

## **We are cutting carbon emissions but nowhere near fast enough:** Opinion piece on the Tasmanian Emissions Update prepared for the Mercury, July 2024

As Australia slides into another politically charged battle in our long-running climate wars, the inconvenient truth is that we urgently need to reduce emissions now rather than in the 2040s if we are to avoid catastrophic warming. As Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General, recently said, “our planet is minutes to midnight for the 1.5-degree limit.” Every emission and every jurisdiction count in this race against the clock.

The recently published state and territory greenhouse gas inventories provide the most reliable data on emissions reduction for key sectors in each state. So how did Tasmania perform?

The good news is that we remain number one in terms of our overall ‘net’ emissions and comfortably below net zero. This is because our abundant forests remove more carbon (about 12.5 million tonnes) from the atmosphere than emissions produced from our transport, agriculture, households and industry (about 8.2 million tonnes).

What has changed is that we no longer lead Australia in terms of producing the lowest absolute emissions per capita (the greenhouse gasses we pump into the atmosphere per Tasmanian). From 1990 to 2021, Tasmania had the lowest per capita emissions in Australia largely due to our use of hydroelectricity rather than coal-fired power. However, South Australia has now overtaken us on this critical measure, and we will almost certainly fall behind Victoria in the 2023 or 2024 inventories.

While other states have cut emissions across the board, Tasmania’s absolute emissions per capita have only declined by 9.4% over the last two decades. In contrast, Victoria has cut absolute emissions per capita by 41%, South Australia has achieved a 37% reduction, and New South Wales is not far behind with a 32.8% decrease.

Tasmania’s transport emissions are declining, but not as quickly as in states with more ambitious policies. Recently, both NSW and Victoria have overtaken Tasmania and now have lower transport emissions on a per capita basis despite residents of these states driving further on average. Tasmanians continue to be very car dependant, highlighting the need for our State’s soon-to-be-released Emissions Reduction and Resilience Plan (for the transport sector) to support the uptake of EVs while delivering safe and reliable public transport options and promoting active transport.

Tasmania’s growing agriculture sector is central to our future prosperity, especially in the regions. However, ‘enteric fermentation’ (mostly methane from ruminant livestock) remains the state’s biggest single source of greenhouse gas emissions. Deploying promising abatement technologies at greater scale – such as emission-reducing *asparagopsis* feed supplements – needs to be an urgent priority if we are to expand agricultural production without contributing to climate change.

Our industrial emissions remain the highest per capita in Australia. If we want to retain heavy industries and the jobs they support in Tasmania’s regions then it’s essential we invest in new low-carbon technologies and processes. The Commonwealth’s \$67 million investment to help

cut emissions from Cement Australia's Railton plant and the Savage River mine will help future-proof these operations. Now it's up to the Tasmanian Government to ensure all energy-intensive businesses can access enough affordable renewable electricity to reduce their dependence on gas and coal..

Even in the energy sector we can't be complacent. Despite our historical investment in hydro power, our claims to self-sufficiency in clean renewable electricity are looking increasingly dubious. In four of the past five years, Tasmania was a net importer of electricity. Last month, the gas-fired Tamar Valley power station was brought on-line for the first time in five years and met 13% of the State's electricity needs in the last week in June. This highlights the need to invest in new renewable energy generation and potentially e-fuels to reduce our dependence on imported fossil fuels.

Tasmania should be proud of its net-zero status but it's also clear that achieving a truly sustainable zero-carbon economy will require fundamental and inevitably disruptive change. It is only natural that many Tasmanians are apprehensive about the impact of this transition.

It is therefore clear that comprehensive regional transition planning will be crucial in the journey towards a zero-carbon future. This planning can address concerns ranging from increased power prices, energy disruptions and the impact of large developments (such as wind farms) on communities and the environment, to broader economic and social changes associated with the rapid decline of many traditional industries and the rise of low-carbon alternatives.

Importantly, transition plans will also help ensure Tasmania can truly benefit from the social, economic and environmental opportunities that decarbonisation has to offer. Developing thoughtful and coordinated transition planning can position Tasmania as a best-practice example of equitable, community-led decarbonisation that delivers improved employment, investment, innovation and wellbeing outcomes. This is a future Tasmanians deserve.

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