

An open letter to the Mayor of Eurobodalla Shire Council (Councillor Innes)

cc: Councillors Lindsay Brown, Phil Constable, Anthony Mayne, Patrick McGinlay, Maureen Nathan, Robert Pollock OAM, Jack Tait, James Thomson

Dear Mayor Innes,

2020 – what a year! Fire, storms, flood, pandemic. In Eurobodalla, we were especially hard-hit by fire which took lives and devastated our environment, health and economy. The BOM/CSIRO State of the Climate 2020 warns that severe fires, storms and extreme temperatures could become the ‘new normal’ within 20 years; a future we must work our hardest to prevent, but alas, we must also prepare for. (1)

As representatives elected by the people of the shire, this letter asks for immediate commitments from yourself as Mayor, to lead your fellow Councillors in supporting our wider community who are calling out loudly for action on climate change.

The 2019/20 megafires of last spring and summer tragically took the lives of three residents and countless wildlife, livestock and pets, burnt 80% of our shire’s forests, razed 501 homes and 879 outbuildings, and brought businesses to their knees.

One year on, we cannot forget the summer of fear, smoke and flames. As Councillors and residents of our lovely shire, you also would have suffered alongside many of us - sharing the constant fear of bushfires for months and choking through the hazardous smoke, stinging our eyes and throats. The ash smothered the land and made its way into our rivers and oceans. It tightened our chests and made us cough and wheeze, causing significant health problems both in the short and longer term. (2) The pollutants from the smoke even made their way into the bloodstream of pregnant women, lodging into the respiratory organ of unborn babies - the placenta. This has been found to have dire health effects including increased risk of preterm birth and other health complications, some known to persist throughout their lives. (3)

It seems fitting that we write to you directly after another extremely devastating weather event, on Boxing Day, that has wreaked havoc for our farmers in the region. An intense storm cell which brought damaging winds, heavy rain and hail, destroyed summer crops on multiple farms and with them a solid amount of potential earnings in what should be the most profitable time of year. Consequently, once more, placing pressure on the viability of small-scale producers' livelihoods and the stability of their mental health and income.

This ‘unprecedented’ year was no freak event, it was predicted and is likely to be repeated again, and worse, as the planet continues to heat. And so, having just experienced a couple of decades of unnatural disasters rolled into a single year, **we call upon the Council to take the following actions:**

ACTION No. 1 – State the obvious

We need you to publicly state to all residents in the shire that climate change is real and is the fundamental cause of last summer’s losses. While undeniable, the message becomes more powerful when expressed by leaders in our community. In particular, as Mayor, in your leadership role.

The *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* made it very clear that climate change drove the severity of the bushfires:

“Natural disasters have changed, and it has become clear to us that the nation’s disaster management arrangements must also change.

Extreme weather has already become more frequent and intense because of climate change; further global warming over the next 20 to 30 years is inevitable. Globally, temperatures will continue to rise, and Australia will have more hot days and fewer cool days. Sea levels are also projected to continue to rise. Tropical cyclones are projected to decrease in number but increase in intensity. Floods and bushfires are expected to become more frequent and more intense. Catastrophic fire conditions may render traditional bushfire prediction models and firefighting techniques less effective.

... the summer of 2019-2020 – in which some communities experienced drought, heatwaves, bushfires, hailstorms, and flooding – provided only a glimpse of the types of events that Australia may face in the future.” (4)

Aside from the Royal Commission, countless individuals, organisations and businesses across the nation and our local Eurobodalla Shire are raising the alarm for leaders, including yourself, to urgently act on the risks from climate-related events. These include **growing costs to many sectors in our community including health, environment, and economy**. A summary is included at Attachment A.

ACTION No. 2 – Project a sense of calm resolve

We need you, and your Councillors, to provide reassurance to all residents in the shire, by publicly demonstrating your genuine concern for their wellbeing, particularly after the devastating year we have had. Many residents are still hurting deeply. Heat waves, windy days, the smell of smoke or a local fire alert, still triggers fear of last summer’s devastation, occurring again.

ACTION No. 3 - Declare a climate emergency

The Eurobodalla Shire must be commended on taking action on climate change through its many achievements and future commitments as outlined in its Emissions Reduction Plan (2017-2021) as well as joining the Cities Power Partnership. Given the climate driven events of 2019/20, declaring a climate emergency would be the obvious and strategic next step. Before we can act on any emergency situation, we need to clearly acknowledge and outline the problem. It's only then we can appropriately prioritise and resource the urgent solutions required. We do not have another decade to waste.

We should join the other 98 Australian local governments - including Kiama, Bega-Valley and Wollongong who have already voted YES to declaring a climate emergency. [UN secretary general, António Guterres, has this month called](#) upon all countries to declare a climate emergency until the world achieves net-zero emissions.(5) Every shire, state and country must do all it can - it is only when we unite our efforts, we can achieve the seemingly unachievable.

Declaring a climate emergency is not symbolic, it has tangible benefits for the community. [Byron shire mayor, Simon Richardson, in speaking](#) of the very recent beach erosion, has said that, in the face of recent climate-driven disasters such as fire, storm, flood and erosion, vulnerable shires and the nation as a whole need to,

‘... do better ... in putting policies in place which actually protect [the economic security of their communities] ... and seize the opportunities that are available.’(6)

The wording of a Eurobodalla climate emergency declaration could be: -

“Council declares that we are living in a time of climate emergency that requires focused and strategic actions at the local government level, for the benefit and safety of our whole community, in both the immediate and longer terms.”

The Shire’s Emissions Reduction Plan 2017-2021 is due for review next year - there are dozens of excellent goals in this plan that have yet to become reality. Let us make 2021 the year we review and revive the plan, making sure it is aligned with climate science and engages our community, our businesses and industries. A total of \$1 million dollars has already been saved from emission reduction actions in our shire - let's take these savings and invest them into further mitigation and adaptation projects such as installing a network of electric car charging stations and connecting towns with paths and cycleways.

Our Climate Adaptation Plan is also overdue for release - this information is essential to our residents, especially as many are rebuilding their lives; they need to know how to do so as safely as possible in the changing climate. A draft plan must be released urgently for public review.

Our neighboring shires have many focused and strategic actions we can draw upon, including Bega Valley’s [*Climate Resilience Strategy 2050*](#) and Shoalhaven’s [*Shoalhaven Adaptation Plan*](#). (7, 8)

ACTION No. 4 – Locally implement relevant recommendations of the Royal Commission

We need you to implement the local government-level recommendations and push State and Federal governments to urgently and thoroughly action the other recommendations of the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (4)*, the *NSW Bushfire Inquiry (9)* and the Emergency Leaders’ for Climate Action *Bushfire and Climate Plan. (10)*

ACTION No. 5 – Take our local businesses and industries on the journey to transform and take advantage of many new initiatives and benefits

We need you to lead and support local businesses and industries to take up the many opportunities inherent in climate solutions: in clean energy; electric transport; energy efficiency; mosaic burning; carbon farming; biodiversity conservation and entirely new industries. These opportunities include increasing employment, not losing jobs.

ACTION No. 6 – Accept our invitation to a solutions-focused community group’s climate action forum in Autumn 2021

We want to work cooperatively with council, business and all shire residents to develop and implement solutions.

Last summer Eurobodalla’s people showed the world the graphic and tragic consequences of where the world is heading if we fail to reverse global warming. Only a couple of months later, at the beginning of our rebuilding efforts, we went on to show our incredible willingness to follow the science and good leadership on COVID-19. We now deserve to see the same science-driven leadership on climate action. Let's take the lessons we learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic and apply them in fighting climate change - work together, unite our communities, focus on prevention, listen to the experts and act quickly.

We look forward to your response and ongoing engagement on these crucial matters.

Yours in support of our still beautiful but perilously threatened shire, its people and its nature,

Note: The signatory groups below have many members and supporters in Eurobodalla and join the majority of Australians and shire residents calling for urgent and meaningful action on climate change. More than 80 percent of Australians support this call. (11)

GROUP/BUSINESS	CONTACT	EMAIL
<i>Surf Beach Surgery</i>	Dr Michelle Hamrosi Dr James Langley Dr Luke Mitchell	admin@surfbeachsurgery.com.au
<i>Doctors for the Environment Australia</i>	Dr Kim Loo	kimloo@dea.org.au
<i>350 Eurobodalla</i>	Allan Rees	euro350.org@gmail.com
<i>Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF Community Eden-Monaro)</i>	Iain Fyfe	iainf@iimetro.com.au
<i>Australian Parents for Climate Action</i>	Suzie Brown	suzie@ap4ca.org
<i>Boom Lawyers</i>	Keely Boom	keely@boomlawyers.com.au
<i>Borrowed Ground</i>	Eliza Cannon + Alex Chiswell	eliza@borrowedground.com.au
<i>Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action</i>	Jack Egan	jackTegan@gmail.com
<i>Climate Action Now Signs Incorporated (CANsign Inc.)</i>	Jed Johnson	jed.johnson@cansign.org.au
<i>Coastwatchers Association Inc</i>	Derek Anderson	contact@coastwatchers.org.au
<i>Extinction Rebellion</i>	Dr Geoff Berry	geoff@naturecalling.org
<i>Friends of the Forest (Mogo)</i>	Joslyn van der Moolen	friendsoftheforestnsw@gmail.com
<i>Micro Energy Systems Australia - Bodalla</i>	Lisa & Stephen Cornthwaite	admin.mesa@bigpond.com
<i>Nature Coast Marine Group</i>	Dr Jane Elek	j_elek@bigpond.com

<i>South East Region Conservation Alliance (SERCA)</i>	Paul Payten	contact@serca.org.au
<i>Southern Sustainability and Health Alliance (SHASA)</i>	Kathryn Maxwell	contact.shasa@gmail.com
<i>Tuross Oysters</i>	Anita Saeck	anita_saeck@hotmail.com
<i>ZeroSE - A Beyond Zero Future for South East NSW</i>	Jo Oddie	jo.oddie@iinet.net.au

Attachment A: The growing costs to sectors in our community

- **Health:** many medical bodies, including most Australian ones, have declared that a climate emergency is a public health emergency. It is well known that climate change is resulting in more extreme weather events including bushfires, storms, floods and heatwaves; spreading vector-borne diseases such as malaria; and worsening mental health due to these events themselves along with the uncertainty climate change brings. (12)

The World Health Organisation estimates that globally over 250,000 lives will be lost each year due to climate change from 2030. (13) That could be any of us, our parents or our children. Last summer saw over 400 deaths due to heat and bushfire smoke exposure, with thousands more presenting to emergency departments. (14) We, the bushfire survivors of Eurobodalla, know the health impacts of climate-driven bushfire all too well.

- **General Food Production:** as well as the more obvious effects of the bushfires (e.g. fencing and stock losses, huge reduction in bee fodder) climate change is proving a major challenge for our local food security.

The forecasts of climate scientists for southeast NSW have been pretty accurate and we have seen greater variability in rainfall as well as hotter temperatures overall. The effects on our dairy and meat industries are well known, and farmers and graziers are doing their best to make provision for the hotter, leaner years. Vegetable growers have realised that they will need to spend increasing amounts on crop protection, irrigation and other capital-intensive practices. Council could make a huge difference to our local food system through composting of all organic wastes for recycling to increase soil fertility, and through the supply of water suitable for irrigation. The bushfires showed to everyone how vulnerable we are to the very long food supply chain. In times of drought, it is vital that we are able to supply a good percentage of our own food, as well as exporting to the Sydney and ACT region.

- **Logging native forests** dries them out and the crowns and butts left on the forest floor add significantly to fuel load endangering locals living nearby State Forests. An even bigger problem is that regrowth forest consists of smaller, younger trees of even age and even height with a more dense understory. This makes the regrowth forest more fire prone for at least 40 years after logging. As state subsidised logging will be unable to meet supply contracts in the next few years, this industry is not viable. Supporting a one hundred percent transition to plantations will meet industry needs and provides council with income from rates on purchased land. Retaining our south coast forests for carbon, water and wildlife will drawdown NSW carbon emissions.
- **Local Oyster Production:** climate change will increasingly expose the local oyster industry to pathogens that have in the past tended to affect the industry in the more northerly and warmer growing areas. The main one being qx or Queensland Unknown. This causes very significant mortality. As water heats up it has less capacity to store oxygen. At the same time an ectotherm like the oyster will experience an increase in metabolic rate. This can cause stress and expose the animal to disease and mortality. There are many other extensive climate impacts on coastal fisheries and the aquaculture industry that are summarised in the reference below. (15)

- **Defence:** military defence analysts say climate change is a huge threat to basic human needs, including water and food, and will lead to conflict over scarce resources. Climate refugee numbers are set to grow, as people's homes become inhabitable due to rising seas and inhospitable temperatures. In Eurobodalla, Black Summer taught us a lot about what happens when basic human needs cannot be met.
- **Insurance:** insurers warn that unmitigated climate change will lead to many homes and businesses becoming uninsurable due to excessive climate risks. Expect this in Eurobodalla too, especially as we are a bushfire and flood prone region.(16)
- **Environment:** climate change is a major threat to our natural environments. Just this month, the Great Barrier Reef's status has been changed to critical. The biggest threat it is facing is climate change. Our Great Southern Reef is also suffering. We, along with the natural world that we are part of, have evolved to thrive in very specific conditions, all of which are threatened by climate change. Biodiversity loss is occurring rapidly around us already - and Australia is a global hotspot, particularly for ocean warming This is set to be magnified as climate change worsens. Eurobodalla is not spared. Our precious Nature Coast including our forests, rivers and oceans, those who care for it, and the businesses that rely on it are already suffering.
- **Weather:** the CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology *State of the Climate 2020* report found that Australia's climate has now warmed by $1.4 \pm 0.24^\circ$ Celsius since modern records began in 1910 and our local ocean temperature has increased by 2° (1). Extreme heat days are up, while stream flows are down. Cool season rainfall continues to decline, while heavy rainfall events become more intense. There has been an increase in the number of days each year with dangerous weather conditions for bushfires. In Eurobodalla we have already felt this sting.
- **Economy:** Deloitte Access Economics warn in their recent report, *A new choice: Australia's climate for growth*, that

“... the pathway of inaction or mis-action [on climate risk] leads to economic losses of \$1.1 trillion in present value terms by 2050 – or 3.6% of GDP. This loss sees almost 330,000 jobs lost by 2050.” (17)

We envisage that a significant proportion of these costs will be borne by local governments, such as Eurobodalla.

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