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

**RE: Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References  
Committee - Inquiry into Algal Blooms in South Australia**

Surfers for Climate is a national, non-partisan organisation founded by surfers and ocean lovers to protect what we love from the impacts of climate change. We work with coastal communities to share their experiences and help shape positive change.

We have over 14,000 members across Australia with 258 residing in South Australia. We work closely with organisations on the ground in South Australia, such as the Great Southern Reef Foundation, and were initially alerted to South Australian harmful algal bloom (bloom) through our members and these partners. While like many, we had initial hopes that this bloom would pass with the onset of winter, it became clear by July that this wouldn't be the case. As our members in particular continued to raise the alarm directly with us over the growing presence of the bloom, Surfers for Climate made the decision to travel to South Australia and visit the most impacted regions. We spent much of July documenting the impact of the bloom on the communities who know the ocean best - those who live, work and play on its shores. The stories we heard were harrowing: surf competitions cancelled, tourism businesses shuttered, bait sales dropping by 80%, and a growing sense of helplessness as residents watched their coastline turn toxic.

From this, Surfers for Climate developed a short film titled '*Sea Sick*', which is available for viewing online along with a petition calling on the Federal Government to take various steps, including changes to natural disaster definitions.<sup>1</sup> The content of this petition forms the basis of our recommendations to this inquiry. As of the submission date, this petition has almost 1,000 signatures. '*Sea Sick*' will also screen publicly at the South Australia Nature Festival

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<sup>1</sup> Surfers for Climate, '*Sea Sick*,' July 2025, available at, <https://surfersforclimate.org.au/pages/sea-sick>

on October 10th.<sup>2</sup> Many South Australian's we spoke to during the filming of 'Sea Sick' have been quoted in this submission.

We thank the Senate for establishing this inquiry and hope this submission gives voice to the communities on the frontlines. Their words should ring as a wake-up call from the ocean itself and we urge this committee to listen to these voices and take action that ensures this tragedy does not become the new normal.

## Recommendations

While we acknowledge that the existing disaster criteria federally is centered on disasters which require what could be considered more urgent crisis funding, we believe that this approach needs to be revisited as Australia is forced to deal with the reality of climate change, a reality that includes disasters which are often more drawn out with longer term impacts.

1. **Update disaster criteria** so climate-driven marine events can trigger natural disaster funding. If it's not recognised as a natural disaster, it can't be declared as one.
2. **Declare a natural disaster** right now and unlock further urgent funding for affected communities, scientists and small businesses.
3. Commit **Federal support for long-term ocean health**. This includes reef restoration, habitat rebuilding, and real climate adaptation strategies.
4. **Set a strong 2035 climate target**. Australia's next climate target will shape our safety, economy and international standing for the next decade. We deserve a strong target that will protect us from escalating disasters.

## Environmental and Climate Drivers: The Impacts of Climate Change

The devastating bloom that spread across South Australia's coastline is a symptom of a changing climate and a warming ocean.<sup>3</sup> For years, scientists, marine ecologists and coastal communities have been sounding the alarm: these events are increasing in frequency, severity and duration, and will continue to escalate without meaningful climate action.<sup>4</sup> The Australian Government's own Department of Climate Change warned of an increased risk of harmful algal blooms as early as 2009.<sup>5</sup> While multiple environmental factors are likely at play, including nutrient runoff, changes in water salinity, and warm stagnant conditions, it is essential to acknowledge the broader driver intensifying these events: climate change.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is also important to note that climate change is an intermediary villain. Pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere is the real cause, and without bold action to reduce

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<sup>2</sup> Nature Festival, accessed 13 August 2025, available at, <https://www.naturefestival.org.au/>.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Geographic, Sheree Marris, 'Algae Armageddon,' 29 July 2025, available at, <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/science-environment/2025/07/algae-armageddon/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Climate Council, 'Code Blue: Our Oceans in Crisis,' 2023, available at, [https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CC\\_MVSA0383-CC-Report-on-Oceans\\_V8-FA-Screen-Single.pdf](https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CC_MVSA0383-CC-Report-on-Oceans_V8-FA-Screen-Single.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Climate Change, 'Climate Change Risks to Australia's Coasts,' 2009, pg. 59, available at, <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/cc-risks-full-report.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Great Southern Reef Foundation, Janine Baker, 'Is the harmful algal bloom (HAB) in South Australia still harming?' June 2025, available at, <https://greatsouthernreef.com/2025-algal-bloom-june-update>.

emissions and protect ocean health, events like this will no longer be rare, they will become the new normal.

### **Ecological Impact: A Coastline on the Brink of Collapse**

The South Australian Coastline is home to a vast area of the Great Southern Reef, which supports a huge amount of Australia's marine biodiversity.<sup>7</sup> Sadly however, the increasing threats to this unique Australian gem are pushing it to the brink of collapse.

Dr Georgina Wood, a Marine Ecologist at Flinders University shared with Surfers for Climate that entire ecological communities may potentially collapse under the weight of these changes, with the recent algal bloom having a severe impact:

*"We went out to have a look at the state of our reefs a month ago, we surveyed 14 sites and observed less than half the number of species commonly found across these sites."*

This mass mortality event has shocked South Australia's coastal communities, with reports of large snapper, rays, dolphins and seals washing up across the coast.<sup>8</sup> As Brad Martin of OzFish SA described in an interview with Surfers for Climate:

*"Seacliff is my local beach. After the first big storm I went down and found a meter and a half long snapper washed up, which I wasn't expecting. That was the first time that we've really seen them recorded washing up. And suddenly, after those few days, there were dozens of them up and down the coastline. It's just been wave after wave of dead animals."*

### **Economic Impact: Businesses Struggling**

South Australia's marine economy is sizable and growing, with particular contribution stemming from Australia's Great Southern Reef.<sup>9</sup> The fisheries and aquaculture sectors alone produced approximately \$478 million of stock in 2023-24.<sup>10</sup> These industries are heavily reliant on healthy oceans, and this bloom has delivered a sharp economic blow to them, particularly recreational and commercial fishing, tourism, and surfing-based businesses.<sup>11</sup>

RecFish SA Executive Officer Asher Deztery noted to Surfers for Climate the impact on small businesses:

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<sup>7</sup> CSIRO Publishing, Scott Bennett et al, 'The 'Great Southern Reef': social, ecological and economic value of Australia's neglected kelp forests,' 27 August, 2015, available at, <https://www.publish.csiro.au/mf/Fulltext/mf15232>.

<sup>8</sup> The Sydney Morning Herald, Caitlin Fitzsimmons, 'A dead shark, dead rays, dead fish, dead cuttlefish': The toxic algal bloom is spreading' 21 July, 2025, available at, <https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/a-dead-shark-dead-rays-dead-fish-dead-cuttlefish-the-toxic-algal-bloom-is-spreading-20250721-p5mgqs.html>.

<sup>9</sup> The Conversation, Thomas Wernberg et al, 'Australia's 'other' reef is worth more than \$10 billion a year - but have you heard of it?' 17 August, 2015, available at, <https://theconversation.com/australias-other-reef-is-worth-more-than-10-billion-a-year-but-have-you-heard-of-it-45600#:~:text=Introducing%20the%20Great%20Southern%20Reef&text=This%20biological%20powerhouse%20provides%20both,truely%20a%20Great%20Southern%20Reef>.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Primary Industries and Regions, 'Seafood Toolkit,' 30 June, 2025, available at, [https://pir.sa.gov.au/primary\\_industry/industry\\_support/toolkit/seafood?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://pir.sa.gov.au/primary_industry/industry_support/toolkit/seafood?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>11</sup> ABC, Josephine Lim, 'South Australian businesses lose trade because of toxic algal bloom, survey finds,' 11 August, 2025, available at, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-11/harmful-algal-bloom-causes-sa-businesses-to-lose-trade/105634018>, and,

*“We're seeing a large number of tackle stores with a reduction of sales up to 40%, and a reduction of bait sales of up to 80%. This is having a profound impact on small businesses.”*

Chris Kingston, a local surf camp operator told Surfers for Climate that he had to shut down entirely by April, stating that:

*“People stopped coming down here. I tried to keep doing lessons, but numbers dropped lower and lower... Literally, we're 500 meters from the beach here. We couldn't even go outside for a couple of weekends. The air quality was so bad.”*

### **Community & Health Impacts: Empty Beaches and Sick Communities**

Beyond impacts on businesses, this bloom event is affecting people's health and how they connect with the ocean: emotionally, culturally and socially. It's keeping people out of the water, severing deep ties between ocean and identity. Residents reported to Surfers for Climate feelings of grief, confusion, and anxiety as their coasts changed before their eyes.

Shane Forbes, owner of Daily Grind Surf Shop and President of Seaford Boardriders, shared with Surfers for Climate that:

*“We actually cancelled a surf comp... We just said, wow, we're not comfortable sending the kids out in this stuff. That's never happened before in South Australian surfing.”*

The reality of this decision was then reflected by a young surfer we spoke to:

*“I've been avoiding the beach a bit... I haven't gone on any beach walks or anything, because I'm kind of just worried about what I'll see... I don't want to see hundreds of dead animals on the beach.”*

Leighton Clarke (a local surfboard repairer known as the *Ding King*) shared his reflection on those who were left to deal with the bloom's impacts:

*“As soon as the onshores came up, they were closing the windows of their houses. They were getting sick. They were coughing. It's been going on for a long time now and has been quite devastating.”*

Richard Coombe, retired ranger and sailor, described to Surfers for Climate how even a simple regatta became hazardous:

*“We had a race out here... and you could hear people on other boats coughing. Then myself, I started being affected... the eyes started watering. Nobody knew what it was.”*

This uncertainty, lack of information, and slow official response has deepened community frustration. The emotional toll is real, and rising.

Zoë Brooks, owner of the Good Bank Gallery and local mum, summed up the community sentiment:

*“People can see there's this massive marine fatality event that's occurred, and they don't want to admit it could be from climate change... It's easier to blame something*

*else than take responsibility for our own actions as humans on this earth... I paddled out the other day and there was just nothing, nothing around. And the impact and feeling of seeing that...I haven't been able to go down the beach as much because of the devastation of seeing marine life washed up on the sand... it's quite damaging to you."*

### **First Nations Cultural Impacts: Loss of Connection**

While this submission defers to First Nations People to speak for themselves, Surfers for Climate's conversations with Jeffrey Kropinyeri of the Ramindjeri People - the Traditional Owners of the Port Elliot and Victor Harbour region - only confirm what should be obvious: blooms like this have profound cultural impacts:

*"We normally go down and get cockles, we can't do that now.... that's one of our biggest food sources... Is it going to be five years before it's any good to eat... if ever... in my life I probably will never, ever eat them again"*

*"I'm unable to teach my grandsons about cockling, you know. And that's something that I did with my grandparents... And so, you know, every time there's something getting skipped and you lose it... it's really sad."*

We urge the Committee to prioritise meaningful engagement with First Nations People as part of recovery and future planning.