
Health and Energy Choices: *Position Paper*

The Position Paper outlines the agreed position of the signatory health sector groups in relation to the implications of energy choices on people's health in Australia. An accompanying Background Paper provides an overview of evidence with regard to the risks to human health and wellbeing associated with fossil fuel energy resources as well as their alternatives.



Climate and Health Alliance

Public Health Association of Australia

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Association

National Toxics Network

Australian Medical Students Association

Services for Australian Rural and Remote and Allied Health

Women's Health East

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Women's Health East
Investing in Equality and Wellbeing for Women



AUSTRALIAN
MEDICAL STUDENTS'
ASSOCIATION

Introduction

This Position Paper has been developed by a collaboration of health sector organisations in Australia that are concerned that the health impacts associated with fossil fuel energy projects are not being considered in public policy decision-making.

In particular, the signatories to this Position Paper are concerned about the profound risks to health posed by the expansion of coal mining and export and coal seam gas developments in Australia.

The development of this paper follows the Health Implications of Energy Policy Roundtable held in February 2013, attended by health professionals and health sector representatives, energy sector representatives and community advocates. It reflects a commitment

by participants at that event, and other health sector representatives subsequently, to develop a position paper to outline these shared concerns and offer recommendations to policymakers, industry, the community and the healthcare sector on a way forward.

This Position Paper outlines the agreed position of the signatory health sector groups in relation to the implications of energy choices on people's health in Australia.

A **Background Paper** providing an overview of the evidence of harm to human health and wellbeing associated with the use of fossil fuel energy resources as well as health risks associated with their alternatives, is available from the CAHA website (caha.org.au).

Key Messages

The fossil fuel energy sector in Australia is undergoing massive and rapid expansion which poses risks to the health of Australians and people in other countries whose health is affected by the combustion of fossil fuels exported from Australia.

The mining, processing and burning of fossil fuels for transportation and the production of electricity has significant and under-recognised detrimental effects on human health and well-being related to: the release of localised pollutants; impacts on air, soil and water quality; water and land availability; adverse social impacts; adverse economic impacts; and by contributing to climate change.

Localised pollutants (including particulate matter, toxic gases, chemicals) associated with the exploration and production of energy from fossil fuels contaminate air, soil, and water and contribute to cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological, reproductive, endocrine and kidney disorders, and cancers. The acquisition of land and property for energy projects can bring adverse social impacts such as loss of amenity, displacement, and loss of social capital which impact on physiological and psychological health.

Decisions about energy choices are being made on the basis of inaccurate assessment of costs and benefits, with the economic benefits of fossil fuel projects in Australia frequently overstated, while the externalised costs to health, the environment, climate, and to other industries are overlooked or ignored.

Fossil fuel energy production releases large quantities of greenhouse gases which are the main driver of climate change. Climate change is already increasing global morbidity and mortality, particularly among the populations

of developing nations, but Australia is amongst the most vulnerable of developed countries.

Emissions from current fossil fuel reserves, much less than the emissions from proposed fossil fuel resource extraction, threaten to push the global average temperature increase beyond the two degrees Celsius guardrail agreed to in Copenhagen in 2009.

The current regulatory system for evaluating the environmental and social impacts of energy projects is evidently inadequate to protect health and well-being. Project approval processes are systematically failing to account for health, social, environment, economic and climate impacts.

The health and medical community has a responsibility to contribute to public policy decisions in the energy sector to ensure information regarding the implications for human health from decisions regarding Australia's energy choices is available to decision-makers and industry.

Governments, business and industry, the community, and the health sector all have a responsibility to respond to minimise these threats to health.

The Australian community must urgently reconsider its energy choices. Safer, healthier, affordable and sustainable choices exist **now**. To protect community health and wellbeing, social cohesion, the economy and the environment, these should be substituted for fossil fuel energy resources.

The signatories to this Position Paper are greatly concerned that:

- a. human-induced climate change, particularly global warming, is already causing disease and death in humans, threatens to cause even more damage to human health during the 21st century and threatens the survival of humanity, not to mention many other species
- b. the major contributor to climate change is the burning of fossil fuels
- c. burning more than 20% of the known reserves of fossil fuels will push global warming beyond the 2°C limit agreed internationally
- d. on current trends, that 20% will be burnt in the next 15 years
- e. the mining, transportation and burning of fossil fuels are major current causes of disease and death in humans, separate to the health effects of climate change
- f. Australia is a major producer, exporter and consumer of fossil fuels
- g. the global community is not currently moving with sufficient speed to make the decisions necessary to avoid catastrophic climate change
- h. Australia is not acting with sufficient speed or commitment locally or globally to ensure that catastrophic climate change is avoided

The signatories to this Position Paper are aware that:

- a. the technology currently exists for Australia to produce all its electricity from renewable sources
- b. the global community must move to a carbon free economy in the next 20 years and that decisions to achieve this must be made in the next few years
- c. as the world reduces its greenhouse gas emissions special treatment must be accorded to those nations that do not currently enjoy the standards of living enjoyed in developed countries

The signatories to this Position Paper wish to:

- a. make more readily available information about the deleterious health effects of current energy policies and practices
 - b. make known publicly their own position on climate change, energy and health
 - c. contribute recommendations for action to the public and political debates about these issues
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Actions needed – by governments, industry, the health sector, and community

These recommendations are directed at policy makers, the energy industry, the community, and the health sector.

Decisions about complex societal problems require the engagement of a variety of stakeholders, and the decisions we take as a nation require input and actions from participants from all sections of society.

- Governments must make decisions about energy policy on the basis of scientific evidence and accept the responsibility to act in the public interest.
- Governments should facilitate, and communities should participate in, active citizen engagement in policy development.
- Business and industry accept their obligations to respond to the negative health impacts of fossil fuels and support a transition to renewable energy.

- The health sector must broaden its advocacy to ensure the implications for health are recognised and acknowledged by evidence based policies in the energy sector.
- All sectors, government, industry (including health) and the community should amplify their efforts to reduce their own emissions and support others to do likewise.

The signatories of this paper make the following recommendations for governments, business and industry and the health sector to fast track a cleaner, healthier, energy future for Australia and the world.

The signatories to this Position Paper recommend that:

Federal Government

- Cease all subsidies to the fossil fuel industry including provision of infrastructure
- Increase the renewable energy target to ensure that at least 60 per cent of Australia's electricity comes from renewable sources by 2020.
- Commit to emissions reductions targets consistent with Australia's fair share of the global carbon budget, starting with 50% emissions reductions from 1990 levels by 2020

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- Increase the carbon price to accurately reflect the total costs associated with emitting each tonne of greenhouse gases, including all hidden health and other costs
 - Establish a national enforceable air quality standard for fine particle pollution (PM 2.5) along with effective monitoring and regulation
 - Strengthen the national standard for ground level ozone and monitoring and enforcement regimes
 - Develop enforceable emissions standards for vehicles consistent with international best practice
 - Introduce project loan guarantees to support renewable energy deployment to reduce economic uncertainty and support the expansion of the renewable energy industry
 - Maximise energy efficiency in all government operations to reduce reliance on energy generated from fossil fuels
 - Develop mandatory environmental sustainability accreditation standards for healthcare
 - Reduce reliance on coal and fossil fuelled power by purchasing green energy from renewable sources
 - Facilitate infrastructure and create policy to increase the uptake of renewable powered electric or hybrid vehicles
 - Commit to funding for research to evaluate the health and social impacts of fossil fuels in affected communities in Australia
 - Invest in education and training opportunities to support the development of the workforce required to enable the economy to transition away from fossil fuels and support a just transition for fossil fuel workers to new industries
 - Establish national regulations to require comprehensive environmental, health and social impact assessments for all coal and unconventional gas exploration and mining projects in Australia
 - For impact assessments to include assessment of all pollutants associated with coal and unconventional gas activities including those associated with flaring, intentional venting, fugitive emissions, diesel use, production of mining waste and waste water
 - Commission independent full life cycle and cost-benefit analysis of the long-term environmental impacts of the fossil fuel industry that include clean-up and remediation of contaminated areas, treatment of wastewater, groundwater impacts, landfill capacity for waste products and accurate assessment of the industry's greenhouse gas contribution

State and Territory Governments

- Introduce regulation to ensure comprehensive health impact assessments are undertaken by independent health professionals for all fossil fuel and energy project proposals
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- Work with Federal Government to establish a national enforceable air quality standard for fine particle pollution (PM 2.5) along with effective monitoring and regulation
 - Work with Federal Government to strengthen the national standard for ground level ozone and monitoring and enforcement regimes
 - Work with federal government to develop emissions standards for vehicles consistent with international best practice along with regulations for monitoring and enforcement
 - Maximise energy efficiency in all government operations to reduce energy use
 - Reduce reliance on coal and fossil fuelled power by purchasing green energy from renewable sources
 - Support the public health sector to identify and implement viable clean, renewable energy resources
- which sustainably meet the energy needs of public health care facilities
 - Facilitate infrastructure and create policy to increase the uptake of renewable powered electric or hybrid vehicles
 - Increased monitoring of air quality including ambient air studies for all existing mines and power stations
 - Develop and implement emissions standards for all coal and gas fired power stations to reflect international best practice
 - Ensure all new healthcare infrastructure is built to the level of global best practice in sustainable buildings
 - Support retrofitting of existing government owned health sector infrastructure to minimise emissions.
 - Support the federal government in commissioning full life cycle and cost-benefit analysis of the long-term environmental impacts of the fossil fuel industry (see above)
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Industry and Business

- Invest in renewable energy technologies and businesses
 - Reduce reliance on coal and fossil fuelled power by purchasing green energy from renewable sources and renewable powered electric or hybrid vehicles
 - Install renewable energy systems e.g. solar panels and wind turbines to reduce the negative health impacts of fossil fuels
- Advocate for policies to promote the expansion of renewable energy
 - Adopt operational health and safety standards that protect community and population health from the known harmful impacts of fossil fuel energy on health
 - Maximise energy efficiency in all operations to reduce reliance on energy generated from fossil fuels
 - Divest from fossil fuel investments
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Health Sector

- Invest in renewable energy technologies
- Reduce reliance on coal and fossil fuel energy by purchasing energy from renewable sources and using renewable powered electric or hybrid vehicles
- Install renewable energy systems e.g. solar panels and wind turbines to produce zero emissions and healthy energy
- Advocate for policies to promote renewable energy in the health sector and more broadly
- Respond to the scientific evidence of harm to human health and the environment from fossil fuel energy and transport and advocate for policy to reduce risks to health from energy systems
- Maximise energy efficiency in all operations to reduce reliance on energy generated from fossil fuels
- Divest from any investments in fossil fuels, including through banking and superannuation portfolios

Community

- Switch to renewable energy technologies as much as possible i.e. install solar hot water and photovoltaic panels on homes and businesses
- Advocate for regulations to prevent harm to health from energy systems
- Advocate for policies to support renewable energy
- Actively divest from any investments in fossil fuels
- Encourage governments to invest in education and training opportunities to support the development of the workforce required to enable the economy to transition away from fossil fuels and to support a just transition for fossil fuel workers to new industries

