



2025 CLIMATE AND HEALTH POLICY PRIORITIES FOR AUSTRALIA

This document summarises key priority areas of focus for Australia, supported by evidence from the 2025 Global Report of the Lancet Countdown.

NATIONAL CLEAN AIR FRAMEWORK FOR HEALTH

1

Achieving cleaner air and better health in Australia requires a National Clean Air Framework with legally binding standards, continuous monitoring, and clear cross-sector accountability. This would unify fragmented state and territory policies, align limits with WHO air quality guidelines, and cut respiratory and cardiovascular disease, while presenting an opportunity to address the shared drivers of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Fossil fuel combustion, especially from coal power and transport, remains a major source of both air pollution and planet-heating gases. Australia is among the top 15 countries globally for per capita CO₂ emissions, with 14.2 tonnes per person in 2022¹. This poses serious health risks each year, yet air quality monitoring and fossil fuel reduction efforts remain fragmented. In 2022, more than 3,400 deaths in Australia were attributed to air pollution (particulate matter PM_{2.5}), with fossil fuels (coal and liquid gas) accounting for 59% of these deaths. Pollution from the transport sector was responsible for 46% of these deaths (**Indicator 3.2.1**). Children, people with pre-existing health risks, and disadvantaged populations are among the most affected.

Australia does not have federal clean air legislation. Instead, compliance relies on the Air Quality National Environment Protection Measures (NEPM) and varying state and territory regulations. These are advisory guidelines rather than enforceable limits and fall short of WHO standards².

A National Clean Air Framework would make clean air a national health priority through consistent, legally binding standards. Enforceable limits would reduce exposure to harmful pollutants, strengthen compliance by environmental agencies and industry, and close major monitoring gaps. Guided by a Health in All Policies approach, coordinated action across transport, energy, and urban planning could cut pollution and deliver broad health gains. Such reform would also reduce fossil fuel combustion and methane emissions, helping lower Australia's high per-capita carbon footprint and advancing action for climate change.

URGENT INVESTMENT TO IMPLEMENT NATIONAL HEALTH AND CLIMATE STRATEGY

2

Implementing the National Health and Climate Strategy 2024–2028 requires sustained, multi-year funding to strengthen Australia's capacity to respond to climate change and protect health. The Strategy outlines actions to build resilient health systems, cut healthcare emissions, and embed health across climate policies, supported by strong governance, workforce development, and First Nations leadership.

Climate change already poses growing health risks³. In 2024, people in Australia were exposed to 8.1 heatwave days each, on average. Of these, 5.4 (67%) would not have been expected to occur without climate change. (**Indicator 1.1.1**). This puts pressure on health systems and staff. Yet adaptation finance remains limited: globally, less than 5% of climate adaptation funds target health⁴, and Australia reflects this gap³.

Australia launched its first National Health and Climate Strategy at COP28, but lacks dedicated funding for implementation. Sustained investment would enable First Nations-led initiatives, including Lowitja Institute⁵ priorities that strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community resilience through self-determined leadership.

Adaptation financing can yield mitigation co-benefits when resilience investments integrate energy-efficient, low-carbon measures. In 2022, Australian healthcare emitted 30 megatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (Mt CO₂-e), a 13% rise since 2016 (**Indicator 3.5**). Developing climate-ready health systems powered by renewables and low-carbon healthcare models can cut emissions while protecting health under climate change.

Investing in climate-ready health systems delivers strong economic and social returns. Analyses from the World Bank and WHO indicate adaptation investments in health can yield economic rates of return of around 80%,⁶ reflecting reduced mortality, sustained care during extreme heat, and workforce resilience. Long-term Commonwealth funding is essential to realise these benefits through the National Health and Climate Strategy 2024–2028.

REDIRECT FOSSIL FUEL SUBSIDIES TOWARDS HEALTH AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

3

The ACTU supports capping fuel tax credits (e.g. at AU \$20 million per company) and introducing a 25% export levy on liquefied natural gas (in place of Petroleum Resource Rent Tax). Building on this ambition, further strengthening of subsidy reform, accompanied by clear reinvestment pathways, could accelerate climate change adaptation and resilience. Revenues redirected toward the National Health and Climate Strategy, agricultural adaptation, industrial electrification, and regionally targeted just transition support would yield significant health, social, and economic benefits for Australia.

Australia continues to allocate substantial public spending to fossil fuel industries through tax credits, concessions, and other fiscal measures^{7,8}. In 2023, it provided net subsidies of US \$10.8 billion, while preparedness for the low-carbon transition declined 5% in 2024 (**Indicator 4.3.2, 4.2.4**). The Fuel Tax Credits Scheme alone costs over AU \$10 billion annually, and PRRT concessions allow major producers to minimise taxation. These measures reinforce fossil fuel dependence, undermine emissions reduction efforts, and contribute to health-damaging air pollution.

Reforming fossil fuel subsidies would align fiscal policy with health and climate goals. Phasing out major fuel tax concessions and strengthening resource taxation could redirect public funds from high-emitting industries toward climate-resilient health systems, agricultural adaptation, industrial electrification, and just transition programs that enhance economic and health resilience.

Accelerating Action

Strengthening Australia's response to the health impacts of climate change requires coordinated action across governance, finance, and regulation. Establishing a National Clean Air Framework with WHO-aligned standards, providing sustained funding for the National Health and Climate Strategy 2024–2028, and reforming fossil fuel subsidies through capped fuel tax credits and LNG export levies would generate fiscal space to reinvest in adaptation, resilience, and just transition initiatives that protect health and communities.

References

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