

## **INQUIRY INTO 2024 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NET ZERO COMMISSION**

**Organisation:** Healthy Futures

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## **Submission to the NSW Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Net Zero Future: Inquiry into 2024 Annual Report of the Net Zero Commission | Healthy Futures, February 2025**

Healthy Futures, one of Australia's leading health and climate advocacy organisations, welcomes the opportunity to submit to the NSW Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Net Zero Future's Inquiry into the 2024 Annual Report of the Net Zero Commission.

We commend the NSW Government for establishing the Net Zero Commission and its commitment to ambitious climate action under the Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023. However, Healthy Futures is deeply concerned about the health impacts from continued coal and gas mine expansions and extensions in NSW. Healthy Futures is particularly concerned about the impacts from methane emissions from coal and gas mining in our state. We implore the Committee to take into consideration how coal & methane pollution poses a preventable health burden, and specifically a burden with associated costs for NSW residents and the state's healthcare system.

As such, our submission to your Committee focuses on the urgent need to address the health consequences of climate change, methane pollution from coal and gas mining, and the policy gaps that must be closed to ensure NSW meets its climate targets. As representatives of concerned healthcare workers in NSW, we have heard countless stories, some of which we have relayed to the NSW Government, about health being impacted by harmful climate change. We have GPs in Western Sydney who tell us first-hand experiences of seeing their patients succumbing to heat stroke, sometimes ending in tragically preventable fatalities. We have emergency department doctors and nurses who have told us about influxes of patients on hot days whose mental health is severely impacted, presenting with suicidality, and increases in presentations of victims of violence. Hot days are deadly days and see spikes in domestic violence in particular. We also hear regularly about health workers treating asthma patients who struggle to breathe when air quality is compromised. Healthcare professionals come to Healthy Futures because they know their patients are affected by pollution from fossil fuel production in NSW and the flow on effects of climate change. These experiences, however, are just a fraction of the enormity of how climate change will impact the health of NSW residents.

We urge the Committee to seriously consider the health impacts of climate change and of fossil fuel methane emissions and to genuinely, meaningfully recommend actions to keep NSW on target for truly meeting its net zero goals.

We offer the following information for the Committee to review:

### **1. Health impacts of climate change and fossil methane pollution**

Climate change is a health crisis; in fact, it is inarguable that climate change is now the greatest threat to public health there is. Climate change is already causing harm to human health, especially so in vulnerable communities, from deadly heatwaves, catastrophic storms, bushfires and floods. We are also starting to see the impact of climate migration cause strain, something that carries with it huge health risks and that Australia's East Coast is not immune from.

The stark reality is that we face unprecedented increases in catastrophic health impacts caused by climate change. NSW's health system is not currently well-placed to sustain quality of care

in the face of the exponential rise in climate patients. Any and all efforts then to ease the impacts of the health burden attributable to climate change should, therefore be prioritised as a matter of urgent action. In NSW, coal mining's methane emissions, in particular contribute to global warming and local air pollution in our state.

The health impacts of methane pollution and climate change are profound and wide-ranging and have high associated healthcare costs. They can include, but are not limited to:

- Respiratory and cardiovascular diseases: the harmful pollutants from coal mining, including particular matter (PM2.5s) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), as well as methane emissions turning into toxic ground ozone, exacerbate asthma, lung disease and cardiovascular conditions.
- Heat-related illnesses and impacts: rising temperatures due to climate change increase the risk of heat stroke and heat-related deaths, for example, from dehydration that can lead to kidney failure. This is particularly so among vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, children and outdoor workers. Hot days also lead to more violence in the community, especially in the home; the heat rises, and so do domestic violence occurrences.
- Mental health impacts: Climate change is contributing to climate anxiety, depression and trauma and increasing experiences of solastalgia distress associated with negative impacts to home environments. These conditions particularly affect NSW communities, who are being impacted successively and excessively by extreme weather events such as bushfires, floods, heatwaves, and coastal erosion.

The health burden attributable to climate change should also be understood as an economic one, given how the impacts listed above will put further strain on delivering quality health care in NSW. It is clear that in terms of climate action, the most meaningful action to take is to scale down coal mining in NSW. At first, stopping the approval of new expansions and extensions of current coal and gas mining is essentially the most singular effective step that could be taken to meet the state's net zero goals.

## **2. NSW's coal mining emissions are, at best, undermining our climate targets. Expanding coal operations outright contradicts the authenticity of NSW's climate targets.**

The Net Zero Commission's first annual report highlights NSW is not on track to meet our legislated emissions targets for 2030, 2035, or even 2050. This largely is due to the pipeline of coal mine expansions and extensions under government consideration, which will only continue to increase emissions from the resource sector as well as add to the health burden associated with coal mining. The Net Zero Commission has rightly expressed concerns about the risks posed by these expansions, and we would add to this an urgent request to consider the flow on health ramifications as well, as per the duty outlined in Section 8 (8h) of the Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023.

The NSW Government should offer an assurance that the public health impacts from coal and gas and climate change are being addressed. These impacts are not abstract or distant - they are already being felt by the people of NSW and will only worsen. We must not continue to deepen the climate and health crisis. To address this health crisis, it is clear that the fossil fuel industry in NSW must urgently be scaled down and not continue to be expanded. The lack of

decisive, meaningful action to do so actively undermines NSW climate goals and, as such, exacerbates the negative health impacts of climate change. Healthy Futures cannot be more emphatic in our call for action - it is imperative, on health grounds, that the NSW Government take immediate steps to address this issue. It is clear that NSW coal mining emissions are at best, undermining our climate targets and, at worse, exposing the lack of authenticity in our commitment to these goals.

### 3. Recommendations

To ensure NSW meets its climate targets and safeguards public health, Healthy Futures urges the Committee to consider the following recommendations:

- **Call for a dedicated Net Zero Commission report on the risks from continued coal and gas expansion:** It is clear that the NSW government should have the Net Zero Commission compile a detailed specific report on the true risk that coal and gas mining in NSW poses to our state climate targets. This report should be a priority and completed by the end of the financial year 2025. The report should also include recommendations in particular for mitigating methane emissions from existing and proposed coal mines and gas operations. Healthy Futures strongly feels that in the interim, no new approvals for coal or gas operations should be given until this commission advice is provided.
- **Create a regulatory duty for planning decision-makers under the Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023:** Healthy Futures, especially in its work related to sustainable health care, as well as advocating for gas-free homes for public health reasons, has encountered several experiences of what we understand to be contradictory aims in planning. Healthy Futures has perceived there to be planning blockages that have prevented the right choices from being made for health and sustainability goals. We believe there have been misunderstandings and barriers for planning staff that Healthy Futures has encountered in our advocacy work. We also believe that if there were a regulatory duty for planners under the Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023, to meet the state's net zero emissions targets, this would help clarify and improve planning processes in NSW.

A regulatory mechanism that establishes a duty for key planning decision makers to meet the targets, as well as consider direct and downstream emissions in the context of the Paris Agreement temperature goals, would be a meaningful step to ensuring the state government as a whole would work collaboratively towards the net zero aims, and not at odds with differing goals, such as short term cost efficiency. This kind of regulatory duty could also be understood as a clear signal of meaningful commitment to climate action that would influence private industry. Pragmatically, it would also show that real climate action is being taken because integrating this goal into all planning decisions, particularly those related to coal mining and across the whole bureaucracy, would undoubtedly see real reductions in emissions being achieved.

- **Net Zero Commission advice should be required on all proposed major coal and gas mine expansions:** The ongoing expansion and extension of existing coal and gas mines is, as described above, at best, undermining our state's attempt to reach its net zero goals, and at worst, an outright contradiction blocking our ability to meet these

targets. The independent and expert nature of the Net Zero Commission should be used to offer additional non-partisan advice and recommendations on all proposed major coal and gas mine expansions and extensions. This new role could be used to ensure that all new projects are better assessed and mitigated, specifically in line with NSW's climate targets. Currently, the continued ongoing approval of these projects is clearly happening without the state's climate targets being taken into account appropriately enough. The continued approval of new coal mine expansions without robust oversight risks locking in high and (astonishingly, potentially increasing) emissions for decades. This madness severely threatens the health of the NSW population.

Requiring the Net Zero Commission's advice would also enhance accountability and transparency in the approval processes for coal mine expansions. The Net Zero Commission can offer an additional systematic checks and balances process, ensuring emissions from new projects are considered in the context of NSW's climate targets. Healthy Futures would suggest that in this new role, the Net Zero Commission could even include advice based on health considerations by ensuring that new projects do not exacerbate existing public health threats.

It is also clear that Section 15 (3) of the Climate Change (Net Zero Future) Act 2023 supports this suggested role for the Net Zero Commission, which explicitly allows for the commission to provide expert advice on major projects that could impact NSW's emissions targets. By mandating a requirement for the commission to offer advice specifically on coal mine expansions and extensions, the act's purpose can be better fulfilled and ensure that NSW meets its climate goals.

The reality is the health impacts of climate change and from methane pollution are too significant to ignore. NSW has an opportunity to address these challenges, mitigate worsening climate change, and protect public health. To do this, it is clear that urgent and decisive action to phase out coal and gas mining is needed.

Healthy Futures urges the Committee to consider supporting the actions outlined above in our submission. The Committee has a chance to help ensure NSW can get back on track to meet its own climate targets and protect public health. The Committee, as all of us should, should consider this a moral obligation to act on climate change to prevent harming the health of the people of NSW.

Thank you for considering our submission, and we welcome the opportunity to provide further information for your review.

Sincerely,

Healthy Futures