



**The Hon Peter Garrett AM MP**

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts

C08/29280

Mrs Julia Irwin MP  
Chair  
House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Petitions  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

22 JAN 2009

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter of 26 November 2008 seeking my response to a petition submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions regarding the environmental impact of human activity.

The petition expresses concerns that biological systems critical to human needs are adversely affected by human activity. It calls for Australia to increase its efforts to reduce negative environmental impacts and to work with other nations to reduce human reproduction and to decrease global per capita adverse environmental impacts.

I agree that a growing population and an expanding economy put increased pressure on natural resources, if the rate at which we consume resources and cause other environmental impacts continues unabated. However, I do not consider that a stable population is necessary to achieve long-term environmental sustainability.

The Australian Government believes that the key to achieving a sustainable future is to take decisive steps to tackle major problem areas like water resources and carbon emissions and more broadly to pursue policies which decouple economic growth from environmental impacts.

The single biggest action the Government will take to de-link population and economic activity from carbon emissions is to implement our election commitment to introduce an emissions trading scheme that will place a limit, or a "cap" on the emissions which can be produced in Australia. Emissions trading is central to achieving the Government's goal of reducing Australia's greenhouse emissions by 60 per cent by 2050.

The Government understands that climate change is a major threat and that for much of Australia, it means more droughts and less rain. We can - and we must - make better use of our available water resources. This means improved efficiency and productivity of water use. In our towns and cities, we must secure water supplies for current and future needs, including from a range of new sources that rely less on rainfall given the clear threat climate change poses to traditional water sources.

These reasons underpin the announcement by my colleague the Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator the Hon Penny Wong, of the Government's \$12.9 billion investment over 10 years in Water for the Future. Water for the Future is the Government's strategy to secure the long term water supply of all Australians. Details can be found at; [www.environment.gov.au/water/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/water/index.html).

In April 2008 I launched the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's report of Australia's Environmental Performance Review. The review assesses environmental management efforts at national, state, territory and local government levels and indicates cause for optimism regarding the consumption of materials per unit of Gross Domestic Product, which have declined by about 20 per cent since 1990. The per capita water consumption has reduced by 21 per cent in major urban areas over a 25 year period. The conclusions and recommendations are based on three broad themes: Environmental Management, Towards Sustainable Development; and International commitments and co-operation. If the Committee is interested in examining the report, the conclusions and recommendations are at; [www.environment.gov.au/about/international/oced/publications/pubs/oced-review08.pdf](http://www.environment.gov.au/about/international/oced/publications/pubs/oced-review08.pdf).

The Government takes the issue of population size and growth seriously. The petition implicitly raises the complex issue of sustainable population levels. Although I am unable to comment on reducing human reproduction on a global scale, the Government is committed to ensuring that changes to the Australian population are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable.

You may be aware that population growth and wider sustainability issues were discussed at the recent *Australia 2020 Summit* and the Government is currently considering its response to ideas raised at the Summit. The final report addressing the issues of population, sustainability, climate change, water and the future of our cities is at; [www.australia2020.gov.au/final\\_report/index.cfm](http://www.australia2020.gov.au/final_report/index.cfm).

Thank you for referring this petition to me for response.

Yours sincerely

Peter Garrett