Minister Garrett – Australia's climate future

Minister acknowledges the Wurundjeri People as the original inhabitants of the land.

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here with you today to talk about Australia's Climate Future.

The Rudd Government has been given a mandate by the people of Australia to make the right decisions to reduce the threat posed by climate change.

We have been given the opportunity of taking action now to ensure that current and future generations remain prosperous and have access to our lifestyle.

And that Australia continues to be known as the "lucky country."

Today I would like to share with you our plans and our enthusiasm for protecting Australia's climate now and into the future.

Bureau's 100 year milestone

2008 has brought with it a few milestones:

- A new Government committed to tackling climate change
- But also the 100 year anniversary of operation of our national meteorological organisation – the Australian Bureau of Meteorology known to most people as the Weather Bureau.

While we all have a day to day relationship with the Bureau – checking in on what the weather is doing at any given moment using their fantastic online radar – what is less known is the significant contribution it has and continues to have to the whole area of climate science.

- Without the Bureau we would not know what we know about global warming in Australia.
- Without the Bureau Australia would not be in a position to make the kinds of changes needed to avert a terrible disaster of humanity's own making.

Though the Bureau's role in climate science may not be well known there can be little doubt that the daily actions of its meteorologists, hydrologist, and oceanographers are very well appreciated by the Australian community.

Routinely they warn the community about life-threatening phenomena – be that severe thunderstorms, bushfires, floods and more recently Tsunami.

Today the Bureau manages, collects and interprets a vast array of observational data taken from a number of satellites, radar, weather balloons, commercial aircraft, and from humble weather stations.

At all hours the Bureau keeps its eye on the nation and beyond – with a geographically distributed observation network and a large group of dedicated staff and volunteers capable of measuring minor climatic changes working around the clock.

Australians have every reason for being proud of the Bureau of Meteorology.

Australia's climate record

Australia is fortunate to have the detailed climate record that it has.

Fortunate is not really the right word to use – it suggests that it happened by chance.

It was the foresight of the framers of the Constitution that laid the basis for the climate record. In what was to become a nation building exercise Meteorology was put on a national footing – with offices in each State and Territory and a set of consistent standards by which to measure and record temperature and rainfall.

From the early days of Federation the Bureau also had the foresight to think in the longer term – recognising that weather forecasting could be improved by taking regular weather observations and developing the kind of climate record that is now the envy of many other nations.

As the record has developed it has provided an important resource to judge just how the climate is changing.

We now have an obligation to share the foresight of our forebears and put in place practical measures to manage and mitigate climate change.

IPCC

When it comes to climate change there are those things of which we are confident:

- Since 1950 there has been a 0.4 to 0.7 C warming with more heatwaves, fewer frosts, more rain in north-west Australia, less rain in southern and eastern Australia, an increase in the intensity of Australian droughts, and a rise in the sea level of 70 mm.

- Climate change is happening right now – every day we hear about reduced water supply and its effect on agriculture.

- While efforts are underway to adapt to these changes today we remain economically vulnerable to substantial economic losses caused by droughts, floods, fire, tropical cyclones and hail.

- This century is certain to be warmer with more intense heatwaves and fires, more frequent floods, landslides, droughts and storm surges, and a reduction in snow cover and frost. Large areas of mainland Australia are likely to have less soil moisture.
- By 2030 the reduction in rain and increased warming will mean that Australia's water security problems will intensify.

- Ongoing coastal development in places such as Cairns and south-east Queensland are projected to exacerbate risks from sea-level rise and increases in the severity and frequency of storms and coastal flooding.

- By 2020 a significant loss of biodiversity is projected to occur in the Queensland Wet Tropics, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, Kakadu, alpine areas, and Antarctica.

- By 2030 risks to major infrastructure will mean that design criteria for extreme events are likely to be exceeded more frequently. We are likely to see failure of flood plain protection and urban sewage systems, increased storm and fire damage, and more heatwaves, causing more deaths and more blackouts.

- With climate change we face a decline in agriculture and forestry over much of southern and eastern Australia.

The climate change challenge

There is no doubt that the extent of the climate change challenge we all face is immense.

The science is in and it says that climate change is real, that it is happening, and it is caused by human activity – particularly our dependence on carbon.

Climate change threatens Australia's costal populations with rising sea levels.

Climate change threatens the viability of our river system – and we are getting an insight into that reality with the crisis currently confronting the Murray Darling Basin.

Climate change threatens the most fundamental relationships we each have on this land – and that ultimately is a challenge for how we relate to each other and how we function as a society.

Bleak as these challenges might sound, they also represent incredible opportunities.

While climate change threatens our economy and our community it also provides for new ideas, new innovation and new ways of thinking.

Australia is blessed with natural clean energy sources, a keen appreciation of science, and the scientists and engineers with the capacity to find solutions and to exploit opportunities.

We all have a vested interest in ensuring that our response to this crisis is successful.

The Rudd Government approach

Today I want to highlight the Rudd Government's approach to tackling climate change as spelt out by my parliamentary counterpart Minister for Climate Change – Penny Wong.

Our climate change policy is built on three pillars: reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions; adapting to climate change that we can't avoid; and helping to shape a global solution.

Reducing emissions

In developing its strategy to achieve deep reductions in emissions, the Government will be mindful of the economic challenges we face.

Measures to reduce emissions will be delivered at least cost, and with greatest potential to drive new growth, create jobs and develop new industries.

Emissions will be reduced by the upcoming emissions trading scheme.

Practical assistance

At the recent election I promised to provide low interest loans for people to make their homes more energy and water efficient.

In the coming months I will be working to progress initiatives such as green loans, energy efficient insulation and cost saving new standards for household appliances.

I will be broadening and extending the Solar Cities concept and making every school in Australia a solar school.

Every bit of assistance is the right step in creating a future not dependent on greenhouse gases.

Climate Adaptation

The second pillar is adapting to climate change that we cannot avoid.

Climate change resulting from human influences is already underway, so we must prepare ourselves for the inevitable changes already built into the climate system.

This will involve far reaching impacts on our economy, human amenity and our environment.

Playing a part in a global solution

The third pillar of the Government's approach to climate change is helping to shape a global solution to this global problem.

This is why the first act of the Rudd Government was to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

Ratifying Kyoto put Australia back on the map. It sent a clear message that Australia is no longer part of the problem on climate change. We are now part of the solution.

This has meant that for the first time we are a full negotiating partner in all key international forums.

We are committed to working towards a post-2012 agreement for addressing climate change that is equitable and effective, and that includes agreement on a long-term global goal for emissions reductions.

This will be a hard and long road; but one that the nation will need to take if we are going to protect the future from further climate change.

Any post-2012 approach needs to secure widespread agreement of countries with diverse interests and entrenched positions. Nevertheless, we are committed to working through these multilateral negotiations toward an effective global agreement.

In working toward that agreement, we understand that the developed world has to lead. Our policies to make substantial cuts to domestic emissions underline that leadership. But simultaneously, we need to adapt to deal with the climate change that is already happening.

Conclusion

There are now things underway to help combat the challenges posed by climate change.

Industry and government have an important role to play in protecting our climate.

Climate change offers new possibilities – new industries, new development, new ways of thinking.

For its efforts the Bureau has emerged at the beginning of this century an accomplished environmental manager able to adapt to the environmental challenges facing Australia.

We have time to act and we are now acting – it will not be easy but if we work together we can each make a big difference.