16th January 2013

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Submission to the Inquiry into recent trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) welcomes the Inquiry by the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications into the important issue of trends and preparedness for extreme weather events. Our submission addresses point (c)-(f) of the terms of reference for the Inquiry.

Communicating trends in extreme weather events to Australians

ACF relies on high quality science and research when developing our policy on climate change, and when communicating the causes, impacts and solutions to climate change to Australians. Since 2006 ACF has hosted and managed The Climate Reality Project Australia, the Australian branch of Al Gore's climate change leadership program. Through the program, we support more than 330 active volunteer Climate Leaders in Australia and provide broader support to hundreds more in the Asia-Pacific region. These dedicated volunteers come from all walks of life. ACF provides them with regularly updated material drawn from the latest peer reviewed climate science, and they present this personally to friends, colleagues and people in their communities; as well as actively engaging with the media and elected representatives. Australian Climate Leaders have now presented the science, impacts and solutions to climate change to more than 1 in 60 Australians.

Climate Leaders regularly talk to Australians about the relationship between climate change and extreme weather events in Australia. They have found that this helps Australians understand and build preparedness for both climate change and extreme weather events. There is large body of climate change science on the connection between climate change and extreme weather events. However, our experience has been that there are areas where additional scientific research is needed, and for better communication of existing science.

Areas for improvement in the communication of trends in extreme weather events

Our work with Climate Leaders and their diverse audiences has helped us better understand the gaps in communications material and their work would be benefit greatly if the following issues where addressed;

1. **Local, specific information**
   Extreme weather events are geographically specific, and not consistent across the nation or even within any one state. Wherever possible, extreme weather trends need to be as granular as possible. Specific sea level inundation assessments for vulnerable cities such as Cairns are good examples of local, specific extreme weather assessments. This level of specificity is not found across the nation and across the spectrum of extreme weather types.

2. **Communication of risk and probability**
   Communication of low likelihood, high impact events with multiple causes is difficult for any societal issue. ACF and our Climate Leaders have experimented with different metaphors and similar examples to see which best communicates the established fact that while bushfires, heatwaves and tropical storms have always been a part of Australian life, climate change increases their frequency and intensity. If concerted research was carried out to identify how best to communicate the risks of climate change and extreme weather, and this communication then put into practice, Australians would be more prepared for extreme weather events.

3. **Consistent timeframes**
   At present, different timeframes are used for different extreme weather observations and projections. For example, projections of days over 35 degrees are carried out for 2030 and 2070, while bushfire weather projections are carried out for 2020 and 2050. This can be confusing for communicating extreme weather risks.

4. **Reducing extreme weather risks by reducing emissions**
   In public health, prevention is better than a cure. The same applies for climate change-fuelled extreme weather. Greenhouse gas emissions to date have already changed the climate and increased the frequency and intensity of many extreme weather events in Australia. Reducing global greenhouse gas emissions reduces the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, and is far cheaper and less complex than trying to adapt to them in the decades to come. In many cases, adaptation is not an option, especially for vulnerable human systems and ecosystems.

Recommendations

To increase the ability of Australians and Australian institutions to understand the impact of climate change on extreme weather, and work together to prevent further increases in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, the Committee should recommend;

1. That the Climate Change Commission develops a national extreme weather map, which provides region and city level projections for heat waves, bushfire weather, tropical storms and flooding from ocean inundation or large precipitation events. The projections would be for scenarios with, and without action to reduce global greenhouse emissions.

2. That the Climate Change Commission carries out communications research to identify the best methods for communicating climate change extreme weather risks, in close coordination with emergency service, insurance and health organisations.

Authorised by Don Henry, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Conservation Foundation, Floor 1, 60 Leicester Street, Carlton VIC 3053