

2025 consultation

Submission type	Upload
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Response ID	275354

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Fiona Lee

3 July 2025

Dear Net Zero Commission,

RE: Submission to Net Zero Commission 2025 Work Plan Consultation

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Net Zero Commission's Work Plan.

I write this submission as someone whose life was irreversibly changed by climate change.

On 8 November 2019, during what came to be known as the Black Summer bushfires, my partner and I lost our home. We'd built it ourselves, off-grid, with care for our environment and as a refuge from a world increasingly destabilised by climate change. But that night, as my partner climbed the steep hill to reach phone reception, he saw only burning piles of rubble and ash. Our house, car, studio, solar system and our daughter's first bedroom were all gone.

Since then, our communities on the MidCoast of NSW have been hit again and again. It's incredibly tiring and anxiety provoking. Just weeks ago, the worst ever recorded in the region swept through, damaging homes and lives still recovering from the 2021 floods and 2019 bushfires. Then there was Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred which brought more severe flooding and now, as I write this, an East Coast Low is whipping through with ferocious winds and toppling trees around us. These aren't isolated events. They are climate impacts that are becoming more frequent, compounding and escalating and honestly it's pretty bloody scary.

Families like mine are shouldering the financial burden of rebuilding our lives from nothing. And emotionally, the toll has been devastating. On top of the trauma of losing our home in the fires, there's been hazard warning after hazard warning - from floods, storms and cyclones. I spend too many hours watching weather patterns, checking alerts and trying to figure out what to do next. It feels like I'm constantly bracing for disaster. I think this is what PTSD looks like in the climate crisis.

Our daughter's school has been closed on and off for weeks due to floods and dangerous weather. She has missed out on learning and a sense of stability - and of course, we are not alone. Many families in regional NSW are living through similar, relentless disruption.

All the while, massive coal and gas companies continue to post record profits. They are fuelling the climate crisis that is costing us everything, yet paying none of the price. It is ordinary families like mine who are left to carry the emotional, physical and financial burden.

This must change. These companies must be made to pay for the damage they are causing with a climate disaster levy. Polluters must be held accountable and contribute to the repair and adaptation that communities like ours so desperately need.

Communities on the frontline of climate impacts need better support. This includes long-term investment in community-centred disaster and resilience planning, climate-ready healthcare and mental health services, secure housing and disaster response and communication systems. These services must be co-designed with the communities they serve and reflect the lived experiences of people who have already lost homes, livelihoods and loved ones.

Both the NSW Inquiry into the bushfires and the Royal Commission confirmed that the Black Summer fires were intensified by climate change. And we know that the mining and burning of coal, including the vast volumes exported from this state, are key drivers of that crisis. NSW must immediately reckon with the full implications of its export sector. At the very least, downstream (Scope 3) emissions must be properly counted and given full weight in planning and policy decisions.

I'm pleased NSW has the Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023 and legislated emissions reductions targets *but* we're currently not on track to meet them for either 2030 or 2035. The Safeguard Mechanism cannot be relied upon to reduce emissions from NSW coal projects to the level required to meet the state's targets.

The continued approval of coal mine expansions is fundamentally incompatible with meeting our targets, keeping our communities safe from escalating unnatural disasters and a net zero future.

Projects currently in the planning system include proposals that would not commence until after 2030, yet they are still progressing through the NSW planning system, allowing companies to "bank" approvals that will lock in emissions for decades. How can this be permitted?

19 proposed coal projects that could generate approximately 1.7 billion tonnes of lifecycle emissions - over 15 times the state's annual emissions. If we are to meet our targets, we need a consistent and credible emissions accounting framework that aligns planning decisions with climate science.

We also know there are big issues with potent methane leaking from coal mines. There have been a number of reports recently, including the Common Capital report which found these emissions are likely underestimated by at least half and are predicted to increase by 75% by 2035 in NSW. This is the opposite trajectory of what is required; the International Energy Agency says they must fall by 75% by 2030 to avoid climate catastrophe.

We need coal mines to be accountable for *all* their emissions including methane, not just the ones they can be bothered with monitoring and reporting.

Finally and thankfully, there is no question that a move away from fossil fuels is already happening. The Royalties for Rejuvenation fund is a good start at supporting coal-reliant communities transition but it should be spent now to begin the process. Transition authorities must be community-led, independent and well funded, with a mandate to deliver place-based solutions that reflect local aspirations and needs.

The Net Zero Commission has a critical role to play in holding the government accountable to its legislated targets and in ensuring NSW has a credible pathway to net zero. I urge you to:

1. Publish a report on how coal expansions threaten climate targets and policy changes needed to address it.
2. Set strong coal sectoral targets for 2030 and 2035 and mandate methane abatement requirements to reduce emissions from existing coal mines.
3. Provide bold advice to the IPC on massive and controversial coal projects coming up - Moolarben and Hunter Valley Operations, to set a standard for greenhouse gas assessment that reflects the NZC's view on the risks posed by coal projects to NSW.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my submission. I wish you all the best in your important work ahead.

Sincerely,
Fiona Lee