

# COASTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE COUNCIL

## Preliminary Conclusions

5 February 2010

### KEY MESSAGES

1. National action is needed urgently and on a continuing basis to equip Australia to cope with the serious threats to the coast posed by climate change. The response effort should recognise the diversity of circumstances.
2. Governments, businesses, professional bodies and communities all have key roles in forming and delivering an effective national response – Australian Government leadership will be vital.
3. Early key actions need to focus on building national awareness of the issue, improving understanding of what may be the most effective actions and clarifying the roles of different entities.
4. A short extension of the term of the Council is recommended.

### Coastal climate change – tackling the challenge

Coastal Australia is confronted with an immense array of risks from climate change. These risks will challenge all sectors of society, the economy and the environment.

The Government report *Climate Change Risks to the Australia's Coast* identifies up to 247,000 residential buildings across all states, at a value of \$63 billion, at risk of being inundated or eroded this Century. In addition there are the risks to public infrastructure and businesses as well as adverse impacts on treasured environmental values and amenity facilities that have not yet been quantified.

Australia is a coastal nation where most people live, work, and recreate. Population in city, regional and even some remote coastal locations continues to grow. Some coastal places are already subject to periodic damage by floods, storm wave erosion and now even higher king tides. These impacts will be exacerbated by the forces of climate change and are already becoming evident in certain sensitive locations.

Development around the Australian coast assumed that sea level and storm events would function as they have in the past. We designed our housing estates, business sites and public utilities as if the coastline and tidal levels would not change. **Such assumptions are no longer valid.**

As a nation we cannot ignore the evidence that climate change during this Century will have significant adverse impacts on living conditions, the economy and the environments of coastal regions. The insurance industry is taking steps now to raise rates in some areas deemed to be at increasing risk, with implications for the value of properties.

It is time for Australia as a whole to grasp the new reality. Action should begin now to prepare Australia to respond to the challenge and to ensure that our children and future generations are best positioned to cope.

The Coasts and Climate Change Council is tasked with helping to engage the Australian people (government, businesses, professional bodies and communities) in starting to prepare for the impacts of climate change in the coast, particularly in the lead-up to the Coastal Forum in February 2010. Critical components of this task involve active engagement of the Australian people, and identification of initial required steps to build community resilience.

### **Engaging the nation**

Taking action to build resilience to climate change impacts will involve new approaches. Our planning systems will need to change, how we assess and share risks will need to change. There will be consequences for all coastal decision-makers from households to major businesses.

This is a challenge too big for any single local government, business or even state government to handle on their own.

There is currently a great deal of uncertainty across all levels of governments and all sectors of the community about how best to respond to the climate change risks presented to the coast and coastal communities. There is an urgent need for leadership from all levels of government and importantly the Australian Government.

Three key steps are in train. First, the 2009 Parliamentary Committee inquiry report on managing our coastal zone in a changing climate has drawn together an expression of the diversity of needs and issues, particularly from a community perspective.

Second, the 2009 *Climate Change Risks to Australia's Coast: a first pass national assessment* provides an excellent foundation and brings for the first time a robust and spatial perspective to the national description of risks to the coast.

Third, the Coastal Climate Change Forum that you are convening later this month is a key opportunity to bring together for the first time senior representatives from across the country and from the range of key interests to build consensus on a forward plan.

The Forum provides the opportunity to draw together advice from the range of senior decision-makers and experts to kick-start a comprehensive national focus. Specific actions are likely to flow from this agenda.

It is essential that government, businesses, professional bodies and communities fully engage with this agenda.

The Coasts and Climate Change Council has helped shape the Forum program and members will be participating actively in the Forum. We expect that the exchange that occurs in the Forum will significantly inform our thinking about engaging our society to manage the risks of climate change impacts in the coast.

### **Starting to prepare for coastal adaptation**

There is an urgency to start now in building the resilience of Australia to climate change. The existing risks are large, and decisions are continuing which will likely increase those risks and increase the burden we are placing on future generations and budgets.

The preliminary conclusions of the Council span the following three themes.

#### *Increase national awareness*

Today there is little real comprehension across society about the magnitude of the risk that confronts Australia in the coastal zone, and the case for action beginning now. It is imperative to create an informed Australia and provide opportunities for people to express views on their needs and suggestions on solutions. Information that is easily assimilated will:

- assist putting in place the difficult policy actions that inevitably will be required;
- facilitate acceptance and encourage direct responsibility for a range of actions; and
- minimise confusion resulting from misinformation.

As a first step, there is an urgent need for social research into how society perceives the risks and what the best strategies are needed to meet its diverse information needs.

The potential damage costs are extremely high, as are the potential costs of making Australia resilient. These costs can be minimised if decisions proceed based on sound and timely access to information.

The *Climate Change Risks to Australia's Coast* report is a good start and work has also begun at state / regional level levels to identify more specific risks. There remains an urgent need for robust information to be generated and communicated effectively for use by communities all around Australia. This information cannot be efficiently or effectively generated by local bodies.

Information needed by decision-makers includes the scale and extent of combined sea level rise, storm surge and coastal recession and the spatial areas at risk from these changes; the likely changes to intensity of tropical cyclones and the potential extension southward of their tracks; and the timeframe of potential switching points from stable or accreting beaches to eroding beaches. There needs to be a concerted plan on what the best kinds of information would be in the near term and how to generate the fundamental knowledge and data to underpin information provision.

Importantly too, decision makers now need improved means of coping with the uncertainty and dynamic nature of science that underpins decisions and adaptive management frameworks to enable planning and decisions to be iterative as science and the knowledge of risks improves and evolves.

#### *Improve understanding of response options*

Although managing coasts and coastal communities vulnerable to coastal risks has been core business for many local communities and agencies overtime, adaptation to coastal climate change impacts is a new agenda and there is considerable uncertainty as to what action should be taken and when. There needs to be clear guidance on public and private obligations and options in responding to and preparing for climate change, both in terms of managing changes with existing developments and for new investments.

Decision-makers need access to information on the costs and benefits of response options, and mechanisms which facilitate the sharing of lessons learned from taking action. Ready access to such robust information will help local communities to manage their exposure to climate change impacts.

#### *Enhance general consistency across governments*

Emerging issues such as planning and legal matters, property valuation, insurance availability and building standards will have a direct impact on many Australians. A number of communities are particularly vulnerable because of social disadvantage or because they are located in areas that are facing immediate threat, for example low lying Australian island settlements.

Many individuals and communities are currently confused about what may constitute effective action to reduce their own risks due to inconsistent instruments and approaches between governments.

There is an urgent and continuing need to reduce uncertainty and enhance consistency in coastal planning and decision-making. At the same time, it will be important to address the different degrees of exposure that will be evident at different places around the coast – sea level rise will not be uniform, different extreme events like storm surges and cyclones have regional characteristics, and the form of development differs between places.

More broadly the forward agenda on coastal adaptation must be integrated with the new COAG focus on strategic planning in our major cities.

### **Role of the Council**

The Coasts and Climate Change Council was announced at the time of the release of the *Climate Change Risks to Australia's Coast* report on 15 Nov 2009. In the very short time effectively available since then, the Council has been active and willing in addressing the scope of its terms of reference, some of which are focused on the very near term in relation to the Forum, and some of which look to the shaping of longer term strategies relating to the Australian people and the coast.

In relation to these longer term strategies, the Council considers that it is only able to report in a preliminary manner at this point in time because it has not had the opportunity to undertake a wider consultation in the short time available. Given that the Forum has been designed to provide an opportunity for a wider consideration of such matters, the Council considers that it could provide a further effective and active contribution by commencing to frame an action agenda in the areas identified above following the Forum.

Accordingly, and in order to address these longer term strategies, the Council members believe there would be benefit in the term of the Council being extended beyond the current expiry at the time of the February Forum. The Council considers that an extension until late 2010 would enable the stakeholder engagement on coasts and climate change envisaged in the Council's terms of reference to properly occur, and for the Council to be in a position to more effectively advise on options for progressing the Australian Government's adaptation agenda, particularly as regards the dimensions connecting with the needs of the Australian people.