

Why Agriculture Must Pursue Net Zero Emissions

Wellington Climate Action Network

Overview

The trajectory of Australia's economic and global reputation for the next decade will be shaped by the decision the Coalition makes leading up to the UN COP26 Climate Conference in November.

The Nationals' position appears to be that the agricultural and regional sectors should be excluded from any further emission cuts and should not suffer disadvantage from net zero 2050 actions because they did the heavy lifting for the Kyoto targets.

We believe there are five themes around why the farming sector¹ should fully play its part in bringing Australia's net emissions down to zero by 2050:

- Ethical and moral factors
- Physical and scientific factors
- Threats arising
- Potential opportunities
- Community support

We are not going to debate the science; the recent IPCC report² was unambiguous in its recommendations and represents the most comprehensive analysis we have of the situation. The course of the global leaders is set and the time to act is now.

Ethical and Moral factors

Acting on climate change is a global, ongoing problem. Therefore, it requires ongoing action from everyone to tackle their contribution to the problem. Thus, every person and sector has:

- a responsibility to act, to the limit of their capabilities, to reduce their emissions down to zero, and
- no ethical right to claim exemption.

To argue otherwise is to seek to profit at the expense of others. It remains to be seen whether the Nationals will use this impending decision as a lever to extort billions of taxpayer funds from us, not to mention exclusions that others do not have.

Physical and scientific factors

In 2019, the sector produced 76.5 million tonnes³ or 15% of Australia's emissions⁴ whilst generating less than 2% of GDP⁵ and exporting 70% of its production⁶.

The Federal Government's 2020 projections show that emissions from the agriculture and land use sectors will rise to 82 million tonnes by 2030⁷ across all sub-sectors⁸ as stock levels⁹ recover. Whilst LULUCF nett emissions were -26 million tonnes in 2019, that is forecast to reduce to only -13 million tonnes by 2030.

Agriculture's contribution to emissions is very significant and increasing; it's work on emissions has a long way to go, however difficult that may be to achieve.

Threats arising

The threats arising from Australia failing to match global emissions reduction policies are rarely presented during the political discourse, to the detriment of informed debate.

¹ For simplicity and alignment with Government reporting standards, we will define "farming" as covering the Agriculture and LULUCF (Land Use, Land Use Clearing and Forestry) sectors.

² Working Group I contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report, Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis (www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/)

³ Emissions are 'carbon-dioxide equivalents', estimated using the 100-year global warming potentials (of the high methane content of animal emissions) published alongside IPCC (2007).

⁴ Grattan Institute [Towards net zero: Practical policies to reduce agricultural emissions](#)

⁵ [ABARES Insights: Snapshot of Australian Agriculture 2021](#)

⁶ [ABARES Insights: Snapshot of Australian Agriculture 2021](#)

⁷ See reference 4.

⁸ Grazing beef, dairy, grain-fed beef, sheep, pigs, other animals, crops, fuel combustion and fertilizer/lime use.

⁹ Animal emissions (mainly methane) are the dominant source of emissions in the agriculture sector; 44% from grazing beef, 18% from sheep and 10% from dairy.

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- Over 70% of our exports¹⁰ go to countries that are adopting net zero by 2050 goals.
- Significant trading partners, such as the EU, are introducing “carbon border adjustment pricing” mechanisms that will impose costs on imports from countries like Australia with weak emissions reduction policies.
- The UK has firmly linked stronger action on climate change to the impending Australia-UK trade agreement.
- The timetable for these threats to materialise is short, as global attention is now focused on how to cut emissions by 50-60% by 2030.
- Consumer preference for ethical “low-carbon” farm products may well emerge, like the trend for free-range eggs labelling in the poultry sector.

The concept that a globally-linked sector such as agriculture will get a cost- and risk-free ride without consequence is a fantasy that the Nationals should no longer promote.

Potential opportunities

These are also rarely discussed but should be, as the basis of a fully-informed debate.

A recent Business Council of Australia report¹¹ recently predicted an \$890 billion boost to economic activity as a result of dramatically cutting carbon emissions, and the creation of 195,000 jobs over the next five decades; particularly in regional areas.

Agriculture should not be denied access to these opportunities by being excluded from emission reduction programs.

Community support

Politicians who oppose stronger action on climate change are seriously out of touch with their constituents. A recent ACF YouGov poll¹² found that a strong majority of voters in every electorate favoured stronger action on climate change.

Every state and territory has embraced such action, often with supported policies.

Major sector and industry bodies, such as the BCA, the National Farmers Federation, Irrigation Australia, the Meat and Livestock Council and the Minerals and Exploration Council, are all committed to net zero by 2050, and in some cases earlier.

The Federal Government needs to step up and set globally acceptable goals, supported by strong plans with a bias for near-term action. Failure to do so will jeopardise investment in Australia and create unnecessary economic and political risks.

Conclusion

There are no compelling reasons why agriculture should be exempt from reaching net zero emissions and plenty of reasons why it should embrace the potential opportunities.

Farmers should strongly resist the Nationals’ current policy position as it is not in their best interests. One could also argue that the Nationals are more interested in meeting the needs of their major donors, the coal mining industry, than representing farmers.

About Us.

Wellington Climate Action Network is a group of concerned Gippsland residents pushing for effective climate action at all levels of government. We believe communities are part of the solution, and individual actions matter.



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[Wellington Climate Action Network](https://www.facebook.com/WellingtonClimateActionNetwork)

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¹⁰ [Australian competitiveness in global capital markets relies on a strong response to climate risk](#) (24-Sep-21)

¹¹ [Achieving a net zero economy](#) (09-Oct-21).

¹² [Australia’s Biggest Poll](#) (30th-Aug-2021).