

AUSTRALIA'S 2035 CLIMATE TARGET WWF BRIEF

June 2010 Sunlight illuminates the coral at the Great Barrier Reef
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A STRONG SCIENCE-ALIGNED 2035 CLIMATE TARGET

- By signing the Paris Agreement, Australia entered a binding treaty with 194 other state parties to pursue efforts to limit global average warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.
- The Australian Government has promised neighboring Pacific countries that it is committed to keeping 1.5°C alive and to doing Australia's part to stop dangerous climate change. To keep this promise **Australia must commit to a new emissions reduction target of at least 90% below 2005 levels by 2035 and net zero before 2040.**
- Climate science shows that this is **Australia's last chance. The climate mitigation policy commitments and actions taken over the next two years will determine whether stabilising warming to 1.5°C by the end of the century remains a possibility, or whether it will slip from our grasp.**¹
- A strong and science-aligned 2035 climate target and supporting National Climate Plan² will support the safety and prosperity of all Australians. It will enhance our food security, protect us from worsening floods, fires and cyclones, attract investment and new industry in the regions, improve our international standing, especially in the Pacific, and determine the survival of our iconic reefs, forests and wildlife. An inadequate target and National Climate Plan may see the Great Barrier Reef added to the list of World Heritage in Danger, this time next year.
- The economic evidence is clear. The greater the ambition on climate action, the more benefits for Australian businesses, workers and communities. Scientific and economic evidence shows that a strong, science-aligned 2035 emissions reduction target will build safer communities and a stronger economy. It will inspire investor confidence, support clean industries and strengthen our trade and diplomatic relationships.

A STRONG 2035 TARGET PROTECTS AUSTRALIA'S NATURE

The best available climate science shows that **for Australia's 2035 emissions reduction target to support global efforts to limit temperatures to 1.5°C, it must be at least 90% below 2005 levels by 2035 and net zero by 2038.**³ Even if the 1.5°C threshold is temporarily exceeded, the target remains both legally and scientifically relevant.⁴ Every fraction of a degree matters – governments must focus on minimising any overshoot and returning to safer levels as quickly as possible.⁵

The devastating impacts of climate change are causing irreversible damage to our iconic places and wildlife, including:

Reefs

- Most of the world's coral reefs, including Australia's Great Barrier Reef, Ningaloo Reef and Great Southern Reef will be all but gone at 2°C of warming. Stabilising warming at 1.5°C will mean parts of these coral reef ecosystems can survive.
- The Great Barrier Reef has suffered six mass bleaching events in the last decade, much worse than UNESCO's predicted worst case scenario.⁶
- The World Heritage Committee requires that Australia set further ambitious targets to limit temperature increases consistent with limiting global temperature to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and align its policies accordingly.⁷
- The unfolding catastrophe's across our oceans, from the Great Barrier Reef to the coral bleaching on the Ningaloo Reef⁸ and the algal bloom wreaking havoc across South Australia,⁹ are a dire warning of the climate impacts to come. Action is critical this decade to give coral reefs and the coastal communities and tourism businesses who rely on them any chance of a thriving future.

Forests

- A 2024 WWF and Deakin University report¹⁰ demonstrates that if climate change causes a 2°C increase in temperature, one of the nation's rarest and most colourful birds will lose 62% of its habitat.
- That loss of habitat, combined with other human-caused impacts, could wipe out the purple-crowned fairy-wren. But holding warming to 1.5°C would retain 61% of its habitat – enough to give the species a fighting chance.
- At 2°C, Queensland's rainforest ringtail possums, like the green ringtail and lemuroid ringtail, also face extinction. Rainforest ringtails previously occurred from 350–450 metres altitude and higher.
- Over the last 20 years, because of climate change, they have retracted to cooler habitat at higher altitudes and are now rarely observed below 700 metres.
- At 1.5°C of warming, these species will still experience serious challenges, but their habitats could still offer some refuge. But at 2°C, the increased frequency of extreme heatwaves is predicted to trigger crashes in populations as the ringtails struggle to survive for more than four days above 30 degrees.

A STRONG 2035 TARGET IS AN ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Climateworks Centre's detailed decarbonisation scenario modelling shows Australia can reduce emissions by 85% below 2005 levels by 2035 and reach net zero by 2039.¹¹

- Australia has abundant renewable resources to enable a transition to a zero-carbon economy before 2040. This presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to replace fossil fuel exports with renewable energy exports, positioning Australia as a renewable energy superpower.¹² Doing so will drive down Australia's in-country emissions and lead to further opportunities for increasing the 2030 and 2035 emissions reduction targets by avoiding the significant Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions of new fossil fuel projects.
- The best available science shows that continued and expanded fossil fuel development is inconsistent with Australia's obligations under the Paris Agreement.¹³ It also locks Australia into an old economic system that is incompatible with a global economy that is rapidly decarbonising its supply chains.
- With the introduction of the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), and many other countries – including Australia's key trading partners – exploring similar approaches to address carbon leakage, business as usual is no longer an economically viable option. Failure to adapt to the growing demand for green iron and steel, for example, could spell the end of Australia's more than \$130bn annual iron ore exports, costing tens of thousands of jobs and billions in lost royalties and tax revenue.¹⁴
- The economic and policy priorities of the Australian Government should, therefore, be on supporting rapid domestic decarbonisation and supporting new clean exports. Research from Accenture, developed in a partnership with business and union leaders alongside environmental NGOs, notes that with the right investment Australia can reach a globally leading position in clean exports.¹⁵ Five priority clean exports, including green iron, could provide AU\$314 billion per annum in revenue by 2040.
- Strong climate targets catalyse new economic opportunities. For example, a 2021 Clean Energy Council survey found that 79% of renewable energy investors said a higher national emissions target would increase their investment confidence.¹⁶
- Meanwhile, more than 150 major European businesses and investors have urged the EU to adopt a bold 2040 emissions reduction target of at least 90%, stating that a "robust climate target" will bring economic opportunities and competitiveness benefits while increasing energy security."¹⁷ In Denmark, a legislated target to reduce emissions by at least 70% by 2030 has been critical in providing policy stability, a "consistent framework for investment" and sends strong signals to the renewable energy industry, resulting in a surge of renewable energy investment and employment.¹⁸

- ¹ United Nations Environment Programme (2024). [Emissions Gap Report 2024: No more hot air ... please!](#) a massive gap between rhetoric and reality, countries draft new climate commitments.
<https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/46404>.
- ² "National Climate Plan" refers to Australia's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement.
- ³ iii Meinshausen, M. and Nicholls, Z. (2023). Updated assessment of Australia's emission reduction targets and 1.5°C pathways. Independent expert report commissioned by WWF-Australia,
https://www.climate-resource.com/reports/wwf/20230612_WWF-Aus-Targets.pdf
- ⁴ J. Rogelj, L. Rajamani, Science 10.1126/science.ady1186 (2025) [The pursuit of 1.5°C endures as a legal and ethical imperative in a changing world | Science](#)
- ⁵ Rogelj, J (2024) "The 1.5°C Target for Global Warming Must Prevail" <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ambitious-global-warming-target-still-feasible-and-necessary-by-joeri-rogelj-2024-06>
- ⁶ WWF-Australia media release, July 2025, [The Reef's World Heritage status at risk; Australia's climate policy a critical factor](#); WWF-Australia media release, April 2024, [Great Barrier Reef hammered by widespread coral bleaching event - WWF-Australia](#) and Byrne, M., Waller, A., Clements, M., Kelly, A.S., Kingsford, M.J., Liu, B., Reymond, C.E., Vila-Concejo, A., Webb, M., Whitton, K. and Foo, S.A. (2025), Catastrophic bleaching in protected reefs of the Southern Great Barrier Reef. Limnol. Oceanogr. Lett, 10: 340–348. <https://doi.org/10.1002/lol2.10456>.
- ⁸ [Scientists say 'devastating' Ningaloo Reef coral bleaching puts ancient colonies at risk - ABC News](#)
- ⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-07-21/sa-murray-watt-in-adelaide-algal-bloom-funding/105554050>
- ¹⁰ WWF-Australia, December 2024, Wildlife on the Brink – The need for Strong Climate Action. The urgent call for 1.5°C aligned ambition to save our wildlife.
https://assets.wwf.org.au/image/upload/f_pdf/Final_Climate_Species_report_Designed
- ¹¹ Climateworks Centre (2023) Climateworks Centre decarbonisation scenarios 2023, <https://www.climateworkscentre.org/scenarios2023>
- ¹² Joint statement from WWF-Australia, ACF, BCA and ACTU, 7 September 2022, ["Act now to create a renewable export industry"](#) and Mazengarb, Michal, 13 October 2021, ["Renewable exports worth more than coal and gas, will create more jobs"](#).
- ¹³ IPCC, 2023: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, 184 pp., doi: 10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647. Paragraph B.5, Page 19: "Projected CO2 emissions from existing fossil fuel infrastructure without additional abatement would exceed the remaining carbon budget for 1.5°C (50%) (high confidence)."
https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_FullVolume.pdf;
- ¹⁴ Bowen, J, Wyche, N (2024) Australia's Green Iron Key
https://assets.wwf.org.au/image/upload/file_WWF_Green_Iron_Report?_a=ATO2Ba20
- ¹⁵ Accenture, September 2023, Report: ["Sunshot - Achieving Global Leadership in Clean Exports"](#); and WWF-Australia policy proposals to accelerate Australia to become a renewable superpower available online here: [WWF-Australia Climate Renewables Australia](#)
- ¹⁶ <https://www.energymagazine.com.au/state-climate-targets-boosting-renewables-investor-confidence/>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.corporateleadersgroup.com/news/business-and-investors-call-eu-set-greenhouse-gas-emissions-reduction-target-least-90-2040>
- ¹⁸ <https://climateinstitute.ca/publications/managing-a-just-transition-in-denmark/>

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