

2025 consultation

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10/7/2025

Dear NSW Net Zero Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

I write on behalf of Healthy Futures, an organisation of healthcare workers and community members advocating for a safe climate future.

We may make multiple submissions to this consultation process. This submission concerns the agricultural and food sectors.

We wish to highlight:

- The EAT-Lancet Commission, which outlines the necessity and benefits of promoting plant-rich diets globally as a means to both improve population health and limit climate change: <https://eatforum.org/eat-lancet-commission/>
- Denmark's current Action Plan on Plant-Based Foods, taking a national approach to this issue, downloadable at <https://en.fvm.dk/news-and-contact/focus-on/action-plan-on-plant-based-foods>
- The health and climate benefits of plant-rich diets in an Australian context, as illustrated by this article: <https://www1.racgp.org.au/ajgp/2023/may/plant-rich-diets>
- The abundance of healthcare workers aware of, expert in and taking action on this issue, as illustrated by Doctors for Nutrition: <https://www.doctorsfornutrition.org/>

We propose there is ripe opportunity for Australian governments, advocacy organisations and the private sector to collaborate in supporting Australians to increase their consumption of plant-based foods, using an inclusive, positive framework as exemplified by Denmark's current Action Plan on Plant-Based Foods, to decrease rates of disease in Australia, improve the health of Australians and assist jurisdictions to reach net zero climate targets.

Please contact us if you would like to discuss opportunities for collaboration on this issue.

Submission to the NSW Net Zero Commission 2025 Consultation| Healthy Futures, July 2025

Healthy Futures, one of Australia's leading health and climate advocacy organisations, welcomes the opportunity to submit to the 2025 NSW Net Zero Commission consultation.

Our intention is to highlight the critical connection between fossil fuel operations, specifically coal and gas, and their negative health impacts on the people of New South Wales. These avoidable health impacts, along with their associated costs and the pressure they place on the NSW health system, should be clearly understood when considering the transition to zero emissions.

In particular, the ongoing expansion of the fossil fuel industry is inexcusable in this context - it clearly undermines climate targets, exacerbates climate change, and disproportionately affects vulnerable communities.

Healthy Futures would also like to take this opportunity to reiterate to the Commission the health implications of domestic gas use. All that can be done to support NSW households in transitioning off gas for health and climate reasons should be done, and a strong resolve to find the best pathways forward to achieve this in a timely manner is clearly needed.

The Threat of Methane Pollution from Coal and Gas Operations

New South Wales is demonstrably off track to meet its legislated greenhouse gas reduction targets. A significant contributor to this failure is the unchecked expansion of coal mining. The current regulatory framework allowing these expansion approvals is clearly inadequate; there needs to be measures in NSW preventing these new and expanded ventures associated with such substantial greenhouse gas emissions pollution.

A particularly insidious aspect of this pollution is the release of methane from coal mines and gas extraction. Methane is an exceptionally potent greenhouse gas, with a warming potential more than 80 times that of carbon dioxide. Disturbingly, methane emissions are likely underestimated by at least half in the current reporting landscape.

The health consequences of methane pollution include of course, the role methane plays in climate change, but more than this, methane also contributes to ground-level ozone formation, a harmful air pollutant known to exacerbate respiratory illnesses like asthma, bronchitis, and emphysema.

Increased exposure to such pollutants leads to higher rates of hospital admissions, premature deaths, and reduced lung function, particularly among children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing respiratory conditions.

Climate Change: A Direct Health Crisis Fueled by Fossil Fuels

The burning of fossil fuels is driving climate change, which in turn poses the most direct and escalating threat to public health in NSW. The health impacts of climate change are multifaceted and far-reaching:

- **Extreme Heat Events:** Increased frequency and intensity of heatwaves lead to heatstroke, cardiovascular strain, kidney failure, and increased mortality, particularly among vulnerable populations such as the elderly, young children, and those with chronic diseases.
- **Air Quality:** A hotter, drier climate fuels more frequent and intense bushfires, releasing vast quantities of hazardous air pollutants, including particulate matter. Exposure to these pollutants causes respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, premature death, and mental health impacts due to widespread smoke haze. There is also the direct air pollution from fossil fuel production, including methane pollution's contribution to smog formation, and the particulates and pollution from coal and gas mining, and from coal-fired power stations.
- **Vector-Borne Diseases:** Altered rainfall patterns can expand the geographic range and seasonality of disease-carrying vectors like mosquitoes, leading to an increase in diseases such as Ross River fever and dengue fever.
- **Mental Health Impacts:** The direct and indirect impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events, displacement, economic disruption, and anxiety about the future, have profound negative effects on mental health and well-being.

The Hidden Dangers of Domestic Gas Stoves

Beyond industrial operations, the use of domestic gas stoves in homes presents an often-overlooked health risk. Burning natural gas indoors releases a range of pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), carbon monoxide (CO), benzene, formaldehyde, and ultrafine particulate matter.

Exposure to NO₂ can irritate the airways, exacerbate asthma symptoms, and increase the risk of respiratory infections, particularly in children. Studies have linked indoor gas stove use to higher rates of asthma and reduced lung function in children.

Inadequately ventilated gas appliances can lead to dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. CO is a colourless, odourless gas that can cause headaches, nausea, dizziness, and in severe cases, carbon monoxide poisoning, which can be fatal.

Benzene, formaldehyde and other ultrafine particulate matter pollutants are also respiratory irritants and can contribute to a range of adverse health outcomes, including cardiovascular issues.

Transitioning away from gas in new buildings and mandating the progressive replacement of end-of-life gas appliances with efficient electric alternatives are crucial steps to mitigate these indoor air pollution risks and protect public health.

Energy Poverty and Health Inequities

The transition to a cleaner energy system must be equitable and just. Energy poverty, where households struggle to afford adequate energy for essential needs like heating, cooling, and cooking, has direct health implications. Without affordable access to modern, clean energy, vulnerable households are more likely to experience respiratory illness development and exacerbation, chronic conditions flare-ups, and mental well-being stress. The acceleration of actions addressing energy poverty and ensuring that all communities benefit from the transition to a healthier, sustainable energy future needs to be a priority for NSW.

Recommendations for the Net Zero Commission:

To address these pressing issues and safeguard the health of NSW residents, we urge the Net Zero Commission to:

1. Publish a comprehensive report detailing how current and proposed coal expansions threaten NSW's climate targets and outlining the necessary policy changes to mitigate these threats.
2. Establish strong, legally binding methane reduction targets. These targets must include methane abatement requirements for all existing coal mines, ensuring a significant reduction in fugitive emissions.
3. Provide expert advice to the Independent Planning Commission (IPC) regarding coal mine expansions, specifically for Moolarben and Hunter Valley Operations. This advice should set a standard for greenhouse gas assessment that fully incorporates the Net Zero Commission's perspective on the profound risks posed by coal projects to NSW's climate goals and public health.
4. Advocate for a plan to address the forthcoming closure of Eraring Power Station, ensuring a seamless transition without extending its operational life.
5. Support and accelerate the implementation of any plans that facilitate the uptake of efficient electric alternatives to gas appliances in NSW.
6. Mandate the banning of gas in new buildings statewide.
7. Mandate the progressive replacement of end-of-life gas appliances with efficient and electric alternatives.

The health and well-being of the people of New South Wales are inextricably linked to a rapid and just transition away from fossil fuels. By taking decisive action to address methane pollution, curb fossil fuel expansion, promote clean energy alternatives, and support communities, the Net Zero Commission can play a pivotal role in securing a healthier and more sustainable future for the state.