

Climate Resilience Emergency Forum

31 October 2025

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Chair - Climate Change Authority

Keynote speech

Check against delivery

May I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners, the Darug and GuriNgal people of the Eora nation, on whose land we meet. I'd like to pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

I'd like to thank Zali Steggall for arranging today's climate resilience emergency forum, and for assembling so many fine speakers.

I'll be discussing the potential role of government action and where the Climate Change Authority fits in – now and in the future.

Before I get to that, though, I would like to draw attention to two elements of the National Climate Risk Assessment that may not have got as much attention as they deserve.

Mind you, the risk assessment and its partner report, the National Adaptation Plan, contained so many important and under-reported matters. It's hardly surprising that even seasoned climate watchers failed to absorb all of them in the first pass...

Since I opened with a nod towards our Traditional Owners, it's fitting that we take a look at what the Risk Assessment tells us about the threats posed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders...

It's pointed and appropriate of the eight "systems" of the report detailing nationally significant climate challenges, the first cover the risks to First Nations peoples.

That's no accident, I'm told ... Many First Nations communities are starting with clear vulnerabilities.

These range from poor health and housing outcomes, to erratic energy and water supplies – and all that before the weather gets wilder in a hotter world...

For people living in more tropical regions, a hotter, more humid climate is going to mean more than just an inconvenience.

Yes, the heat can be moderated by air-conditioning, or packing an ice-making machine to your ute, as Government and other workers already do in areas such as the Kakadu National Park.

Such cooling options aren't always available in remote communities.

In the future, what might seem a luxury now will become an absolute necessity as the temperature and humidity rise – as scientists expect.

It's not an exaggeration to say that maintaining connection to cCountry in an altered climate won't be easy for many.

Just ask those living on some of the Torres Strait islands that have had to relocate because of rising sea levels.

For some, such as on Saibai island, it's the risk of inundation of homes or other property. For others, saltwater intrusions affect crops and threaten drinking water supplies...

It may sound glib, but "dispossession by thermometer" could be the reality if we – and other nations – don't knuckle down to cut greenhouse gas emissions and curb global heating...

One further point... you may have read the Risk Assessment's First Pass report released more than a year before the formal inaugural report last month.

That First Pass initially identified 56 nationally significant climate risks. By the final report that risk tally had increased by seven to 63.

All of those extra seven risks related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

By the way, when we think of the difficulties those Australians living in our tropical zone will face in a warming world, we shouldn't overlook people to our nation's north living even closer to the Equator.

Some of you here might have had the privilege to attend one of the climate presentations of former US Vice President Al Gore, earlier this month when he visited Sydney.

Amidst the compelling – and concerning – slides Al Gore powers through are two that stood out for me.

One entitled "Earth's Zone, showed the "uninhabitable current" areas scattered across parts of Africa that include parts of the Sahara...

The next slide, taken from a report published in a US peer-reviewed journal in 2020, projected what would be "uninhabitable" by 2070.

Alarmingly, those areas unsuited to human existence now spans most of a large band along the equator. Most of the northwest of South America would fit that unfortunate condition, likewise most of northern Africa and the Middle, large parts of India, and most of Southeast Asia – including Indonesia.

Most of northern Australia west from Cape York, the Top End, and the Pilbara would also fall into the "uninhabitable zone".

The defence challenges this widespread calamity would bring to Australia are sobering enough.

But you can start to appreciate the sheer extent of the intolerable conditions billions of people would face if we don't halt climate change.

So, humidity and heat, the brunt of which will be borne by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, was one of the resilience challenges I wanted to highlight.

The other is water security in a hotter world. As we all know, Australia starts with a highly variable rainfall record, so more volatility will not make life for farmers and for our water managers any easier.

Our ecosystems, too, will likely face increased strains – and many of them don't start from a healthy state either...

Notably, the National Adaptation Plan already rates the present risks to water security as "high". Some regions, it notes, already experience drought and water security challenges – as parts of South Australia and Victoria are enduring right now...

By the Plan's projections that look at a world warming by 2 degrees and then 3 degrees, the risks to water security would rise to "very high" by 2050 and "very high to severe by 2090".

Reduced rainfall and runoff across southern Australia, increasing aridity and more severe droughts are among the threats. Groundwater will have less recharge, there would be lower water allocations, and there would be increasing competition for water.

Unhelpfully, water quality, too, would be at risk.

As comprehensive as the Risk Assessment and Adaptation Plan were, I should note that they contained knowledge gains. It's important that we continue to fund the science that can help fill them.

I mention that because a new paper out this week looking at historical drought trends and what they tell us about the droughts of the future might look like.

One of the report's authors, Andy Pitman from the University of NSW, makes the subtle but important point that in a warmer world, the farmer will need more rainfall than he or she used to, for the same crop yield.

Likewise, a dam operator won't get the same usable water from rainfall or run-off.

It seems hotter temperatures place an increased evaporative demand on available water. The atmosphere becomes thirstier...

So, what can governments – and the Climate Change Authority – do about these issues?

Obviously a first priority is to cut greenhouse gas emissions so we're not making the problem worse.

It's why the Authority recommended Australia cut those emissions by 62 to 70 percent compared with 2005 levels...advice that the government accepted.

In per capita terms, the reduction is about 76-81 percent over those two decades.

Remember, we start from the position of being among the world's biggest polluters on a per-capita basis, and achieving this target would bring us very much closer to other wealthy nations.

Of course, every tonne emitted is one too many, and so we need to press on to net zero emissions as soon as we can ... and to prod other nations to do so.

Hosting COP31 next year would be the ideal platform to do that prodding...but also of course, to focus Australians throughout an entire year in the run-up to the event on climate matters.

The Authority stands ready to help lead those efforts.

We would look at promoting the resilience of the Australia's emissions targets themselves.

Most Aussies accept the climate science as they accept the science that enables the great majority of planes take off and land safely, or that diagnoses an illness and prescribes appropriate medicine to deal with it....

As for helping communities around Australia prepare for and adapt to the coming impacts of warming world, the Authority also stands poised to help where we can.

We have dedicated, talented and highly motivated staff who work in a range of fields, from the challenges of the energy transition to advancing energy efficiency and building up the resilience of the built-environment.

Indeed, a report earlier this year, entitled "Home Safe", looked at the perils posed to Australian households from climate change. It was a timely report following soon after Cyclone Alfred had crossed the Queensland coast further south than usual.

We noted that the cyclone construction codes mandating stronger buildings only extend down the coast to about Bundaberg...or more than 300 kilometres north of Brisbane.

Given that those codes were basically drawn up decades ago, in the wake of Cyclone Tracy's devastation of Darwin in 1974, we think there's a strong case to review how well they've worked so far ...

It's probably also worth examining whether it's time the codes extended southwards to include the fast-growing populations of Brisbane, the Gold and Sunshine coasts, and northern NSW.

While the Authority has undertaken research and made recommendations about adaptation and resilience, it's up to the Government to decide whether the Authority should take a stronger role in the climate adaptation space, as we are mandated to do in the mitigation one.

I should note that such an extension of our role was one of the recommendations of the Productivity Commission's draft report on the low-carbon economy, released earlier this year: Interim report - Investing in cheaper, cleaner energy and the net zero transformation | Productivity Commission

As chair of the Authority, I would be honoured to have our remit expanded... but we would also stand ready to assist any other agency granted that role.

After all, we are all going to be in this fight together...

Thanks for listening... and I'd be happy to take your questions...