

As Heatwave Hits Australia, Polls Find 71% Support Net Zero Emissions by 2030

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Spring exited into summer with record temperatures soaring to more than 40° Celsius in much of New South Wales and South Australia over the final days of November.

It was a harbinger of already existing climate change and a reminder of the federal government's abrogation of responsibility to set serious emissions' targets.

Meanwhile, [public support for action on climate change](#) is higher now than it was at the peak of the catastrophic bushfires last summer. According to the latest *Guardian* Essential poll, 81% support a net zero emissions target by 2050 (a 10-point increase since January) and 75% support a net zero target by 2030, rather than mid-century (an 11 point increase).

According to Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) senior meteorologist **Dean Narramore**, Andamooka in outback South Australia reached 48°C on November 28. In NSW, 46.9°C was recorded at Smithville near the SA border. Sydney broke 40°C on back-to-back days: 40.8°C on November 28 and 40.5°C on November 29. [Narramore said](#) this was only the second time in 162 years of records that Sydney Observation Hill recorded back-to-back 40-degree temperatures.

These readings are consistent with the findings of the sixth biennial [State of the Climate 2020](#), a report produced by the BOM and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). The report synthesises the science informing our understanding of climate in Australia and includes new information about this country's climate in the past, present and future.

The report highlights many recent changes. Most are expected to continue and include: warmer air and sea temperatures; increased numbers of very hot days; ongoing sea level rise; more periods of dangerous fire weather; and longer and warmer marine heatwaves.



State of the Climate 2020, by the Bureau of Meteorology and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation.

The report demonstrates the interaction between these indicators of climate change and points to their impact on health, food security, tourism, conservation and biodiversity. The full report is available on the CSIRO and BOM websites.

“The current heatwave and early fire season are graphic reminders that Australia has warmed on average by $1.44 \pm 0.24^{\circ}\text{C}$ since national records began in 1910, with most warming occurring since 1950 and every decade since then being warmer than the ones before,” the report notes.

Australia’s warmest year on record was 2019, and the seven years from 2013 to 2019 all rank in the nine warmest years. This long-term warming trend means that most years are now warmer than almost any observed during the 20th century.

There is a greater frequency of very hot days in summer, compared with earlier decades.

National daily average [maximum temperatures](#) are on the rise: in 2019, there were 33 days that exceeded 39°C , more than the number observed from 1960 to 2018 combined, which totalled 24 days.

The report concludes that the increase in greenhouse gas concentrations has been the predominant cause of global climate warming over the past 70 years.

In 2019, the global average carbon dioxide (CO_2) concentration reached 410 parts per million (ppm), while all greenhouse gases combined reached 508ppm CO_2 -equivalent, levels the report said, had not occurred for at least 2 million years.

Emissions of CO_2 from burning fossil fuels are the major source of the increase, the report notes, followed by emissions from changes to land use.

While the ocean and land have absorbed more than half the extra CO_2 emitted, the rest remains in the atmosphere.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced fossil fuel emissions in many countries, including Australia. However, the [report notes](#) that these reductions have only “marginally” slowed the current rate of CO_2 accumulation in the atmosphere, and are “barely distinguishable from natural variability in the records.”

The report’s science is designed to inform a government, industry and communities’ economic, environment and social decision-making.

The federal government’s gas recovery plan shows it is lagging well behind public opinion on the need to act with urgency.

The National Greenhouse Gas Inventory, the federal [government’s quarterly update on emissions](#) released on November 30, showed a structural decline in emissions, with electricity reductions the largest single factor. The pandemic caused a 6.7% drop in transport emissions over the year to June, due to fewer cars on roads and fewer passenger flights. But these decreases in emissions were partially offset by increases in emissions from stationary energy and land use, land use change and forestry sectors and increases in LNG exports.

The report noted that the 4.3% decrease in emissions from the electricity sector is mainly the result of a 5.9% reduction in coal generation and a corresponding 14.5% increase in supply from renewable sources in the National Electricity Market.

The federal government claims the figures show it will meet its 2020 target, with the Prime

Minister saying Australia may not use its controversial method of emissions accounting — using carry-over credits from Kyoto — to achieve its 2020 emissions target, a miniscule 5% cut below 2000 levels.

However, scientists dispute this. [Frank Jotzo](#), director of the Centre for Climate Economics and Policy at Australian National University, said the reduction in emissions “are almost entirely due to the competitiveness of renewable energy sources and to circumstances that have nothing to do with federal government policy”.

Jotzo said Australia’s Paris Agreement target, to cut emissions to 26% to 28% below 2005 levels by 2030, could be raised with “very modest” policies.

“It’s becoming more and more evident that the existing 2030 target can be readily made without the use of the carryover credits,” he told the *Guardian* on November 30. “A stronger 2030 target could be readily made with some sensible policy efforts. The drivers for that are increasing renewable energy, meaning less and less coal-fired power on the grid. These are tremendous savings.”

Even a survey of business leaders has found a majority want the federal government to do more to combat the climate crisis as part of the economic recovery plans from COVID-19.

According to the [Carbon Market Institute](#)’s survey released on November 30, a majority said the government’s policies were inadequate to meet Paris targets of staying under 1.5° C warming, and 78% said the government’s emissions target of 26–28% below 2005 levels by 2030 was inadequate.

Seventy nine per cent said using carry-over carbon credits to meet the Paris targets from over-achieving on the Kyoto targets “should not be allowed”. Eighty-eight per cent supported a net zero target by 2050, up from 83% last year.

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