

Fire chiefs' climate group a pet 'project' of activist Tim Flannery

EXCLUSIVE

By **BRAD NORINGTON**, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

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Climate activist Tim Flannery is the force behind a band of former state fire and emergency chiefs accusing Scott Morrison of abandoning bushfires across the nation and demanding an immediate end to the burning of fossil fuels.

The Australian has confirmed Emergency Leaders for Climate Action — 29 ex-fire chiefs led by former NSW Fire and Rescue commissioner Greg Mullins — is funded by Professor Flannery's crowd-funded Climate Council as an official "project".

Mr Mullins was joined by five other former state and territory fire chiefs on Tuesday in pledging to convene a national summit of industry experts early next year to find a long-term solution to bushfires savaging Australia's east and west coasts.

A source close to the Climate Council claimed it was "largely a vehicle for Tim Flannery". He added, however, that the decision of fire chiefs to accept support as a Climate Council "project" was significant and could not be underestimated because of their authority in the community as experienced firefighters who had witnessed worsening weather conditions.

"These fire chiefs are not muppets, they are hardly activists," he said. "They've made a deliberate decision to take a stand because they see conditions are getting serious."

Mr Mullins said the former fire chiefs were prepared to "go it alone" with a national bushfire summit, claiming the Prime Minister had offered "no moral leadership" on climate change.

The former NSW fire chief, who is also a councillor with Professor Flannery's group, said he hoped Mr Morrison and state leaders would attend the summit.

Climate writer and scientist Professor Flannery, Australian of the Year in 2007, has sparked past criticism that he is an alarmist for urging that coal-fired power stations be shut down and for suggesting Perth could become the nation's "first ghost town" based on its scarce water supply.

The chief executive of his Climate Council is Amanda McKenzie, a former board member of the Labor-linked Whitlam Institute and founder of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, the activist group that has sponsored climate change protests by schoolchildren in Canberra and other capital cities.

Mr Mullins blasted Canberra for a "leadership vacuum" on bushfires raging across the nation that he said were linked to climate change. He said the Morrison government had offered "no moral leadership" by opposing tougher carbon emissions standards at the Madrid climate conference.

"The facts are that Australia is burning while we turn a blind eye to the driving force, which is climate change and a warming planet," Mr Mullins said at a news conference called to confirm that a national summit would be convened after the current bushfire season ended in March or April.

Emergency Leaders was formed in April with Climate Council support, after the Prime Minister rebuffed Mr Mullins's request for a meeting on fighting bushfires that would also consider the impact of climate change. Mr Morrison instead referred Mr Mullins to Water Resources Minister David Littleproud.

The Climate Council was formed in 2013 by Professor Flannery as a crowd-funded climate change communications body after the Abbott government abolished Labor's taxpayer-funded Climate Commission that he had headed since its creation in 2008.

The Climate Council seeks tax-deductible donations to help the group's "authoritative, expert advice to the public on climate change, energy solutions and international action, based on the most up-to-date science".

Mr Mullins said on Tuesday it was "no good saying we're only a small emitter" of carbon dioxide pollution and it was "simply not true" when Australia ranked 17th in the world, and was the world's No 5 emitter when coal exports were taken into account.

West Australian Naomi Brown, former chief of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authority, said Emergency Leaders for Climate, which had grown this year from 23 to 29 ex-fire chiefs, wanted to "draw attention to an appalling problem".

She said Australia would have worse scorching summers and uncontrollable fires unless action was taken now to tackle climate change. "This is climate change, we are seeing it," Ms Brown said.

Urging the Morrison government to set the example for others worldwide, she said: "We can't keep digging up fossil fuels and shipping it out."

Major General Peter Dunn, retired commissioner of the ACT Emergency Services Authority, said: "We have to stop burning fossil fuels. This is what is inducing climate change. This is not speculation. This is science. Just read what the CSIRO is saying."

Queensland former fire and emergency services chief Lee Johnson said firefighters were seeing the effects of climate change "firsthand" as they battled blazes.

Professor Flannery said he had no comment about his council's link to Emergency Leaders.

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