



## Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Health | December 2014

Climate change is among the most serious threats to health faced by New Zealand, but it also represents an unprecedented opportunity to improve health, create a fairer society, and reduce costs for the health sector.

A well-designed, strategic approach to addressing climate change has the potential to reduce existing health inequities as well as to help tackle some of our major diseases including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. This approach will need to include policies and actions to transition to a low-carbon society, as well as policies and activities that support New Zealand communities to adapt to the level of climate change that is already locked in.

If climate change continues unchecked, the burden of disease, disability and premature death from climate change will continue to accelerate globally, and New Zealand will not be immune from this burden.

## About OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council

OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council is a health professional organisation focusing on the health challenges of climate change, and the health opportunities of climate action. It has a rapidly growing membership of health professionals: doctors, nurses, midwives, public health professionals, academics (including leading international climate-health experts) and students.

OraTaiao is a not-for-profit, politically non-partisan, incorporated society. Its 300 strong membership is well-supported by the wider New Zealand health sector (see NZ health professionals '[Call for Action](#) on Climate Change and Health'), and by a global movement of health professional authorities. OraTaiao is well placed to assist the Government to build health promoting climate policy.

## Health Co-benefits of Climate Action

Climate actions that are timely, well-designed and fairly implemented, can lead to a healthier nation, a healthier environment and alleviate growing financial pressures on the health sector in New Zealand. National financial costs of responding to climate change will be offset by the cost-savings of health co-benefits. There are actions and policies that can be implemented now that will reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions *and* reduce the leading causes of death and illness in New Zealand. Examples are as follows:

Action	Positive Health Impacts	GHG Emissions Avoided Through:
<b>Increase active transport (walking, cycling) through greater investment in active and public transport infrastructure.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase physical activity</li> <li>• Reduce obesity</li> <li>• Reduce health-damaging air pollution</li> <li>• Reduce road traffic injuries</li> <li>• Improve fair access to education and other health promoting goods and services</li> </ul>	<b>Reduced transport emissions</b>
<b>Improve housing by investing in insulation, energy efficiency and low-carbon heating and electricity.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce illnesses associated with cold, damp home environments (e.g. childhood asthma and chest infections)</li> <li>• Reduce fuel poverty</li> <li>• Reduce health-damaging air pollution</li> </ul>	<b>Reduced emissions from home heating</b>
<b>Enable a population shift to healthier plant-based diets that are lower in red meat and animal fats through pricing, economic and health promotion mechanisms.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce rates of cancers</li> <li>• Reduce cardiovascular disease</li> <li>• Improve drinking and recreational water quality</li> </ul>	<b>Reduced agricultural emissions</b>

## Health Equity Gain

Climate action that prioritises health equity has significant potential to reduce health inequities for Māori, Pacific people, and low-income New Zealanders. For example, recycling carbon penalty revenue back to low-income families would remove the risk of an extra carbon-cost burden, and could provide revenue for initiatives that improve health (and lower emissions) for low-income New Zealanders (e.g. retrofitting insulation to make homes warm and dry can reduce childhood asthma and chest infections, leading causes of hospital admissions, particularly for Māori and Pacific children).



*Those at highest health risk from climate change in New Zealand include Māori, Pacific peoples, children, elderly and those on low incomes.*

## Negative Health Impacts of Climate Change

If climate change continues unchecked there will be increasing risk to the health and wellbeing of New Zealanders. Risks include high temperatures and illness/injury from other extreme weather events; and changing patterns of infectious disease. Powerful indirect impacts will be economically and socially mediated including forced migration, loss of livelihoods, and increasing food insecurity. These effects will have a greater impact on those that already suffer from disadvantage and poorer health in New Zealand. However, if we act now, this pattern of inequitable health outcomes can be reduced in New Zealand. Further information is available in a recently published, special article in the New Zealand Medical Journal ([available here](#)).

## Actions

### Cross-sector Policy Actions

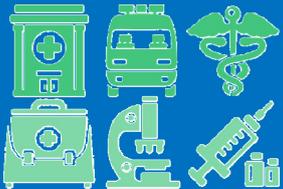
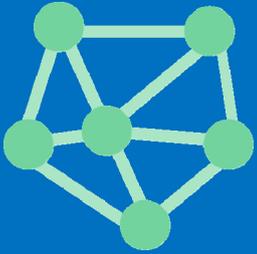
- National emission reduction targets of 80-95% by 2050, consistent with IPCC evidence, with robust interim targets:
  - ⇒ Achieved through emission-lowering policy across transport, energy, housing, urban design, agriculture, forestry, waste, designed to make the most of opportunities for gains in health and fairness.
  - ⇒ Involvement of public health expertise and Health (including equity) Impact Assessment (HIA) to be routinely undertaken to inform key climate-relevant policies.

### New Zealand Health Sector Actions

- GHG emissions to be a key performance indicator for health sector organisations:
  - ⇒ The health sector can show leadership in tackling climate change ([e.g. UK NHS](#)), and can [save money](#) in the process.
  - ⇒ Several DHBs in New Zealand have already employed Sustainability Officers to take advantage of the cost-savings and quality improvements associated with health sector sustainability initiatives.
- Health sector planning to prepare for the locked-in health impacts of climate change, with prioritisation of the most vulnerable groups: Māori, Pacific peoples, children, elderly, and low income people.

### International Actions

- New Zealand to demonstrate leadership in promoting effective and fair global action to reduce GHG emissions.
- New Zealand to demonstrate leadership in protecting and promoting health in the climate-vulnerable Pacific region.



## Key References

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