



NZ Climate & Health Council

23 January 2018

Briefing to Minister for Climate Change Issues

Dear Minister Shaw,

We congratulate you on your new climate change portfolio – and offer our support in prioritising actions towards our shared objectives. We look forward to working constructively with you over the next three years.

Climate change has been called both the greatest threat to global public health and the greatest opportunity to address our biggest causes of mortality and morbidity. Proactively combating climate change is one of the most important actions the New Zealand government can take to improve outcomes for health. Climate protection can also help with many of the government's other social and health priorities, including reducing health inequities and eliminating child poverty.

If climate change continues unchecked, the burden of disease, disability and premature death from climate change will continue to accelerate globally. New Zealand will not be immune. Conversely, potential win-wins for health (co-benefits) exist in addressing climate change across New Zealand's main climate polluting sectors: transport, housing, energy, agriculture and food, and health.

These win-wins (co-benefits) will not come automatically. There is also potential for co-harms to health and health equity from mitigation and adaptation actions (examples include: food crop biofuels, incentivising expensive electric private cars at the expense of public and active transport, an Emissions Trading Scheme from which only corporations profit, and poorly managed retreat from sea level rise). Many health equity risks of climate policy can be reduced through the effective government hypothecation (directed recycling) of carbon price revenues – making it crucial that carbon price instruments enable this.

A well-designed **national climate change and health action plan** (that includes health sector mitigation and adaptation, and health in all climate policies) is essential to protect and promote health and equity in the response to climate change. While an action plan is being developed, there are immediate actions that can be taken – with short-term wins for health, the environment and social equity (outlined from page 3 onwards).

The government also has a vital role to play in shifting the public framing of climate change as being an “environmental” issue, outside of individual lives and influence, to being viewed as an issue that fundamentally affects all aspects of human experience, including health and wellbeing. The significant opportunities for immediate gains must be highlighted, including improved health and a fairer, more resilient society through climate change mitigation. There is growing evidence that by reframing in this way, we can gain broad public and political will (across the political spectrum) for the social change needed.

Limiting warming to 1.5°C will likely require global zero net emissions well before 2040¹. The IPCC special report on 1.5°C later this year may update this to an even earlier global deadline. Developed countries like New Zealand arguably should decarbonise much faster than developing countries

¹ Walsh B, Ciais P, Janssens IA, Peñuelas J, et al. Pathways for balancing CO₂ emissions and sinks. Nat Commun. 2017;8:14856. <https://www.nature.com/articles/ncomms14856>. See also <https://insideclimateneews.org/news/13042017/paris-climate-agreement-greenhouse-gas-emissions-global-warming>

(who have polluted least, are most affected and least able to afford to take such action).² New Zealand’s domestic legislation and international commitments and targets need to better reflect these pressing realities.

Health co-benefits of climate action (Health in All Policies approach)

The building blocks for health lie well outside the health sector and, like health services, are unjustly distributed by income and ethnicity. In particular, this undermines the Treaty and other rights to health for Māori. 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. 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 valued, included in cost-benefit assessments and implemented now. Specific examples are in the table below.

Emissions reduction measure (mitigation)	Health benefits
Zero-carbon public and active transport by rebalancing the transport investment	Physical activity-related including obesity, air pollution-related, road traffic injuries, equitable access to education and employment, improved social connection, improved economic resilience, and more.
Housing-related energy efficiency through investment in housing insulation and quality and zero-net carbon heating including in private rental housing	Reductions in lung cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, extreme temperature related deaths including cold-related deaths, asthma, child poverty
Reducing production and consumption of animal products through pricing, removal of perverse incentives and health promotion	Ischaemic heart disease, cancer, obesity, freshwater quality, food and waterborne infectious disease, antimicrobial resistance, food insecurity
Zero-carbon energy generation through no new fossil fuel exploration, putting climate change back in the RMA and taxing pollution	Air pollution related (cardiopulmonary mortality, cancer), occupational injury, social and health equity

These examples illustrate the importance of the government taking a ‘Health in All Policies’ approach, emphasising the principle that the government’s purpose is to protect and improve wellbeing.

Health equity

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, being leading causes of hospital admissions, particularly for Māori and Pacific children).

² Metcalfe S, for the New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine and OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council. Fast, fair climate action crucial for health and equity. Editorial. N Z Med J 2015;128(1425):14-23. <http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/read-the-journal/all-issues/2010-2019/2015/vol-128-no-1425-20-november-2015/6741>

Negative health impacts of climate change

We have recently assisted the Royal Society of New Zealand to develop [expert advice](#) on the health impacts of climate change, which demonstrates that climate change is already affecting the health of New Zealanders. If climate change continues unchecked there will be increasing risk to the health and wellbeing of New Zealanders.

Direct impacts include death, illness, and injury from extreme weather events and lost productivity from workplace heat. Powerful indirect impacts will be environmentally, economically and socially mediated including through changing infectious disease vector ecology, reduced freshwater quality, sea level rise impacts on the built environment, forced migration, loss of livelihoods and increasing food insecurity. The mental health impacts of climate change are likely to be a large, poorly recognised health sector burden.

All the above health effects will have a greater impact on those already suffering from disadvantage and poorer health in New Zealand – children, elderly, low-income, Māori and Pacific populations. Hauora Māori will be affected first and most severely, undermining Treaty and other indigenous rights to equitable health outcomes.

Well-planned adaptation now will allow New Zealand to prepare and reduce these impacts.

Our recommendations for priority actions are detailed below.

Priority actions for climate health

- 1. Develop a national climate change and health action plan.** This plan must include actions to achieve a carbon zero health sector well before 2040; a health adaptation plan (including both health sector adaptation and health-protecting adaptation in other sectors); and actions to influence climate policies in other sectors.

In the meantime, we recommend the following priority actions are taken:

- 2. Broker and accelerate cross-party agreement for a Zero Carbon Act using health and wellbeing framing.** The Act should legislate a net zero, all-gases emissions target well before 2040 and establish an independent climate change commission as a Treaty-based partnership with Māori. Ensure health experts are represented on the commission. Ensure carbon pricing instruments (ETS/carbon tax) enable hypothecation of revenue to protect and improve health equity.
 - a. The role of an independent climate commission will be to advise government on how to undertake societal transformational change to meet climate targets, incorporating a values-based framework. This will require a range of transdisciplinary stakeholders, with sectoral and climate science input.
 - b. In addition to health, Māori expertise will be crucial, as will be the formation of relationships with climate-vulnerable Pacific nations with whom New Zealand has significant ties. It is important to disallow the involvement of vested interests in their own regulation, and consequently the representation of the fossil fuel industry in the commission would be antithetical to its goals.
 - c. The commission should provide pertinent information and advice to local government and should possess information gathering powers.

3. **Support and commission research** to increase understanding of the NZ burden of climate change health impacts; further elucidate the implications of climate change for Hauora Māori; value the health and equity co-benefits of climate action; and assess the total carbon footprint of the health sector.
4. **Strengthen the Emissions Trading Scheme**
 - a. All sectors and sources of greenhouse gas emissions must be included in the ETS. The inclusion of agriculture will incentivise emission reduction in the industry responsible for half of New Zealand's climate-damaging emissions. Action now can capitalise on the present zeitgeist among farmers looking to diversify and reduce expensive inputs.
 - b. Incorporate a clearly signalled 'sinking lid'. This should include a decreasing cap on New Zealand's emissions, with fewer permits over time effecting higher emissions prices which will stimulate zero/low emission investment. The cap and emission prices should be regularly reviewed against the global atmospheric budget limit.
 - c. Support a transition towards an emissions tax, being easier to administer, readily adjustable, and generating revenue which can be used to support lower income households disproportionately affected by emissions pricing schemes.
5. **Reinvigorate the RMA as a second-tier safety net** to capture high-emitting projects that are not successfully discouraged by carbon pricing legislation. Clearly position greenhouse emissions as a harmful discharge to air in the RMA and frame their inclusion for consideration in consenting processes and planning as a "safety net" rather than a "double penalty". Climate action is urgently needed at all levels, including local government, communities, businesses and households.
6. **Reduce emissions from transport**, which comprises New Zealand's fastest growing source of emissions:
 - a. Shift the focus of the transport budget away from building road capacity and encouraging motor vehicle use to investment in infrastructure and services that successfully **prioritise in the following order**: access and public transport for vulnerable New Zealanders (people using guide dogs, pushchairs, walking sticks, wheelchairs, mobility scooters, invalids and people with disabilities and their caregivers, people with babies and toddlers, and/or during the later stage of pregnancy, and senior citizens); walking and cycling; zero carbon public and freight transport systems (electric rail and buses, widespread electric car share systems, low carbon shipping); avoidance of longer trips through enhanced technology; transition to a smaller, low carbon vehicle fleet.
7. Reduce emissions from our **houses** while maximising health and equity co-benefits. This will need to involve:
 - a. A target for government to fund the insulation of all remaining houses accommodating low income households by 2025, including private rental housing;
 - b. Building standards that require new builds to be zero-carbon and that also protect the health of occupants from indoor air pollution;
 - c. A 100% renewable electricity supply by 2025, including removing barriers to community owned and operated electricity generation;
 - d. Enhanced support for local government bylaws requiring high efficiency, low emissions home heating.

8. Re-orient New Zealand's **food and agriculture system** using a suite of policies assisted by the changes to the ETS and RMA mentioned above:
 - a. Changes to the way that food is taxed to shift perverse cost incentives to consume unhealthy, carbon-intensive foods.
 - b. Ensuring that freshwater allocation and land use legislation and policy do not provide unfair and perverse incentives for high-emissions agriculture that also undermines health through water pollution and encouraging diets high in red meat and dairy.
 - c. Reduce economic reliance on ruminant livestock and farming and reduce the intensity of dairy farming, which through reduced input costs can be more profitable while significantly reducing agricultural emissions.
 - d. Promote a shift away from practices in the agricultural sector that unnecessarily increase emissions, including coal-powered milk treatment, fracking waste-products, increases in nitrogenous fertiliser use, and failing to fence all animals away from waterways.
 - e. Encourage the agricultural sector to reposition New Zealand as a diverse and resilient low emissions food-producing nation.
9. Place an immediate moratorium on **fossil fuel** exploration, and pledge to phase out existing extraction in the next decade.
 - a. Enable a 'just transition' to low carbon energy generation where sustainable clean energy, low carbon jobs are created.
 - b. Ensure that the adverse effects of phasing out fossil fuel extraction on workers, local communities and regional economies are mitigated by investment in other industries.

International Actions

1. **Rapidly revise our INDC** such that New Zealand's contribution to greenhouse gas emission reduction is fair, ambitious, and meets our globally assessed responsibilities.
 - a. Commit to a global zero carbon target well before 2040, taking annual and credible steps to achieve this goal.
 - b. Pledge much more than a 40% reduction in our gross domestic greenhouse gas emissions compared with 1990 emissions by 2030, leading towards net zero emissions well before 2040 from mostly domestic action.
 - c. Include the health gains ('mitigation co-benefits') from well-designed climate action, and the health costs from climate change, in the economic analysis of the costs of New Zealand's climate action.
2. **Protect the health of our Pacific neighbours** through the use of existing relationships and responsibilities to support healthy climate change adaptation and mitigation in these climate-vulnerable nations. Costs of inaction will be incurred by New Zealand through the stress generated by mass migration from the Pacific and other regions.
3. **Provide fair climate finance for developing nations** to reach their sustainable development goals in addition to current aid. Further, provide fair global adaptation finance for the loss and damage in developing nations that we have contributed to through greenhouse gas emissions.
4. **Ensure that international trade agreements** do not undermine the ability of governments to legislate, regulate and develop healthy and effective policies to combat climate change.

OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council

OraTaiao 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 all New Zealand's leading international climate health experts) and health professional students.

OraTaiao is a not-for-profit, politically non-partisan, incorporated society. Its 600-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 a founding organisational member of the [Global Climate and Health Alliance](#). We are therefore well-placed to support the government in developing healthy, equitable climate policy.

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Further resources

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