

# **Boroondara Climate Emergency Declaration**

## **Deputation Submission to Boroondara Council Kooyong Climate Change Alliance 19 March 2020**

### **Purpose**

This paper sets out the case for a climate emergency declaration by the City of Boroondara. It supplements the detailed Climate Emergency paper submitted to Council's CEO by the Kooyong Climate Change Alliance on 16 March 2020.

### **Overview**

Earlier this month, Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General, pointed out once again that 'climate change is the defining challenge of our time'. He went on to say that 'time is fast running out for us to avert the worst impacts of climate disruption and protect our societies'.

The Secretary General's statement is based on the well-established scientific consensus about the seriousness of the threat which global heating represents to our way of life and the need for dramatic action. There have been many warnings from scientists about the dangers. For example, in November 2019 more than 11,000 scientists published a paper in a prominent peer-reviewed journal in which they declared 'clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency'.

All levels of government have a responsibility to contribute to the response to this emergency. Many Councils in Australia and internationally have risen to the challenge by declaring a climate emergency and making a commitment to act accordingly. This includes 30 Victorian Councils to date, including four of the six Councils adjacent to Boroondara.

The City of Boroondara is to be applauded for its decision to develop a new Climate Action Plan, and for involving the community in development of the plan. However, the Council should now show true community leadership and demonstrate its recognition of the scale and urgency of the action required by declaring a climate emergency.

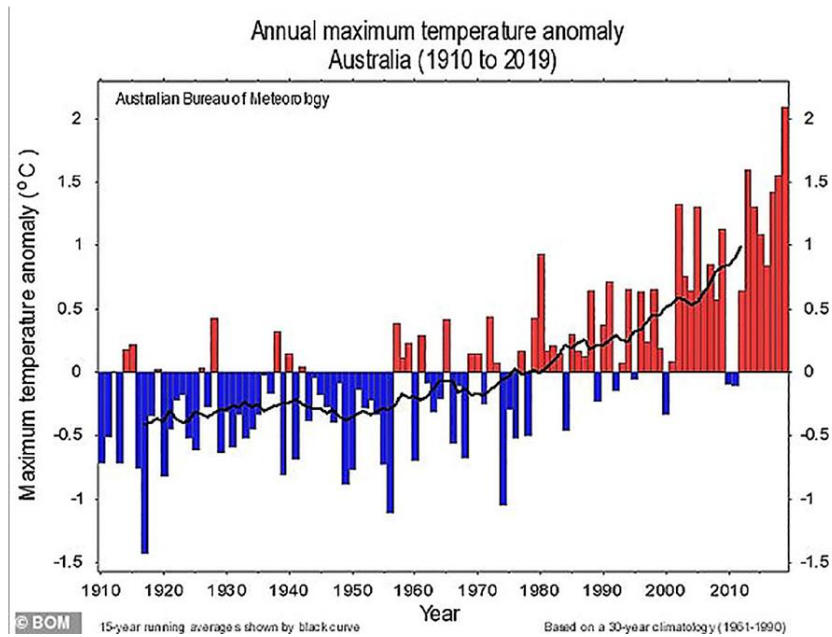
There is strong community support for a declaration in the municipality. The Kooyong Climate Change Alliance has submitted a petition to Council with over 3,900 signatures, calling on Council to declare an emergency and take effective action. All petition signatures were collected in person within the municipality in recent months.

Making an emergency declaration before the commencement of consultation on the new plan would be a powerful way of assuring the community of the seriousness of Council's commitment to effective climate action. It would create a positive context for the consultation process, promoting community engagement and inspiring development of an ambitious plan the whole community could be proud of. It would also act as a spur to individual climate action by residents and businesses across the municipality.

Council leadership is the first principle of Council's *Our Low Carbon Future Strategy*. True leadership requires honest and well informed communication with the community. An immediate declaration of a climate emergency would be a clear demonstration of Council's genuine commitment to act as a community leader on the climate, and Council should not hesitate.

## The State of the Climate

Record-breaking extremes in the climate are now a matter of routine. The average **global temperature** is 1.1° C above pre-industrial times, and the last five year and ten year periods were the hottest on record. 2019 was Australia's hottest year, with the seven hottest days ever recorded all occurring in December. All of the last five years were among Australia's ten hottest on record.

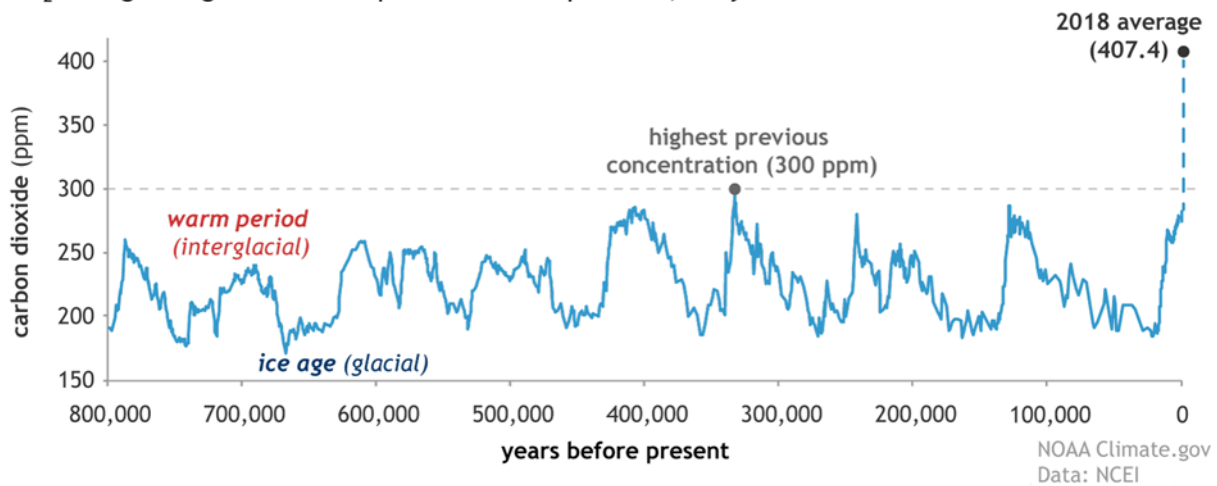


Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology, Annual Climate Statement 2019

The global **emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs)** which are driving the increase in temperature continue to rise. For the 10,000 years prior to the industrial revolution (i.e. from about the time agriculture first appeared) the atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> was around 280 parts per million (ppm) and by 1958 the concentration was still only 316 ppm. It is now over 410 ppm, a level not seen for 3 million years, when temperatures were more than 2° C above pre-industrial levels and sea levels 15 to 25 metres higher.

## Atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>

CO<sub>2</sub> during ice ages and warm periods for the past 800,000 years



Source: National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration

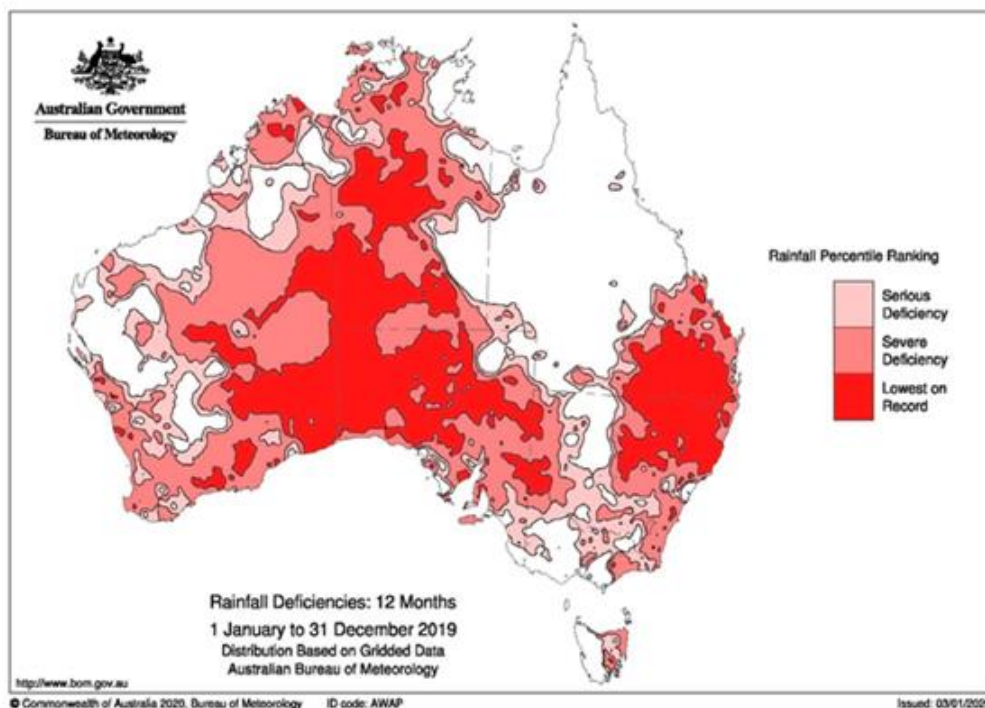
The **Paris Climate Agreement** objective is to limit the increase in average global temperature to 'well below 2° C' and to 'pursue efforts' to limit the increase to 1.5° C. However, even if all current national commitments to reduce emissions under the agreement are implemented, the global temperature increase will be 3.2° C by 2100. In the absence of additional effort (i.e. 'business as usual'), the temperature increase by 2100 will be in the range of 4.1° to 4.8°.

The possibility of even more extreme heating is also plausible. **Climate 'tipping points'** are large scale irreversible discontinuities in the climate system. Some tipping points may be exceeded with less than 2° C of warming and many of the underlying processes are self-reinforcing, releasing more GHGs and driving further heating. A cascade of interacting tipping points is a real possibility, leading to a new 'hothouse' global climate.

## The Implications of Global Heating

The impacts of global heating are already apparent and will multiply and intensify with further heating.

- **Sea level rise** is accelerating, with multi-metre sea level rise a real possibility in the long term. Small islands and low lying coasts are vulnerable even at 1.5° C heating.
- **Heatwaves** have a high impact on human health and directly contribute to increases in premature death. Many more people are being exposed to heatwaves, and heatwave frequency, severity and length are increasing.
- Significant **droughts** have affected all the inhabited continents in the last five years, with major economic and humanitarian impacts; southern Australia is a particularly vulnerable region.



Source: Australian Bureau of Meteorology, Annual Climate Statement 2019

- **Bushfire** risks are increasing significantly, with unprecedented fires in Australia, the Arctic region and the Amazon rainforest in 2019. The length of fire seasons and fire intensity are increasing, with areas previously considered too wet to burn affected.

- **Tropical cyclones** are associated with very large economic losses. Heating is increasing the intensity of cyclones, and in Australia they are reaching further south along both east and west coasts. Sea level rise exacerbates their effect, magnifying the size of storm surges.
- **Ocean temperatures** are now the highest on record. Arctic sea ice is rapidly declining (leading to increased heat absorption) and coral reefs will almost disappear at 2°C heating.
- **Ocean acidity** is increasing as CO<sub>2</sub> is absorbed, with negative effects on many species, and the number of ocean 'dead zones' is growing strongly as high temperatures reduce oxygen uptake.
- Increasing climate variability and extremes are a leading cause of severe **food crises**, and heating also reduces the yield of many key crops. Global heating will also significantly increase the number of people suffering from **freshwater shortages**.
- Global heating creates more favourable conditions for many types of epidemic outbreak, including cholera, malaria and dengue fever, increasing **health risks** for very large numbers of people and resulting in large numbers of premature deaths.
- Impacts on **biodiversity and ecosystems**, including species loss and extinction, will increase with further heating, due to fire, the spread of invasive species and reductions in the climatically determined geographic range of many species.
- The compounding effects of global heating will have a substantial adverse effect on **economic growth**, with already disadvantaged populations being particularly susceptible.
- Climate related food shortages and forced migration are likely to increase tensions and heighten **political and social instability**.

## What needs to be done

To limit heating to 1.5°C, GHG reductions will need to be five times greater than the combined effect of the current national targets under the Paris Agreement. Had serious climate action begun in 2010, emissions cuts per year would have been 0.7% per year for 2°C heating and 3.3% per year for 1.5°C. The required cuts are now 2.7% per year from 2020 for 2°C and 7.6% per year for 1.5°C. Further delays will reduce options and require even more radical action to meet the temperature goals.

According to the International Panel on Climate Change, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions must be reduced by 45% from 2010 levels by 2030 and to net zero by 2050 to limit heating to 1.5°C. Deep cuts in methane and other non-CO<sub>2</sub> GHGs are also needed. Even with these reductions, there is significant risk that heating will exceed 1.5°C. The latest UN report on emissions concludes that '**incremental changes will not be enough and there is a need for rapid and transformational action**'.

The actions needed to reach net zero emissions are well known and in most cases solutions are already available. The changes required include transition to renewable energy for power generation, transition to electric vehicles, transformation of industrial processes to zero GHG emissions, more sustainable agricultural practices and zero deforestation. These changes are a major challenge, but costs are declining more rapidly than was predicted just a few years ago, and climate action can create jobs, reduce air pollution and improve human health.

## This is a Climate Emergency

An emergency is an event or a situation which requires an urgent and exceptional response beyond 'business as usual' to adequately deal with a threat. Emergencies can be at any scale, affecting the whole planet, particular communities or an individual. Whether a situation should be considered an emergency depends on:

- The likelihood of the adverse consequences of the situation/event;
- The severity and magnitude of those consequences if unchecked; and
- The urgency and scale of the action required to avoid the adverse consequences.

The timing of the consequences may be another consideration, but it is the timing of the required response which is the critical factor. Some people are reluctant to acknowledge that there is a climate emergency because they believe the serious impacts are well into the future. This misses the point that, as the UN puts it, 'rapid and transformational action' is needed now in order to avoid those impacts. Further delay simply makes the task more difficult and potentially impossible.

Another concern for some people is that the declaration of an emergency is a sign of panic. However, a clear and calm acknowledgment that there is an emergency is the first step towards taking considered and effective action. A refusal to publicly accept the true gravity of the situation makes effective action less likely and may ultimately result in a panicked response as circumstances deteriorate.

Global heating has major adverse consequences for the most basic aspects of our way of life. We are already experiencing more intense and frequent extreme weather-related events, in some cases with significant loss of life and major economic losses. Even if heating is limited to 1.5°C, vulnerable populations and ecosystems will suffer profound damage. To avoid the worst consequences, an unprecedented transformation of the world economy is urgently needed.

**Given the likelihood and scale of the impacts and the urgency and magnitude of the action required to avoid the worst of them, it is clear that we are facing a planetary climate emergency. Failure to acknowledge the emergency and to act effectively would be a betrayal of the vulnerable, of the young and of future generations.**

#### *A note on the COVID-19 emergency*

The onset of COVID-19 pandemic has led some people to claim that unlike global heating, this is a 'true' emergency. The threats posed by the pandemic and global heating and the responses required are obviously very different, but these differences do not mean that one emergency is more 'real' than the other. The need for radical measures to combat the virus does not lessen the threat from global heating or the need for urgent large scale climate action. And it is important to note that a hotter climate is creating more favourable conditions for the development of many types of epidemic.

Some key lessons about dealing with an emergency have already emerged from the pandemic response:

- The community expects and deserves leadership informed by the best available scientific advice;
- Clear and honest public communication about the magnitude of the threat and scale of the response required is essential;
- The community will accept and support major disruption and mobilisation of resources if they are needed;
- An early response is critical to avoiding the worst consequences; and
- The cost of action becomes a secondary consideration when fundamental aspects of our way of life are threatened.

All of these lessons apply equally to the climate emergency.

## Community Attitudes

There is now widespread support in the Australian community for emergency action on the climate. Two in three (66%) Australians agree that 'Australia is facing a climate change emergency and should take emergency action', according to a national survey undertaken by the Australia Institute in November 2019. This included the majority of Coalition (54%), Labor (79%), Greens (86%) and Independent voters (56%). Similar numbers supported the view that 'governments should mobilise all of society to tackle climate change'.

These results confirm other surveys, such as the Lowy Institute poll in March 2019, which found that 64% of Australians see climate change as a critical threat and rank it as the top possible threat to Australia's vital interests in the next ten years. It is highly likely that following the devastating bushfire season, these views will have become more widespread.

The declaration of a climate emergency by 93 Australian Councils (including 30 in Victoria) is further strong evidence of community views.

There is also strong support for an emergency declaration within Boroondara. The Kooyong Climate Change Alliance has collected 3,913 signatures on a petition calling on the Council to:

- Declare a Climate Emergency; and
- Mobilise the required resources and take effective action.

A small group of volunteers collected the signatures in person within the municipality between October 2019 and early March 2020.

It is also significant that four of the six Councils adjacent to the City of Boroondara (Stonnington, Yarra, Banyule and Manningham) have declared a climate emergency.

## Boroondara Climate Emergency Declaration

All levels of government must be involved in the response to the climate emergency, including local government. The key tasks for Councils are to:

- Eliminate emissions from Council operations;
- Develop and support initiatives to eliminate emissions across the municipality;
- Build community resilience to cope with a hotter climate;
- Advocate effectively for emergency climate action by the State and Federal Government.

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