always striving to ensure we act on climate change in ways that are responsible, meaningful and just. Of course, thank you to the Australian Local Government Association for the invitation to join you, and to representatives across local government for making time to join the conversation at this year's General Assembly.

I am well aware of the burden carried by local councils as climate change inflicts more havoc on the communities you represent. Every time one of these disasters hits, local mayors and councillors are quick to step into the breach and provide local leadership rallying resources to guide communities through the emergency and mapping out the long and difficult road to recovery. Your capacity and willingness to step up to these challenges is inspiring, but we must acknowledge that it takes a toll.

Unfortunately, we are seeing extreme weather events that were supposed to happen once-in-100 years, now occur with a distressing frequency. So far this year, heavy floods have hit northern and western Queensland, as well as Taree and large tracts of the New South Wales mid north coast. At the same time, parts of Victoria and South Australia are battling a savage drought.

These events remind us of the need to collaborate on enduring solutions that improve Australia's resilience and make a difference for the people you serve. It starts by being honest about climate change, and what it will take to prevent escalating warming beyond what any of our communities can cope with.

2024 was the hottest on record, breaking a record only set one year prior. It was also the first time that global average temperatures spiked above 1.5 degrees – the threshold Australia and other countries have committed to work to avoid under the Paris Agreement. That doesn't mean the fight is over to limit warming, that 1.5 degree temperature goal refers to consistent warming over an extended period of time. But it underlines the urgency of action to prevent escalating warming becoming the norm.

The Climate Change Authority's mandate includes giving independent, robust advice to the Commonwealth on how Australia can meet its emissions reduction goals, and set the nation up to thrive as a prosperous and resilient net zero economy. One of the clearest insights from our work in recent years is that the path to reducing emissions runs through Australia's electricity system.

Not only is it our largest source of direct emissions; clean, abundant electricity can unlock deep reductions in emissions right across the Australian economy. Decarbonising our energy grid requires us to turbocharge investment in renewable energy infrastructure which harnesses Australia's abundant natural resources. Importantly, it gets us ahead of the closure of unreliable coal-fired power stations, and has consistently been identified by experts as the lowest-cost option for delivering new energy infrastructure now.

In the Authority's work and reports, we continue to identify ways to remove barriers to investment and turbocharge the roll out of new generation, storage and transmission infrastructure. In fact, we had a report out just last week called *Unlocking Australia's clean energy potential*, which set out policy recommendations to:

- expand and extend investment in new renewable capacity
- maintain system security and reliability
- speed up connections of new generation to the grid, and
- unlock generation and storage at the local level.

I encourage you to take a look – and the Authority welcomes an ongoing dialogue with local government, among other stakeholders, on these important issues.

In all our work, the Authority is very conscious that the overhaul of Australia's grid needs to yield meaningful benefits for people, particularly in communities on the frontlines of change. Regional communities – many of those represented here today – have a legitimate expectation that the energy transition will deliver things that matter locally – like good jobs, better services, infrastructure that works.

Of course, they also want to share in the benefits of lower emissions and more affordable, reliable energy, which will be seen around Australia as this transition gains momentum. I am confident the growing wave of investment in renewable energy assets can deliver more prosperity and help address community priorities, if we channel this to the right places, with the right processes along the way. Building and maintaining social licence demands that we strike the right balance between proper community consultation and giving clear assessment pathways to proponents. It also means that the benefits of new income streams for farmers hosting renewable energy assets, re-investment into community infrastructure and opportunities for First Nations have to be tangible and lasting.

So my plea to everyone involved in this year's Assembly is to continue to help us find and showcase models of engagement and benefit sharing that work.

Now, there's another challenge we will need to work through together, as we confront the consequences of a changing planet. That is adapting to the growing risk of extreme weather disasters around Australia to keep our homes and communities safe.

The Authority explored the issue in a report released just last week – *Home safe: National leadership in adapting to a changing climate*. It chronicles the economic and financial impacts – none of which would come as a surprise to local governments, who've had to count them too often recently.

The Insurance Council of Australia estimates extreme weather events currently cost Australians around \$4 billion a year. That could more than double by 2050 without action. Households are under stress from escalating insurance premiums; in some parts of Australia, they have become prohibitively expensive or completely unavailable.

The Commonwealth already spends an average of \$1.6 billion a year on disaster recovery – and that doesn't account for the bill that lands on the desk of cash-strapped councils. By 2030, more than three million properties face exposure to some degree of riverine flooding and by 2050, this risk is projected to reduce property values by some \$170 billion nationally. But these are just the measurable costs, as high and daunting as they are.

What's costing communities in other ways is the trauma, dislocation and impacts on health and wellbeing from exposure to these extreme weather events. If you lose a home, you lose your place of sanctuary, sense of belonging, and sometimes, a lifetime of memories. And that's before we get to the daily stress of living with hotter days, urban heat, rising sea levels or the degradation of precious farming land.

One lesson from the recent spate of disasters caused by a changing climate is how quickly the landscape around us has shifted. When Cyclone Alfred hovered off the coast of Queensland, threatening a stretch from the Tweed to the Sunshine Coast, more than four million people were placed on alert. Four years earlier, Cyclone Seroja barrelled across the Western Australian coastline near Kalbarri as a Category 3 storm.

What these cyclones had in common was how far south they were as they hovered off the coast. In fact, they were well beyond the regions where the nation's construction codes currently require buildings to withstand cyclonic-strength winds. These risks are rising, but there are practical things we can do now to improve our resilience.

Authorities will need to review and tighten building codes. Parts of coastal Queensland and Western Australia not currently covered by cyclone construction standards may need to be, and soon. But we shouldn't stop there.

For example, poor energy efficiency means that many Australian homes are unable to maintain comfortable and safe temperatures during both heatwaves and cold snaps. To meet the shifting requirements of a changing climate, adaptation will need to become business-as-usual. It will require national leadership – and we recognise local government will need clear guidance and financial support.

Australia needs a coordinated and comprehensive strategy to ensure everyone is rowing in the same direction. The Commonwealth is already developing Australia's first National Adaptation Plan. Adaptation efforts need to be fit-for-purpose, aligned across different spheres of government and appropriately resourced. In our Home safe report, the Authority has put our hand up to play a role in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the Plan once it's in operation.

The United Kingdom and New Zealand have tasked their independent climate bodies to report on progress on delivering each country's national adaptation plan or program every 2 years. With appropriate resourcing, the Authority that I'm honoured to lead would be well-placed to assume this role within a strengthened national adaptation framework.

Our report also makes the case for a range of other actions which can help communities adapt to climate risks.

Urban and land use planning reforms, for example, can help prevent construction in high-risk areas and reduce exposure of homes to climate-related hazards. There's also a strong argument for aligning the National Construction Code with projected climate impacts. We should also empower Australians to make informed choices about reducing climate risks by giving them more information and resources. It'll help them decide where to build or buy a new home, whether to rebuild or relocate after a climate-related disaster, and what steps to take to reduce the physical climate risks of their home.

Given the home is the biggest financial investment that most Australians will ever make, people deserve to have that information at their fingertips.

We know adaptation makes sense – not just from a community perspective, but an economic and financial one too. Research by the CSIRO found that every dollar invested in adaptation pays for itself 10 times over in avoided disaster recovery costs. It's an investment well worth making – and it should motivate all levels of government, business and the community to act swiftly in embedding adaptation in everything we do.

Too many Australians have suffered in recent years from the fact that our climate is changing rapidly. Even if we prevail in our efforts to achieve net zero, some climate impacts are already locked in and will escalate during our lifetimes. Local government will have a crucial role to play in helping us think through the challenges and design solutions that work to protect communities around the country.

I look forward to continuing to work with you on the journey.