

# A SHORE THING

When the Coalition government led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott was elected this year, it was hardly a secret that big changes to environmental policy were coming down the line.

After a campaign dominated by the promises of axing the carbon tax, slashing 'green tape' and a big reduction in environmental bureaucracy it didn't take long for many of the previous government's key structures of influence to feel the knife.

One of the new government's first highly symbolic acts was to abolish the Climate Commission as a "cost-cutting measure" and sack its high profile chief commissioner Tim Flannery.

The Climate Commission was then relaunched as the 'Climate Council' – an independent non-profit 'think tank' disconnected from taxpayer funding and now seeking support through the public's generosity through donations.

Environmental issues have always generated political friction, and not just on the stereotype of a left versus right divide. As the resources boom spread across Australia, many traditionally conservative farming and livestock interests became deeply ambivalent over the development of Coal Seam Gas and mining they believe encroaches on their livelihoods.

Yet behind all the acrimony and rhetoric over the issue of a carbon tax or emissions trading scheme, the fact remains that the new government's pledge to instigate a series of 'Direct Action' measures is aimed at meeting a reduced greenhouse gas emissions target – even if many of the specifics are still to be fleshed out fully.

The head and shoulders of the 'Direct Action' plan are to address soil carbons and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by five per cent by 2020 without what need for what the Coalition calls "a damaging, economy-wide tax".

Local and state governments across Australia are now actively contemplating what a post-carbon tax future will mean to them in terms revenue measures, investments and offsets. They necessarily need to weigh-up the future of their existing environmental expenditure, future projects and overall stance – whether it's buying hybrid

The change of government has drawn plenty of attention to the issue of taxing carbon. But focus on the ground is now shifting to what will happen to existing coastal council plans to deal with predicted changes in sea levels and the weather, **Paul Hemsley** reports.

light commercial vehicles, opting for co-generation or tri-generation powered infrastructure or dealing with methane from landfill.

As is often the case, the simplicity of rhetoric is betrayed by the complexity of reality. It is believed that energy efficient infrastructure like LED street lighting not only abates carbon emissions, it has been designed to reduce electricity bills – and potentially revenue to state owned providers. The same scenario confronts water.

In the case of densely populated local governments of the City of Sydney and the City of Melbourne, both were quick to take-on the issue of reducing carbon emissions through measures and policies and were subsequently declared ‘carbon neutral’ by the federal government’s independent carbon offsetting authority Low Carbon Australia.

Even further beneath the headlines of a battle between so-called climate change sceptics and believers is an even more serious and long term risk mitigation plan that has been supported by almost all sides of politics.

As scientists warned the earth’s climbing temperatures could lead to a rise in sea levels and extreme weather events, the federal government believed it was necessary to create a plan that would help local communities “adapt” to these potential catastrophes.

The Department of Climate Change, along with some councils, went as far as to suggest a “planned retreat” from the coast for some communities if necessary.

Gradually rising sea levels and temperatures are certainly one issue being contemplated, but a more immediate threat for many coastal communities is the impact of coastal erosion that stems from wild weather and threatens to swallow houses.

As a direct response to the threats faced by coastal communities, the federal government created the National Climate Change Adaptation Program in July 2004, which included the establishment of the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) based at Griffith University as well as the Climate Adaptation Flagship at the CSIRO.

A core element of these programs was to help communities living on the coast of Australia to defend themselves against potential storm surges, erosion and even flooding of their homes or streets.

The possible damage to infrastructure remains a pressing problem for coastal councils which are often unable to wear the potentially crippling long term costs of dealing with the notion of oceans flooding further into towns and properties.

As Australia’s folklore attests, flooding is far from just a coastal issue.

This became prominently evident in Queensland when communities were evacuated as towns flooded in 2010/11 and

again in 2012/13, causing unprecedented damage to homes and infrastructure totalling in the billions of dollars.

Thus with a literally vested interest in determining the environmental risks of climate change – insurers soon voted with their wallets and adjusted premiums to reflect where they felt there is real exposure.

## COAST GUARD

When Kevin Rudd’s government was elected in 2007, it followed heated debate over the previous Howard Coalition government’s reluctance to ratify the Kyoto Protocol of 1992.

Yet despite its seeming opposition to participation in global agreements, the Howard government nonetheless laid the foundation for not only climate change adaptation schemes but also the more controversial Carbon Emissions Trading Scheme.

Thus it was hardly surprising that the incoming Labor government of the day would seek to build on measures targeted at allowing local communities to address their vulnerability to potential climate changes.

The government did this by funding \$126 million to communities in November 2010 to conduct studies into how they could adapt their infrastructure to deal with these potential problems.

A key part of this scheme was the Coastal Adaptation Decision Pathways program worth \$4.5 million, where 13 projects commenced in June/July 2011 and concluded in June 2012.

Far from being any kind of physical infrastructure investment, this funding was meant to enable councils to conduct studies into the risks threatening their communities and assets and gather information about the costs and benefits of different adaptation solutions.

The studies included a diverse range of projects conducted by local government associations, individual councils and the Sydney Coastal Councils Group.

Some projects even included looking at potential impacts of climate change on coastal caravan parks because of their exposure to potential impacts of climate change, which could have devastating consequences on local tourism.

## BIPARTISAN ADAPTATION

Following the conclusion of these projects, it was then up to the councils themselves to follow through with those adaptation studies and implement their own solutions.

As the federal government’s Climate Change Adaptation Project wasn’t meant to provide funding for capital works to create more resilient infrastructure, councils would then need to source funding themselves through normal state and federal government channels.

But the federal government’s funding and commitment to adaptation research

doesn’t appear to have been directly targeted for cuts following the election of the Coalition government.

The new government’s fierce campaign against the carbon tax was notably contrasted by the Minister for Environment Greg Hunt’s pre-election commitment of \$9 million over three years to NCCARF.

Although the funding has yet to be approved by Treasury, this commitment from the Coalition appears to have given the CSIRO some confidence that that the government will act to improve the resilience of coastal communities.

CSIRO Climate Adaptation Flagship science director, Dr Mark Stafford Smith, says there’s a sense that at the national level attention is returning to dealing with extreme events as well as present and future climate risks to infrastructure.

“The Queensland floods and the bushfires in NSW have really focused peoples’ minds on the extreme events that we’re experiencing right now,” Dr Smith says.

Dr Smith told *Government News* that peoples’ minds are focused on how resilience can be built in the future rather than having to recover from them because of the consequential costs and injuries.

“We can put a bit more effort into trying to make ourselves resilient to the future and when we start doing that, you want to do it to the conditions that we’re facing today,” Dr Smith says.

Although Mr Hunt made the commitment to continue funding to NCCARF, the Coalition’s recent moves to abolish the carbon tax and defund the Climate Commission might yet be a cause for discomfort for communities on the frontline.

Mr Hunt’s office didn’t respond to *Government News’* enquiry on what will happen to the adaptation projects in the long term.

Sydney Coastal Councils Group regional coastal environment officer Geoff Withycombe says there has been anticipation of some commitment from Greg Hunt and the Abbott government on how the Canberra will be addressing the critical issue of adaptation research and practice in the future.

“We are concerned about various cuts in the various agencies and we’re waiting more about the future of a national approach to adaptation will be,” Mr Withycombe says.

Mr Withycombe told *Government News* that if there is no investment or any leadership in this regard from the federal government, “we’d be most concerned”.

He says there have been significant programs and staff being reassigned to other agencies within the federal departments, “so we’re waiting for some commitment”. **GN**