



6 Jan 2020

Dear Minister Rattenbury,

This lethal, ferociously destructive and globally unprecedented Australian fire season, still in progress, painfully reinforces the reality of the crisis formally recognised last year by the ACT Government in its Declaration of a Climate Emergency.

Over the last several days, Canberra's air quality has ranked among the worst of all global cities, more than ten times levels considered as "hazardous." Unprecedented. We cannot say how long this will continue. A very real threat is posed by growing bushfires on the urban fringe. We are experiencing unprecedented heat stress: two days ago, the high temperature of 44°C measured at Canberra's airport shattered all previous records. Health professionals warn we are in uncharted landscape in protecting and preparing the ACT population for this extended period of extremely hazardous conditions, let alone those that will likely follow in future.

Logically and ethically, we cannot declare a climate emergency, and then carry on with business as usual. Consequently, the ACT Climate Change Council met on Friday, 3 January 2020, to discuss how to restructure its own activities and practices to be more relevant in the climate emergency in which we now live.

We have resolved to meet and report more frequently and transparently, and to reshape our work plan to address different timescales, incorporating and facilitating rapid new learning. Specifically, we envision short-term work focussed on information, engagement and data collection associated with the current summer crisis, and longer-term work related to policy responses.

These are the messages that we wish to convey immediately:

1. Most pressing, the current exceedingly poor air quality in the ACT offers a short-lived opportunity to record critical baseline data that would be key to informing local actions to improve public and environmental health in both the short and long term. Specifically, the Council recommends immediately deploying air quality monitoring devices across a range of building types, geographical locations, schools and other public areas. We are willing to provide more detailed advice, as appropriate.
2. The current unprecedented conditions provide an opportunity for deep engagement with the ACT community, both on how to immediately act and adapt over the next several weeks, but also on how to become engaged in the broader response to the climate emergency. Immediate engagement now will also bear dividends in the community's response to the next phase of the ACT's plan to reach net zero emissions, including the 2025 target.



3. The Canberra of the future will not be the Canberra of the past. Grieving for the past and things lost (such as clean air, healthy bush land, the ability to go outside without a mask at any time) is a natural and necessary path for our collective mental health. Just as important will be regenerative re-imagining and creation of a new climate-adapted Canberra. Whilst other factors are in flux, deep engagement, community building, and individual participation will be required to maintain the essence of the Canberra identity. The Council recommends that collective work on these issues be instituted as a matter of priority.
4. Whilst the effects of climate change brought on by anthropological global heating have been known for some time, preparations to adapt to these effects have been slow. We are particularly under-prepared for multiple, simultaneous and widespread effects. The Council recommends that the ACT quickly establish a fund to resource studies and prototype activities that will build the evidentiary base and accelerate learning for quick and effective adaptation in the Territory, including necessary changes in human services and the management of the ACT's public buildings such as hospitals, schools and libraries.
5. New learning is needed on several fronts, including the health impacts of extended wildfire smoke exposure, effective communication strategies in multiple alert and emergency situations, and natural resource management in volatile conditions in the urban and wider regional context, to name just a few. This summer will provide some of the information we will need. The Council would welcome the opportunity to participate, as appropriate, in the evaluation of current events and responses to them, in order to guide future actions in a culture of continuous learning.

The next meeting of the ACT Climate Change Council will take place on 13 January 2020, after which we will give further advice.

Throughout, the Council expresses its respect for the Territory's climate leadership, and reiterates its commitment to work within the ACT to deliver sound and equitable outcomes for the Territory in this profoundly changing climate.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Penny D Sackett'.

Penny D Sackett

Chair, and on behalf of, the ACT Climate Change Council