



Friends of the Earth Australia

Introduction

In response to the economic impacts of the outbreak of the Coronavirus/ Covid-19, state and federal governments are now announcing rolling, large-scale stimulus packages to keep the economy afloat. These already total billions of dollars and are likely to be ongoing.

This is both a threat and an opportunity for the future of the economy, the climate and ecosystems at a time of overlapping crises.

Will we see the Morrison government attempt to force through subsidies for new coal mines and fossil fuel generators, bailouts of large corporations and guarantees for executive pay while regular people struggle to pay rent and emissions continue to rise?

Or will we take this opportunity to transform the economic system to get the climate crisis under control, and ensure the safety and health of people?

Both the Covid-19 outbreak and this summer's bushfire disaster have confirmed that society and the economy depend first and foremost on the health, wellbeing and safety of the community and nature. Many regional communities are trying to rebuild their lives in the fallout of the bushfires, while now responding to Covid-19.

Free market capitalism cannot solve these immediate and long-term threats and has failed both people and the planet.

Our goal must be to use the massive investment of public funds to start to position our economy to be fit for purpose for the reality of climate change. Simply locking us further into 'business as usual' will only put off the changes we need to make, or lock us into bad investments that make the climate crisis worse.

While we focus on the immediate health and economic threats posed by the COVID-19 outbreak we need to remember we are already in the middle of an unplanned transition in our economy due to the forces of economic globalisation and technological changes to the energy system. Because it is unplanned, it is unjust. At the national level, there is wage stagnation and an industrial relations system which works against the interests of workers. Now hundreds of thousands of Australians have lost their incomes. Many aging coal-fired power stations are nearing the end of their lives and the native forests sector is clearly unsustainable and on the verge of collapse. The economy is undergoing a market-driven

transformation and many of these changes are bad for blue collar workers, for instance, as was shown by the closure of the Australian car industry.

Based on principles of justice, solidarity, resilience and care and action¹, we have set out our initial view of what a short-term economic rescue package should include to act on climate change while protecting people whose livelihoods are being disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Covid-19 stimulus package focussed on climate must aim to secure good jobs for people, and guarantee people's access to essential services. Alongside implementation of a universal basic income and a jobs guarantee, we propose a series of initiatives that will provide immediate employment in workplaces that can be managed to keep the risk of infection low (ie work that can be done remotely, and work that will occur outdoors, or in small groups, etc).

These are set out across multiple sectors or themes, covering energy, cities and transport, agriculture, waste, rivers, forests and the natural world, waste, housing and welfare,

We have focussed largely on the state of Victoria, as well as measures that can be taken by the federal government. We also propose some more systemic changes that would steer our economy to a more sustainable footing.

Rebuilding public infrastructure

The dominance of neoliberalism over the last few decades has been a disaster for people and the environment. One practical example of this is highlighted by the fact that our public infrastructure has been systematically defunded and dismantled by successive governments. Now we need to rebuild the public service and other institutions that work for the public good.

It is essential that we bail out people, not corporations. Workers who are losing their jobs should be the focus of all stimulus packages, not corporations. There should be no bailouts for the airline industry and other industries that have recklessly mismanaged their budgets by fattening the pockets of their CEOs. Where bailouts are sought, public ownership should be prioritised. Direct payments to workers must take priority over payments to corporations.

¹Friends of the Earth Australia statement on the Coronavirus/ COVID-19, March 26 2020, https://www.foe.org.au/covid19_response

Energy

The current energy system's dependence on burning fossil fuels is Australia's top contributor to increasing greenhouse gas emissions and is driving global warming. Public money should be directed to renewable energy projects and energy storage, including community-owned and cooperatively run wind, solar and energy efficiency projects that create opportunities for local employment, strengthen community incomes, and reduce electricity costs. This should include the following measures:

National:

- Fast-track the identification of Renewable Energy Zones, where new projects will be supported and have access to suitable grid connections.
- Invest in transmission infrastructure to reshape the energy system. Energy grid constraints are a real block to the rapid development of renewables in many parts of the country.
- Increase funding for the Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) and Australian Renewable Energy Agency, and expand the CEFC's purpose to include offshore wind.
- Create a national map of offshore wind energy resources in state and commonwealth waters to strategically plan out development of the sector.
- Fast track the site selection for pumped hydro projects. These projects can deliver investment and employment to regional centres. For instance, a \$700 mil pumped hydro project looks set to proceed in Kidston, QLD and could create 500 jobs. It would add 250MW of renewable energy to the grid and would support jobs in more industries in Townsville and other centres.

Victoria:

- Rollout the installation of 10kwh rooftop solar and battery systems at every rural fire station, community hall, evacuation centre, health service, school and library to guarantee affordable access to energy at essential community buildings for years to come.
- Invest in 'no regrets' energy efficiency upgrades such as lighting, insulation and solar hot water systems. These could be rolled out by local governments or cooperatives such as Earthworker to create jobs locally.
- Kick off the second round of renewable energy auctions under the Victorian Renewable Energy Target (VRET) to fund the construction of new wind and solar projects. With the state government soon to gain the powers needed to expedite the rollout of transmission infrastructure, now is the time for the renewable energy sector to get to work planning and building new installations.
- Directly fund the construction of mid-scale community owned renewable energy projects such as wind and solar farms, micro-hydro and energy storage in every local council area in regional Victoria.
- Fund the rollout of cooperative, not-for-profit energy retailer CoPower to ensure people can access affordable electricity prices.

Cities and Transport

With greatly reduced traffic on roads and public transport, this is a good opportunity to make smart interventions in building sustainable cities. The transport sector is the second largest and fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions, and a key leverage point to reduce emissions. Public transport is an essential service key to making cities more accessible and liveable. Most of these measures can be rolled out by state governments but would be bolstered by federal spending:

- Boost funds to construct and maintain walking and cycling paths and immediately fund all cycle paths with development approval. Walking and riding is a safe and healthy option for people to access essential services.
- Begin preparatory work for Melbourne Metro 2 which will unlock key hubs, create jobs and increase capacity across the Melbourne rail network.
- Build Water Sensitive Urban Design projects to mitigate increased flood risk at vulnerable train lines, tram lines, bus routes, public parks, walking and cycling paths.
- Pilot projects for “cool pavements” on freeways in the urban core to reduce the urban heat island effect.
- Investigate and support creation of urban forests and food growing.
- Put disability accessibility at the heart of all transport infrastructure, upgrade tram lines and continue the rollout of modernised E-class trams.
- Stimulate the manufacturing of electric buses that will revamp local manufacturing jobs.
- Upgrade the bus network by increasing bus services along major and popular transport routes with ‘turn up and go’ frequencies, as well as identify and service hubs where there are no alternative public transport options. This will unlock potential for people to easily get to work or study and participate in and contribute more to society.
- Bus stops should be converted to high quality, accessible and comfortable bus shelters.
- Install electric vehicle recharging stations in more areas, both metropolitan and regional, for public and private transport. These can be integrated into the urban fabric in innovative ways, eg. as part of street light upgrades.
- Power all new transport infrastructure -- trains, trams, buses, and electric vehicle charging stations -- with renewable energy to lock-in emissions reductions and create regional jobs.
- Design and build ten-star rated public and community housing projects. Conduct post occupancy analysis on building performance on public health and utility bills.

Forests, Rivers, and the Natural World

The natural world that our lives depend on is in crisis, with biodiversity declining globally and extinctions rising. This is heightened by the impacts of climate change, which is causing significant damage to vital landscapes, and directly altering sensitive ecosystems. Australia's forests, rivers and other natural systems are also being damaged by extractive industries, which have been designed for profit rather than resilience and sustainability. With the Covid-19 crisis having an immediate impact on tourism and people's access to natural landscapes, putting money into conservation measures, restoring ecosystems and establishing public good infrastructure like walking trails would help protect biodiversity into the future and improve amenity for the public.

National:

- Catchment Management Authorities know where trees need to be planted and can readily accept funding from the federal government. A massive, broad-based reforestation effort across rural areas could be started almost immediately. The federal government could directly fund planting one billion trees from the coast of SE NSW to Kosciusko and the Victoria coast to the desert - supporting the completion of the Hindmarsh biolink project, from the west coast of Victoria through Gariwerd/The Grampians to the Big Desert and Sunset Country, to the Murray River, reconnecting landscapes with biolinks.
- This could be matched with a national riparian zone restoration program that would help protect vital river systems. This would include constructing fencing to limit stock, carrying out weed management, and tree planting. Dispersing funds to CMAs would see money go to local fencing contractors, nurseries, etc, in their area².
- More than 10,000 people have volunteered their time to support the Conservation Volunteers Bushfire Recovery Programs. There is clearly a community desire to be involved in recovery efforts, which could be supported with stipends.
- 'Depression era' style investment in public spaces could leave a legacy for coming years. Walking tracks and other public infrastructure in national parks and other parks could be extended and updated.
- Governments should increase funding for environmental and citizen science groups that hire local community members to plant trees, carry out research, clean waterways and undertake initiatives to strengthen biodiversity and environmental resilience.
- Fund eradication programs to respond decisively to the Crown of Thorns starfish, offering employment to suitably trained people who are usually employed in the tourism industry.
- Complete the Native Fish breeding program and invest in re-stocking rivers.

² Landcare Australia, Riparian Restoration Collaborative Project, <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/news/riparian-restoration-collaborative-project/>

Victoria:

- Maintenance and upgrades to Park Victoria access tracks and public facilities.
 - There are already funds allocated under the timber industry transition plan to establish new plantations. These projects should be fast tracked. This will create employment in both seedling establishment, land preparation and tree planting.
 - The use of the middle Goulburn River (Lake Eildon to Nagambie) to carry water intended for irrigation along the Murray River is having a negative impact on many species such as the Murray Cod. Work should start as soon as assessments have been completed on an irrigation channel or pipeline to transport water intended for irrigation from the mid Goulburn to the irrigation zones of the Murray River.
-

Agriculture and Food Systems

Food systems and supply chains are being disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The industrial food system is a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions. Efforts to relocalise production and supply chains close to people's homes will help to support farmers, revitalise local economies, guarantee access to food, and reduce food waste as suppliers are impacted by wider lockdowns.

- Urgent support for expanding urban farming projects. Local food production provides a lifeline for vulnerable people in our community.
 - Support localised supply chain development to prevent food waste and guarantee people enjoy safe access to food in their local community
 - Funding for on farm rehydration projects. ([Mulloon Institute](#))
 - Implement regenerative agriculture practices in agricultural areas that have been impacted by bushfires to help kickstart the amelioration of farming land as well as ensure continued improvement of productivity in those areas.
-

Waste

Restrictions on the export of waste to the Global South have exposed the fragility of waste systems in Australia, and the need to reduce consumption, establish stronger domestic recycling facilities and practises and creatively reuse materials in line with a 'Circular Economy' approach. The global economic impacts of Covid-19 may place further strain on these systems.

Victoria

- Continue with the roll out of the four bin system, with a public awareness and education campaign along the lines of those used for the Transport Accident Commission (TAC) or WorkSafe.
- Provide appropriate funding for local councils, and set up regional recycling hubs.

- Investment in municipal waste systems including organic waste recycling, better local processing of recyclable materials to increase the value of recycling as well as cutting down on the transportation costs of recycling.
 - Educational campaigns around reuse of resources rather than treating these resources as waste is required. Support local educational institutions with grants to create and deliver educational resources and services that can be used in national or statewide campaigns to reduce waste and increase the use of resources.
-

Guarantees for income, jobs, housing and essential services

The global financial crisis taught us what works when it comes to fiscal stimulus: focus on the things that can be done quickly and easily, target cash payments to those on low incomes who are more likely to spend it, and target support to small businesses which are more likely to suffer a cash flow crisis. Favour payments to workers and the community over payments to large corporations. Policies that guarantee people's access to essential services must be protected and expanded. We support initiatives that achieve these goals, including:

- The implementation of a universal basic income (UBI) alongside a jobs guarantee.
 - Expansion of all social security payments, including coverage for migrant workers.
 - A homes guarantee: there should be no evictions for renters during the outbreak
 - Energy guarantee: a moratorium on disconnections and late fees for all utilities.
 - Use of empty hotels and other accommodation to provide safe shelter for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
 - Funding for domestic violence shelters.
-

No bad investments -- it's essential we rule out public funds for:

- The fossil-fuel industry is already heavily subsidised by the federal government. This industry should not get yet another giveaway in any form, whether it's low-interest loans, asset write-offs, royalty holidays, new tax subsidies or fast-tracked planning status.
 - Major toll roads that will decrease liveability and parkland, increase carbon emissions and put further strain on our healthcare system.
 - Expansion of irrigation systems that would benefit large agricultural companies, rather we should prioritise available water for our rivers, food production and town drinking water supplies.
 - Waste to Energy projects until other recycling projects are complete as part of a 'Circular Economy' approach.
-

We need long-term cultural change

Like climate change, COVID-19 presents an existential crisis to our economy, with far reaching impacts on the society at large.

The solutions presented in this document would make a significant contribution to creating employment and strengthening the social safety net in response to the viral outbreak, while taking action on the climate crisis. We see these as key, early steps in what will be required to ensure social, environmental and climate justice become centrepieces of our society.

The system of colonial, free market capitalism has been a source of oppression and injustice long before COVID-19 disrupted life as we know it. Long term cultural change is needed to tackle this system of oppression that remains the status-quo in western societies and create pathways to more sustainable and equitable economic systems.

Small neo-liberal government with under-funded healthcare, welfare and education systems have left us exposed and poorly situated to handle the public health and economic crisis that is now unfolding.

The COVID-19 crisis is both a threat to life as we know it and an opportunity to redesign our way of being. Friends of the Earth intends to carry out further work which will focus on the need to localise economies, rebuild self-sufficient communities, and dismantle systems of oppression.

This is a time to radically re-think the way we live and function as a society.

Feedback: This document is an initial blueprint setting out key ideas for a response to the Covid-19 crisis that addresses systemic issues in society and the economy while acting on climate change. We are interested to hear feedback from members and allies and additional ideas and solutions to build a more sustainable society and economy as we all grapple with the reality of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Contact: Pat Simons, patrick.simons@foe.org.au



Version #1. March 2020.
www.foe.org.au