



ON BUSHFIRE ANNIVERSARY, DOCTORS COMMIT TO WORK TOGETHER ON HEALTH IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

To mark one year since the beginning of Australia’s unprecedented Summer of Fires, the AMA and Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) are today calling on the Federal Government to adopt a suite of key measures to help reduce the risk of further climate-related disasters.

The Gospers Mountain fire, the largest forest fire ever recorded in Australia, began on 26 October 2019. It burned for 79 days, destroyed more than 512,000 hectares, damaged vast biodiverse ecosystems, and threatened the health of millions of Australians.

It is recognised that the ongoing failure to address climate change helped to fuel this bushfire.

The AMA and DEA are calling on the Australian Government to:

- Develop a national climate change and health strategy to facilitate planning for future climate health impacts;
- Undertake an ambitious reduction in Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions aligned to science-based targets;
- Establish an Australian Sustainable Development Unit to support environmentally sustainable practice in healthcare and reduce the sector’s own significant emissions; and
- Support policies that acknowledge the health benefits of a transition to renewable energy.

“As Australia recovers from the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and adjusts to ongoing restrictions and economic changes, it’s important that we also prioritise the health impacts of climate change,” AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, said.

“The 2019-20 bushfire season in Australia was catastrophic, and had severe health consequences.

“Along with more than 30 tragic deaths directly attributable to the fires, exposure to bushfire smoke caused an estimated 417 excess deaths, 1124 hospitalisations for cardiovascular problems, and 2027 hospitalisations for respiratory problems.

“The mental health impacts of the fires and months of smoke haze are still being felt around the country and are likely to be significant and protracted.

“The AMA Federal Council’s declaration last year that Climate Change is a Health Emergency was an ominous prediction of the terrible effects of the bushfires just weeks afterwards.

“Just as the Australian Government has been at its best in responding to COVID-19 when basing its strategy on science and evidence, we ask for a similar response to the real threats to the health of Australians due to climate change. The AMA and DEA are making a clear commitment to work together to address the health impacts of climate change.”

“The recovery from one health emergency, COVID-19, cannot be allowed to further contribute to climate change, which is the other very real and significant health emergency,” DEA Co-Chair, Dr Eugenie Kayak, said.

“In committing to work together, our two associations are recognising that the health impacts of climate change have fallen off the political and social agenda in Australia, and it is time for a renewed focus to protect the health of present and future generations.

“Climate change is a devastating health emergency that needs to be urgently addressed.

“It is beholden on doctors and the health sector more broadly to work towards deep cuts to carbon emissions and limit global warming to manageable temperatures. We have an obligation to ‘First, do no harm’ - public health and wellbeing depend on it.”

In order to achieve progress on climate change and health, we need our Federal parliamentarians to show leadership.

The AMA and DEA are pleased to see current efforts by independent parliamentarians, including an upcoming Climate Bill being introduced by Zali Steggall in November, to advance legislation on climate change which is above politics and based on science, and which includes acknowledgement of its health effects.

We encourage all parliamentarians to advocate for practical, meaningful policies to mitigate the health impacts of climate change.

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