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Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Submission on Senate Inquiry into Australia's environment

The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Inquiry Australia's environment.

ACF is committed to inspiring people to achieve a healthy environment for all Australians. For almost 50 years ACF has been a strong voice for the environment, promoting solutions through research, consultation, education and partnerships. ACF is Australia's leading national not-for-profit environment organisation, funded almost entirely by our members and supporters.

ACF holds concerns with respect to a number of the Abbott Government's environment policies and key decisions on environmental matters. This submission is not intended to be an exhaustive list of concerns, but a summary of some key ones. We will briefly address each category under the Inquiry's published terms of reference. For further information, contact details are provided at the close of this submission. We appreciate the opportunity to provide our views to the Committee.

(a) Attacks on carbon pricing, the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, the Australian Renewable Energy Agency and the renewable energy target, the Climate Change Authority and the Climate Commission

Climate change is the single biggest challenge Australia's environment and economy faces. The carbon price not only reduced Australia's carbon pollution and helped our economy 'decarbonise' in line with international economies, it also helped bolster global action to cut pollution. Repealing a working national policy to address the most significant threat to our country was a pointless backwards step. Experts do not believe the government's Direct Action policy, which is intended to replace the carbon price, is a reasonable replacement. Direct Action is hampered by several fundamental design flaws that leave it inefficient, inflexible and unlikely to meet targets – if it manages to pass the Senate. As a result Australia has no effective national climate change policy.

In the context of the billions of dollars the Federal Government spends on subsidising the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels (more than it spends on public education) the investment in clean energy through the CEFC and ARENA is small. In fact the CEFC is a source of revenue to the Government, not a net expense.

The Climate Commission was the body charged with providing accurate and relevant information about climate change to the public. The abolition of the Commission has limited the information Australian people and businesses receive about the threat of climate change.

The Renewable Energy Target (RET) helps drive investment in clean energy research, development and deployment. It lowers power bills and pollution. Reviewing the RET has destabilised the clean energy industry, delayed billions of dollars' worth of investment and put at risk continued investment, business opportunity and jobs, all of which are important in the effort to tackle climate change and create the modern energy system needed to compete in an increasingly decarbonised world economy.

(b) Attacks on federal environmental protection through handing approval powers over to state governments, which have poor track records and recent environment staff cuts

Without national leadership, our national environmental treasures cannot be adequately protected. The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act) is Australia's central environment protection law. The Federal Government's plans to abdicate its duty to protect the environment will result in lower standards of protection for sites of environmental significance, biodiversity and natural resources. Communities do not trust state governments, routinely subject to significant financial conflicts of interest in these decisions, to make sensible decisions which protect their interests. State environment departments, which are already under-resourced, will struggle to deliver additional approval processes and ensure compliance. Federal oversight in approvals which impact on matters of national environmental significance is critical.

(c) Attacks on funding for community environment organisations and the Environmental Defenders Offices, abolition of the Biodiversity Fund, and cuts to programs including, Landcare and Caring for our Country

In its first Budget the Abbott government delivered a \$29.2 billion hit to the environment. Cuts include \$483.8 million from nature protection by replacing Caring for our Country and Landcare with a new, narrower National Landcare Program. It also cut Indigenous programs and the biodiversity fund. Reducing our investment in the long term management and stewardship of our essential national assets is unwise and ultimately a false economy.

(d) Undermining Australia's compliance with the World Heritage Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Ramsar Convention, in particular by attacking the Great Barrier Reef and the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Areas

The Government's request to the United Nations to delist 74,000 hectares of World Heritage listed Tasmanian forests not only put at risk one of the most spectacular forests in the world, it also undermined the historic 'peace deal' between conservationists and the timber industry. The peace deal, delicately negotiated over two years, paved the way for a more

sustainable future for the industry and the state. Ultimately the UN rejected Australia's proposal. If the Government's plan had succeeded it would have set a disastrous precedent – a first world government failing to respect and protect its own world class asset, diminishing the effectiveness of the entire World Heritage process which helps protect environmental treasures around the world.

We further hold the view that the devolution of EPBC Act approval powers risks placing Australia in contravention of international conventions to which we are party, and degrading the natural values which those conventions are intended to protect.

(e) Any other related matters

Other decisions of this Government which we believe will have serious negative impacts on the environment include the following:

i. Defunding Environment Defenders' Offices

Communities are the best custodians of their local environment. The Environment Defenders' Offices have for decades empowered local communities to take action to protect themselves and their environment from inappropriate developments and to hold decision makers to account. Defunding the EDOs means Australians are less able to speak up for themselves, ensure that the environments they value are looked after, and keep political decision makers honest.

ii. Abolishing the National Water Commission

Managing water scarcity is one of Australia's biggest challenges, so the advice the government receives should be independent and of the highest order. Abolishing the NWC is a worrying move when considered in the context of the Abbott government's agenda to fast-track resource extraction and dam-building in northern Australia and weaken environmental approval processes.

iii. Reviewing the network of national marine reserves

Despite the Coalition's proud marine legacy under John Howard, who increased protection for the Great Barrier Reef and initiated the Marine Bioregional Planning process, the Abbott government has sought to review and potentially weaken Australia's world-renowned network of marine reserves. The marine network and management plans were based on comprehensive scientific analysis and extensive community and stakeholder consultation. Now the Abbott government has restarted the management planning process from scratch.

iv. Continuing to provide billions in subsidies to mining corporations

Despite the Coalition's claims that it would end the era of entitlement the Federal Budget delivered an additional windfall to mining corporations and others in the form of fuel tax credits (the diesel subsidy), accelerated depreciation for mining companies and a new exploration incentive. These subsidies and handouts are unnecessary and distortionary, increasing fossil fuel consumption and associated pollution. The International Monetary Fund has called on governments to end these types of subsidies.

v. Irresponsible nuclear policies and processes:

The particular safety and security concerns surrounding nuclear issues require the highest levels of scrutiny and this has not been reflected in the Coalition's approach in this policy arena. Uranium sales have been advanced with the United Arab Emirates despite not meeting the pre-conditions recommended by the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, and with India despite not addressing extensive concerns over Indian domestic nuclear governance and safety standards or the impact of this deal on Australia's international

obligations under the South Pacific Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty. The Coalition has failed to address the United Nations September 2011 call made in response to Fukushima, a continuing nuclear crisis directly fuelled by Australian uranium, for Australia to conduct 'an in-depth assessment of the net cost impact of the impacts of mining fissionable material on local communities and ecosystems'. The Coalition also appears intent on continuing to promote remote central dumping as the only option for the management of Australia's radioactive waste, despite the failure of the Muckaty plan and sustained calls for a dedicated and public national Commission to instead explore the full range of options available to best realise responsible radioactive waste management.

Conclusion

Healthy people and a strong economy both require functioning natural life support systems. The stewardship of national environmental assets, and the management of these assets, is a key test of any federal government or Parliament. As a nation we must ensure that natural assets are fully valued and managed for the long term, rather than sacrificed to short term interests.