

(address redacted)

22 August 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

Action on Climate Change

We are a group of former Chief Veterinary Officers (CVOs) and senior government veterinarians from the Commonwealth and every Australian State and Territory. Each of us has decades of experience advising the government on how to keep animals and people safe.

We are writing to you to convey our growing concerns regarding the impact of climate change, a matter of vital global importance, and the need for far more urgent action to reduce greenhouse emissions.

As background, Chief Veterinary Officers lead public animal health services in the prevention, detection and response to serious animal diseases and other emergencies in the broader biosecurity sphere.

Throughout our careers, we have prevented, suppressed or eliminated many potentially devastating diseases. In some cases, we have also led responses to safeguard animals in natural disasters like fires and floods, thus stopping significant damage to animals, and Australian lives and livelihoods.

Animals hold a special place in Australia's story - from the livestock that enabled Australia to grow our economy "on the sheep's back" to the unique native wildlife with which our country is blessed and so well known.

It is now apparent that global warming is one of the key drivers of changes in disease distribution and emergence of new, potentially dangerous diseases, as well as increasingly severe extreme weather. During our times of service, we witnessed the changing distribution of pests and diseases affecting Australia's land based and marine animals as climate zones began to shift. Like all Australians, we were also shocked by the devastating effects of this past summer's massive bushfires.

In recent decades, 60-70% of all new diseases affecting humans have originated from animals, including COVID-19. These diseases often emerge as a result of habitat or ecosystem disruption, leading to increased contact between humans and animal reservoirs of pathogens. Experts in their field agree that climate change is a major factor in the loss of animal habitat around the world.

Prime Minister, we congratulate you that during Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic you have consistently emphasised to the Australian people the need to listen to, and act on, expert scientific and medical advice.

Addressing climate change, like tackling a disease outbreak, also requires taking the advice of scientific experts and acting decisively.

For decades Australia's scientific community has been sounding the alarm on climate change. The science is clear and unambiguous that anthropogenic climate change is occurring and having a major adverse impact on our environment and lives. With COVID-19, we are in the midst of a global pandemic. However, we must not lose sight of the climate crisis and its long-term consequences, which will be much more serious if we do not act now.

We believe that sustained and urgent action based on the best available science and technology can reverse our current trajectory towards unsustainable and irreversible changes in climate. For the sake of future generations, now is the time to heed the scientists' call, similar to your response to the pandemic, to hasten our transition towards renewable energy and other climate solutions.

Governments listened to and valued our scientific advice when we served as Chief Veterinary Officers. In fact, all Australians relied on us for sound scientific guidance during outbreaks of new diseases such as the highly fatal Hendra virus or the equine influenza crisis. We urge you now to do all in your power to have governments and industry listen to and act on the best advice from climate scientists in framing Australia's response to climate change.

We also urge you to adopt a national target of zero net greenhouse emissions by 2050 at the latest, as recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We also ask you to consider that scientists from the Climate Council now advise, based on updated information, that we need to reach zero net emissions by 2040 to remain below the upper Paris climate target of 2°C. Further, as a nation we need to take immediate and determined action to meet this target. The future of our environment, our animals and our grandchildren depends on it.

Australians are practical, determined and creative problem solvers. We can solve the climate crisis if we work together in a unified, bipartisan manner. We ask you to lead the way.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Ron Glanville, former CVO Queensland

Dr Rick Symons, former CVO Queensland

Dr Helen Scott-Orr, former CVO New South Wales

Dr Ian Roth, former CVO New South Wales

Dr Richard Jane, former CVO New South Wales

Dr Andrew Turner, former CVO Victoria

Dr Hugh Millar, former CVO Victoria

Dr Charles Milne, former CVO Victoria

Dr Rob Rahaley, former CVO South Australia

Dr Robin Vandegraaff, former CVO South Australia

Dr Rod Andrewartha, former CVO Tasmania

Professor John Edwards, former CVO Western Australia

Dr Peter Buckman, former CVO Western Australia

Dr Allen Bryce, former CVO Northern Territory

Dr Brian Radunz, former CVO Northern Territory

Dr Malcolm Anderson, former CVO Northern Territory

Professor Martyn Jeggo, former Director, Australian Animal Health Laboratory

Dr Bill Scanlan, former Manager, Australian Animal Health Committee Secretariat