

# House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry & Resources

## Inquiry into impediments to increasing investment in mineral and petroleum exploration in Australia

Submission by Australian Conservation Foundation

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The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) would like to raise the issue of greenhouse pollution as a major impediment to further fossil fuel exploration and development in Australia.

There is now broad scientific consensus that human-induced climate change is already occurring, and is set to increase. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a collaborative process involving over 1500 of the world's foremost climatological, meteorological and atmospheric scientists, concluded that the 1990's was the warmest decade - and that 1998 was the warmest year since records began 150 years ago. Average global temperatures have jumped by 0.5° C in the last 25 years. While this may not seem much, it's worth remembering that a fall of just 3° C heralded the last ice age. Today's carbon dioxide levels are 30% above pre-industrial levels, and if energy demand continues to soar at current rates, carbon dioxide levels could double by the end of this century. IPCC climate models project an increase in global mean surface temperature of between 1.6°C and 6°C between 1990 and 2100. These changes in temperature will be accompanied by changes in rainfall patterns, sea level rise and other factors such as snow and ice cover, ocean circulation and monsoons.

A recent report, which surveyed the impacts of climate change on a broad range of marine and terrestrial ecosystems in tropical and temperate climates, found that the incidence of disease rose with temperatures increases. The report's authors point out that some impacts can be dramatic – such as the effect on Caribbean corals, which have hosted species that have existed for 4000 years – and which have now been wiped out by disease in just 15 years.

The 2001 State of the Environment Report for Australia highlights that in Australia climate change is likely to have impacts on all of Australia's population through changes to the levels, frequency and intensity of flooding, drought, bushfires, snowfall and sea levels. This is especially concerning in light of the Third National Report greenhouse gas emissions projections produced by the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO) which showed projected emissions between 1990 and 2010 are expected to be 33% higher than in 1990.

Clearly the most important issue in terms of consideration of future investment in mineral and petroleum exploration is the costs and benefits of doing so. Australia stands to lose much from the impacts of climate change. For example, there is the potential for major – and unpredictable - adverse public health impacts both in Australia and around the world, including:

- Respiratory illness from worsening air pollution.
- Projected temperature increases could extend the geographic range of mosquitos, and assist the spread of malaria, Ross River fever, Dengue fever and Yellow fever to areas previously too cold for mosquitos.
- Warmer temperatures increase the incidence of algal blooms, which promote conditions conducive to the spread of cholera. This would be exacerbated by decreased water availability in many regions already facing water shortages

There is also a range of agricultural impacts likely to result from climate change. Australia's foremost scientific research body, the CSIRO, has estimated that pests and weeds may extend their current range. For example, tropical pests such as the cattle tick and the Queensland fruit fly may spread southwards and threaten exclusion zones – which could be catastrophic for some parts of the agricultural community in Australia.

## Summary

Australia is the worst per head greenhouse polluter in the world, largely because of emissions from the energy sector. It is imperative that energy efficiency, renewable energy and a cap on greenhouse pollution be implemented and supported by strong legislative frameworks. Further exploration and development of Australia's fossil fuel resources could have disastrous consequences on Australia's public health, agricultural sector and burgeoning environmental industry sector. Given the impacts of climate change that are likely to affect Australia, ACF calls for an end to government subsidies for fossil fuel exploration in Australia. The fossil fuel sector already receives upwards of \$6.5 billion in State and Federal Government assistance.

ACF urges the Federal Government to avoid expanding subsidies to the fossil fuel sector. Indeed, the Government should implement a program to phase out these perverse subsidies for greenhouse polluting industry. The public benefit for such a phase out would be enhanced by shifting these subsidies to the renewable energy sector which is one of the fastest growing employment sectors of the Australian economy.

## References

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