Submission to the Climate Change Authority

Caps and Targets Review

From: Sustainable Population Australia

30 May 2013

Sustainable Population Australia is an environmental charity deeply committed to ecological sustainability. We consider it imperative that Australia does all it can to minimise further anthropogenic climate change.

Australia's future population policy choices will have highly significant impacts on our greenhouse gas emissions, and on the effort, costs and risks of reducing emissions in line with our international 'fair share'. The Climate Change Authority's Caps and Targets Issues Paper is remiss in failing to mention future population possibilities and their impacts.

Recent Australian governments have chosen to impose very rapid population growth. In the six years between 2003 and 2009, population growth almost doubled. After a brief dip in response to public concern, growth has resurged in the past 18 months. In the year to September 2012, Australian resident population grew by 1.7%. Recent accounts of increases in all visa classes suggest that current growth rate is significantly higher, possibly around the 2% achieved in 2009. This is by far the highest growth rate among rich nations, and higher than the global average.

The reasons for these policies are not the focus of this submission. Even if the claims of economic benefit were true, they would not provide ethical grounds to impose a higher burden on the global atmosphere. It is at least relevant to note that there is no evidence at all that the claimed benefits exist or will ever exist, and in fact population growth is responsible for expanding deficits at all levels of government.[1] Hence it cannot even be claimed that population growth will provide the economic means to implement the transition to a low carbon economy. On the contrary, it is creating ever more pressure to expand coal and gas exports to balance our rising import bills.

Without interventions from the Federal government, Australia's growth rate would have followed a natural decline, towards stabilizing before mid-century. This stabilisation process is characteristic of the final stage of demographic transition, from high mortality with high fertility to low mortality with low fertility. An Australian Academy of Science review of Australia's population options in 1994 noted that we were likely to peak at between 23 million and 35 million. They concluded that "In our view, the quality of all aspects of our children's lives will be maximized if the population of Australia by the mid-21st Century is kept to the low, stable end of the achievable range".

[1] O'Sullivan JN. 2012. The burden of durable asset acquisition in growing populations. Economic Affairs 32(1): 31-37. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0270.2011.02125.x/abstract;jsessionid=9079E4E881757354969065CEA605CD52.d04t04

We have already passed 23 million, decades earlier than 1990's projections. If we maintained a growth rate of 1.7% per annum, we would reach 43 million in 2050 and 100 million during the year 2100. We are almost certainly exceeding that rate now. Alternative policies, merely limiting the immigration quotas and removing pronatalist propaganda and direct incentives for large families, could yet cause Australia's population to stabilise around 26 million. Current government policies are therefore choosing to quadruple the task of decarbonising the Australian economy.

Australia's population policies have impacts beyond Australia. The false arguments of economic benefit have deterred developing countries in our region from making efforts to stabilise their own populations. Overpopulation is impoverishing them, and causing unemployment, crime and civil unrest. The chance of achieving sustainable development in these countries is diminished each year their population grows, as is the chance of preserving remaining forests and reefs.

The Caps and Targets Review should note that Australia's low 2020 target (compared with most developed countries) was justified by Kevin Rudd on the basis that it requires *per capita* reductions comparable with the EU's. It is not ethically defensible that we choose to encumber ourselves with a population growth rate that diminishes our mitigation contribution.

Likewise, Australia's fair and defensible share of future emissions must not be inflated by discretionary population growth. This merely pushes greater responsibility onto other nations, which is unfair.

The argument that immigrants are merely moving and not adding to global emissions is problematic in a number of ways. Firstly, Australia would have to reach agreement with the sending nation, to the effect that they continue to count their emigrant's emissions in their national accounts, even though the emissions occur in Australia. Alternatively, they would have to reduce their emissions in proportion to their net emigration (regardless of what their total population is doing) to compensate for Australia setting targets on a per capita basis. Neither of these options seems feasible. Secondly, a person moving from almost anywhere in the world to Australia would be likely to increase their per capita emissions substantially. Sheeting these increases home to the sending country is not remotely plausible.

Recent research has calculated that, if the global population follows the UN's low projection rather than the medium projection, this change alone would account for 16-29% of the emissions reductions needed by 2050, and could reduce fossil fuel demand by 37-41% by the end of the century.[2] Such a contribution should not be ignored, while the probability of remaining under 2^{o}C warming remains remote without it.

Clearly Australia's ethical response to the climate change must include choosing a low population path, consistent with a low global population. Because our per capita emissions are among the highest in the world, our responsibility to minimise further population growth is even greater than other countries.

[2] O'Neill BC, Dalton M, Fuchs R, Jiang L, Pachaui S, Zigova K (2010) Global demographic trends and future carbon emissions. Proc Natl Acad Sci 107:17521-17526.

It is further in Australia's interest, since a lower population will minimise the carbon price required to meet any given target. If our 2050 population passes 40 million, the cost of providing renewable energy capacity equal to all of Australia's current coal and gas would be expended with no benefit to the planet, just to extend energy supply to added people. If, instead, it stabilises with only 15% more people, the same effort would achieve our responsible 2050 target (based on global per capita convergence).

We understand that the Climate Change Authority is not in a position to make recommendations to government concerning population policy. However, it is entirely within the Authority's remit to note that a range of possible population outcomes exist, and to assess the extent to which these outcomes affect Australia's capacity to meet responsible targets for emissions reductions.

Recent population growth is clearly a relevant contribution of government policy to drivers of change in Australia's emissions since 1990. Likewise, population should feature in any evaluation framework to assess Australia's future progress.

It would be political censorship, not to make reference to the impact of population change, and to the extent to which it may vary within feasible policy settings. We are used to population growth being referred to as the "elephant in the room". However, wilful blindness in the face of a planetary emergency would be an unthinkable travesty.

Submission prepared by Jane O'Sullivan
On behalf of the National Executive,
Sustainable Population Australia Inc.
PO Box 3851,
Weston Creek, ACT 2611
Phone: 02 6288 6810
E-Mail:info@population.org.au
Web: www.population.org.au