

# AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS



ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE



POLICY FRAMING  
STATEMENT

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## CLIMATE and ENVIRONMENT

The notion of Climate and Environment here refers deliberately to long timeframes of at least generational nature. The Australian Democrats are vitally concerned with seasonal variability in weather and biodiversity, but the context of this statement is this longer timeframe and more focused on the cumulative impacts of our actions over time.

The reality is that we borrow the world from our children and grandchildren and we should strive to leave it in as good or better condition than we found it. The Australian Democrats are strongly committed to the philosophy of being “honourable ancestors” in the context of being climatic and environmental stewards.

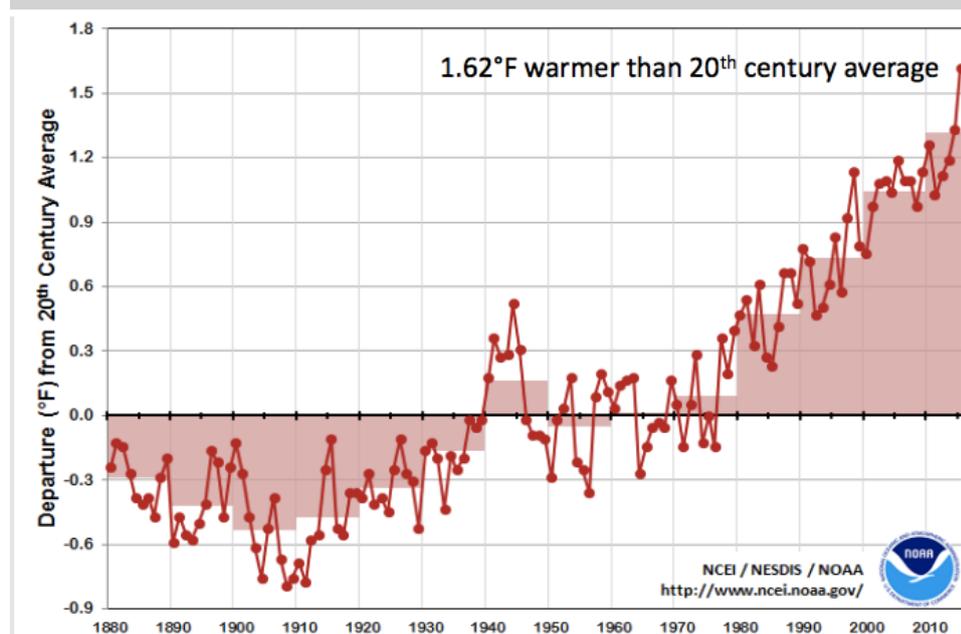
As a species, mankind has an appalling history in this regard and it is essential that we learn from our past to prevent even more devastating outcomes in the future. We must apply what we have learned and continually strive for greater knowledge and understanding to continually improve our stewardship.

Science is our best tool for understanding the world around us. Science is responsible for the knowledge that has produced the technology we rely on in the modern world.

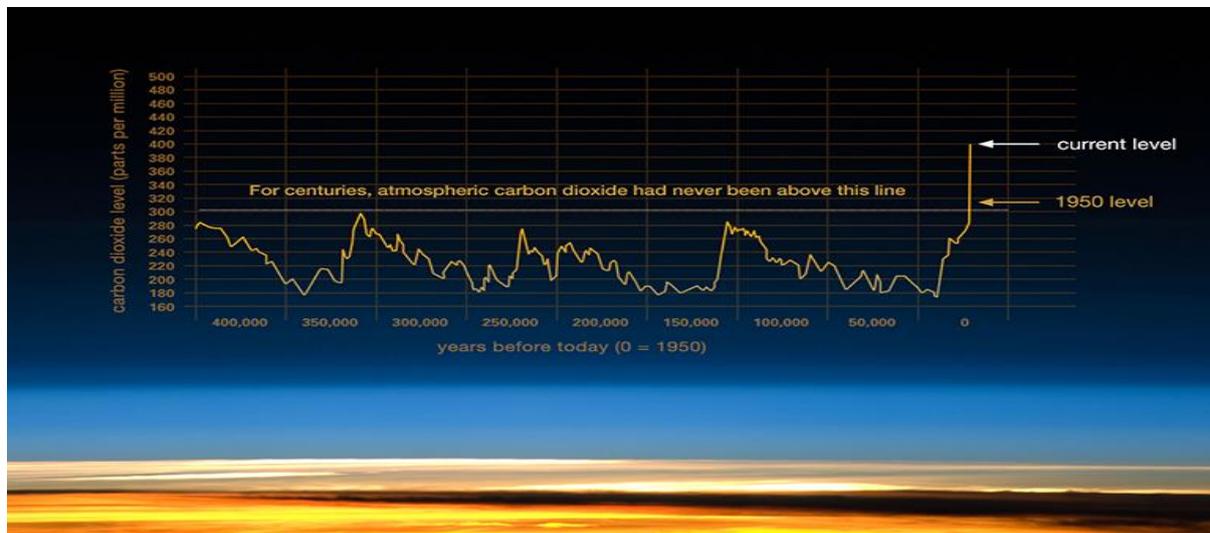
At this time, 97% of published scientific papers support the view that human activity is warming the climate, largely through the extraction of stored fossil fuels and that such warming has a high likelihood of resulting in adverse consequences. This high level of scientific agreement is very unusual and other debates that have ultimately been resolved into widespread agreement have generally achieved a considerably lower level of scientific consensus.

The world has been warmer before, but not within the timeframe that we have built our global civilisation. This is cause for considerable concern because our civilisation depends on climate stability in order to support the agricultural enterprise that supports the still growing human population.

## Global Temperature Time Series



Global atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are now higher than at any time during the last 3 million years. These high levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide are also impacting on carbon dioxide levels dissolved in sea water with resultant impacts on pH and likely dramatic ramifications for the entire oceanic food chain.



In view of the above points, society must at least adopt the precautionary principle and agree that global carbon dioxide emissions need to be constrained. The Australian Democrats are willingly, ethically, morally and culturally committed to doing no harm and leaving the nation, and by inference the climate that affects it, better than we found it where possible.

However, it remains necessary to encourage and support the sustainable development of natural ecosystems to pursue sustainable agricultural production systems to the best of our ability and with the best intent to grow the economic prosperity of the nation.

The implications of climate change present significant challenges for the entire biosphere with impacts already apparent in aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. It is apparent that climate change can't be easily stopped or reversed in timeframes that will prevent significant ecological disruptions and it is essential that humans invest and act to manage and preserve biodiversity and healthy ecosystems even including, if necessary, through strategic interventions in those systems.

### Extractive Industries

In the current economic paradigm there is conflict around the prioritisation of resources based on the finite production of extractive industries as opposed to the comparatively infinite production of agricultural industries.

Australia has enjoyed an abundance of agricultural lands with little regard for food security based on consistent export surpluses. However, the global food challenge paints a bleak picture for regional food security into the future. Future demands on agricultural production demand that the natural resources that underpin that production must be protected for future generations.

Extractive industries must operate with a genuine "do no harm" commitment that is not timeframed.

Clearly the threats to agricultural land vary between the nature of the extraction method, the intensity of the agricultural enterprise and the ability of the two activities to coexist.

It is increasingly apparent that the larger issue around extractive industries and their impact on agricultural production systems is in relation to direct and collateral impacts on ground water assets.

In most agricultural landscapes, water is the most limiting resource. The complexity of the hydrology in ground water systems presents difficulties for the assessment of impacts of a particular activity until after the activity is undertaken and even then it is not always clear what the causes and effects are.

The Australian Democrats are committed to the prioritisation of agriculture and the protection of agriculturally important natural resources.

The Australian Democrats are also committed to objective evidence-based policy. In the situation of extractive industries and the conflicting science, biased as it may be, the precautionary principle must prevail. Consideration must be given both to the likelihood of a particular outcome and the severity of a particular outcome.

In relation to disruption of essential ground water supplies and its impact on current and future production, the Australian Democrats are conservative in their view and would necessarily oppose any extractive industry that poses a threat to these resources.

The onus of proof must lie with the extractive industry proponents to prove that their intended activity will have no lasting impact on the productivity of the agricultural landscape.

### Murray Darling Basin

The current issues in the Darling River provide a compelling case study into the challenges and interconnection of human management, environment and climate.

The Murray Darling Basin is an iconic part of the Australian landscape and incorporates an area over one million square kilometres which is approximately fourteen percent (14%) of Australia. It includes three state jurisdictions and the Australian Capital Territory.

The Basin incorporates roughly forty percent of Australian farms by number and accounts for roughly a third of the gross value of agricultural production for the nation. It supports significant proportions of all the agricultural commodity sectors. In turn it additionally sustains a significant population that does not reside in the basin.

The Murray Darling Basin is a strategic economic and environmental asset of the nation. Our stewardship of the Basin has a critical influence on the socio-economic opportunities for generations to come as well as the environment.

It is our collective responsibility to pass it as productive if not more productive than we inherited it and that our management of the asset evolves in step with our increasing understanding of the environment and ecology of the Basin.

Water resources are conventionally regarded as state resources and administered by state governments in Australia. This approach has led to significant discord over decades.

Significant environmental issues in the Basin and particularly in South Australia led to federal intervention and the establishment of the Murray Darling Basin Plan (the Plan) and subsequently the Murray Darling Basin Authority (the Authority) within the Federal Government as part of the Plan.

Unfortunately, the process of developing the Plan and its subsequent administration have been subject to political interference which has undermined its credibility. There is significant and ongoing concern around the quality of the science on which the Plan is developed.

The development of the plan has been construed as an adversarial process, pitting irrigators against environmentalists and simultaneously fostered parochial state-based conflicts particularly between South Australia and water use in the Upper Murray Darling Basin.

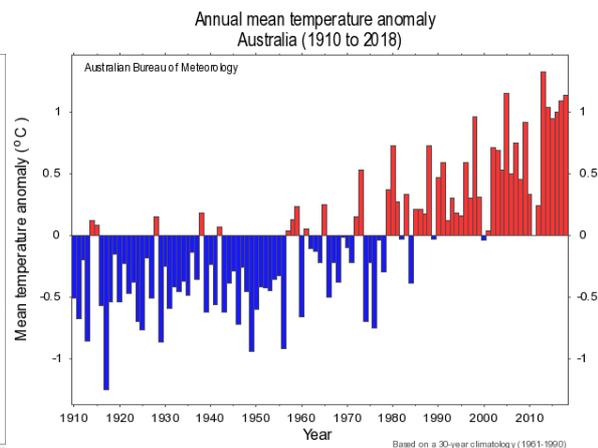
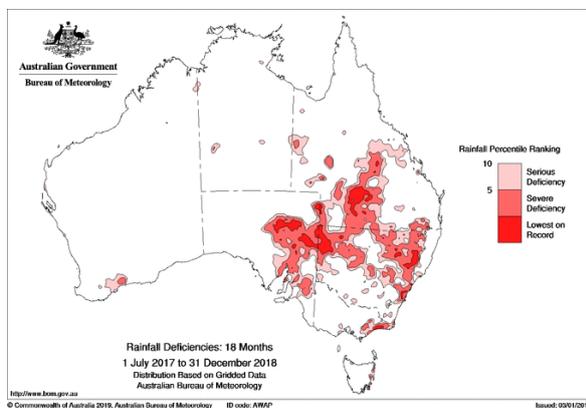
Much of rhetoric around the Plan intimated that all the problems in the Murray are directly attributable to irrigation in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales. This is unfounded and unfairly simplistic and belies the complexity of the environment and ecology of the Basin and an increasingly volatile and changing climate.

Prior to the foundation of the irrigation industry in the Murray Darling was not a constantly flowing river system. The Darling River stopped flowing forty-five times between 1880 and 1960.

Hydrological intervention in South East region of SA was commenced in the 1860's primarily to drain inundated lands which was up to forty percent of the landscape. This drainage work continued with a purely productivity agenda until the mid 1970's.

The construction of barrages at the mouth of the Murray also dramatically altered the hydrology of the Lower Lakes and Coorong and prevented natural flushing of the system with sea water in a bid to artificially maintain a fresh water ecology.

Overlaying these human interventions, the impacts of rising temperatures associated with climate change mean significantly higher rainfall is required to maintain pre-industrial streamflows.



Irrespective of the perceived causes of environmental degradation in the Basin, it is essential to act to sustainably protect the productivity of the basin, with regard to the environment and the communities that operate within it.

The Australian Democrats is very conscious of the need to address and mitigate critical environmental issues. We are absolutely committed to leaving the country better than we found it.

In this process though we are also vitally concerned that the debate is well informed and balanced. We must have confidence in and rely upon the science as the primary means to inform and develop public policy.

We support a thorough objective and quantitative review of the plan if it genuinely considers socio-economic factors as part of the measure of sustainability.

There is no doubt that humans have had a massive impact on the landscape. This is also true of the human activity that preceded European settlement. People and their associated development are now an intrinsic party of the evolving natural balance.

If the prime objective of the Plan is to return the Murray Darling Basin to a pre-European ecological state, then it follows that we must completely depopulate it. This is plainly unrealistic, and it is essential that the process stops punishing basin communities on the premise that we must restore a pre-European environment.

We must be mature about the fact that the population growth both domestically and globally means these kinds of ecological changes are inevitable and essential. That said it is vital that we strive to find the best possible balance to sustain basin communities within and as part of the environment.

The strategy for maintaining the Murray Darling Basin must include the people who live in it as part of the ecology and just as important as any other component.

Ongoing press coverage of questionable water sharing arrangements sanctioned by politicians and bureaucrats has also damaged confidence in the Plan and its administration.

It is essential that the future of the Basin and the Basin communities is administered objectively and transparently. It is essential that all decisions are informed completely by robust and credible science. It is essential to separate this process from emotive populist politics and ensure it remains grounded in delivering genuinely sustainable basin.

All Basin communities need certainty and fair consideration.

### Native Vegetation

Improving environmental outcomes and approving sustainable development are not mutually exclusive. Providing strategic incentives and allowing greater flexibility in how biodiversity is managed should lead to improved productivity, investment, resilience and regional profitability and at the same time tangibly improve environmental outcomes.

Across the country, native vegetation legislation is destroying farmers competitiveness and ability to manage their land sustainably and economically. The regulations are prohibitive to sustainable agricultural development and production.

Farmers are compelled to manage the environment as a form of public amenity without any form of compensation or regard for the social and economic implications to their business and community. Invariably the perverse outcomes are that the land is underutilised and adverse environmental outcomes such as weed and pest invasion result with a decline in productivity and financial resilience of landholders.

The impacts of this legislative constraint to responsible development flows through regional communities as agriculture struggles to optimise regional employment and underpin regional economic activity. There must be a triple bottom line approach to the management of native vegetation for farming and the environment to remain sustainable. Legislation has to be simplified.

If farmers are more profitable then the environment benefits from increased investment in, and utilisation of, sustainable management practices. Farmers have a long term vested interest in sustainable land management and legislation should be focused on supporting landowners not hindering them.

Meaningful environmental reform can only be delivered with willing farmer participation.

Many areas of agricultural land are still comparatively under developed. Native vegetation legislation is preventing substantial areas of this land from being developed. This is amplifying the impact of drought now by severely limiting drought mitigation developments such as grain and fodder production developments and or cash cropping for additional financial resilience.

The Australian Democrats recognise that farmers are environmental stewards dependant on healthy ecosystems for sustainable productivity.