Our climate, our future

Ports consultant and sustainability advisor **Jason Sprott** argues for a clear policy position from Australia for net zero emissions by 2050 and global co-operation

Chase Dekker

The release of the sixth assessment report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides a comprehensive, scientifically-based climate update.

It is a definitive piece of work.

Let's make no mistake, the IPCC is the world's most authoritative body on climate science. The report reminds us that the Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015, outlined the goal of limiting global warming to well below 2° Celsius, preferably 1.5° C, compared to pre-industrial levels (remembering the benchmark years used are 1850-1900).

Alarmingly, it's already around 1.1° C degrees warmer.

As the report states, it is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land and that widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred.

"The scale of recent changes across the climate system as a whole and the present state of many aspects of the climate system are unprecedented over many centuries to many thousands of years," the report states.

The IPCC believes we will hit 1.5° C degrees warming between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate. This is an unprecedented rate of global warming.

If it wasn't already, the case for a strong and unambiguous climate change policy commitment (and a clear execution pathway) at the Commonwealth level, is now compelling.

REPUTATIONAL RISK

In pre-COVID days, we participated in several global conferences focusing on the transitioning economy and sustainability in the context of the port industry. We met with port representatives and presented at conferences in Amsterdam, Oslo and Baltimore.

We joined a global port meeting convened by the World Port Sustainability Program at UN Headquarters in Geneva in early 2019 to discuss the industry's progression in the transitioning global economy and alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

We repeatedly grew tired of answering questions about Australia's climate change position. People asked us about climate change, the Great Barrier Reef and our lack of clear policy commitment.

We absolutely defended the Australian interest and reinforced that industry and business were simply getting on with the job of working towards a cleaner future. That industry and business were invested heavily in adopting new, smart technologies and developing robust sustainability plans; that our scientists were leading the world in reef research and programs; that our ports had excellent environmental scientists and governance systems in place focused on impact avoidance, management and offsetting programs.

However, no matter how much we defended the industry, and our national position, the elephant in the room, was our lack of a consolidated position and perceived lack of commitment to climate change.

In November this year, the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) will take place in Glasgow. At this meeting, the world will come together to discuss the climate and undoubtedly, the latest IPCC report.

The goals of the conference are relatively simple. To secure global net zero by mid-century and keep 1.5o C of global warming within reach; to adapt to protect communities and natural habitats; to mobilise finance; and to work together to deliver these goals.

Australia must confirm a clear policy position for net zero 2050 before that conference. We must join the global community in establishing a common vision and a goal to strive for.

If we fail, our reputation as a modern, contemporary and future-focused society – one aware of the need to contribute at a global level – will be questioned.

A failure to commit in line with other leading nations, will undermine our policy position on a number of fronts – politically as part of the United Nations and G20 and, from a geo-political point of view with highly contentious issues such as the listing of the Great Barrier Reef's position on the World Heritage list as "in-danger".

I am certainly not suggesting that signalling a commitment to net zero by 2050 would remove any absolute pressure on the "in-danger" listing, nor negate the need for continued policy work and reef programs.

However, the optics of the nation who takes carriage of the responsibility of this internationally-acclaimed natural asset, for which the greatest threat is climate change, failing to confirm a position on net zero emissions, is clearly not favourable.

Should we fail to signal our commitment by or at COP26, our standing on the world stage will be eroded.

A BALANCED WAY FORWARD

As one of the highest carbon dioxide emitters per capita, we need a national commitment to the goal of net zero emissions by 2050.

At the moment we have a fractured national policy position on climate change action and this continues to erode investment confidence and collective progression towards a cleaner economy and a more liveable future.

All Australian states and territories have committed to net zero by 2050. The Commonwealth must therefore construct consistent policy architecture by committing to the goal of net zero emissions. This will help stimulate investment confidence, support policy delivery ideas and innovation on how best to achieve the goal – and continue the work by business, industry and communities around our country. It will signal that our nation is on the pathway to a more sustainable future.

The politics of hesitation must stop.

The politics of partnerships, collaboration, goodwill, trust, transition, innovation, opportunity and alignment must be realised.
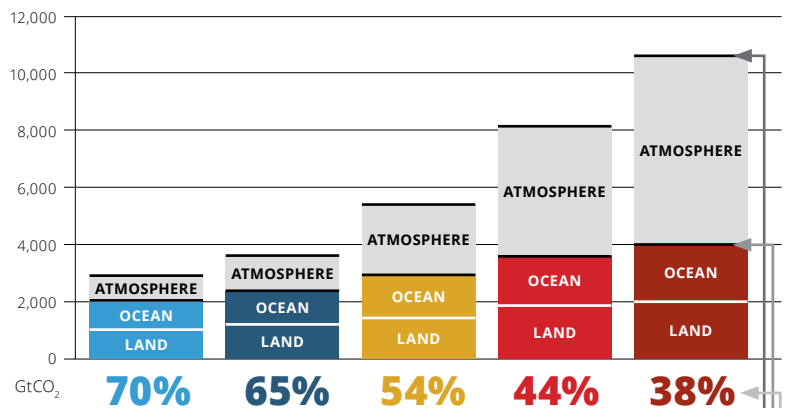
We must create the right policy settings to enable our industry, corporate sector, investment entities and broader communities to go forward with confidence. To innovate.

We must see an end to binary arguments viz. environment *or* mining/environment *or* jobs.

RESOURCE-RICH

We must enable a mature discussion on the future of our country, and we must align our climate change aspirations. That mature discussion, for our resource-rich nation, involves mining.

C0$_2$ EMISSIONS TAKEN UP BY LAND AND OCEANS AND REMAINING IN THE ATMOSPHERE, UNDER THE FIVE ILLUSTRATIVE SCENARIOS, FROM 1850 TO 2100

Source: IPCC

The amount carbon dioxide emissions taken up by land and ocean carbon sinks is **larger**, but more of the emitted carbon dioxide remains in the atmosphere

Meaning that the proportion of carbon dioxide emissions taken up by land and ocean carbon sinks from the atmosphere is **smaller** in scenarios with higher carbon dioxide emissions

Mining absolutely has a role to play in the transitioning economy. To suggest otherwise ignores the incredible historical contribution mining has made to our world, allowing us to build, grow, develop, travel, provide medical care and explore new possibilities – including those in the renewable energy sector.

The extraction and processing of precious materials and energy resources will continue, but it needs to transition. It must become cleaner, and the extraction of some resources will need to cease. Leading companies are already preparing and executing strategies aligned to this realisation.

We clearly need stronger conviction and commitment from our Commonwealth government to facilitate confidence in the transition.

CLEAN PROSPERITY

We have made progress in this space, but we need to do more collaboratively.

We have unbelievable access to renewable resources. Opportunities to generate renewable solar, wind and hydrogen can be found around our nation. Our national coastlines and oceanic conditions also present amazing opportunities.

We already have the technology and the science to deliver.

What better way to stimulate sustained economic activity coming out of the COVID pandemic than to let our brightest minds and those companies willing to invest in these opportunities show what can be done. Let's provide them with the tools, support funding and policy confidence so that they can work collectively with the inherent knowledge of our First Nations peoples, community stakeholders, industry and the scientific community in exploring and delivering clean prosperity.

We can do this and we must, through immediate action, and sustained effort. ■

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Jason Sprott, director, Sprott Planning & Environment