

White Paper response: 'timely start, but we could do better'



The unique wetlands of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory may disappear if the average global temperature rises by 2°C or more. John Coppi/CSIRO Scienceimage

Since the federal government released its White Paper outlining a carbon pollution reduction scheme (CPRS) for Australia in December, the response from environmental and public policy experts has been consistent – introducing a CPRS in 2010 is commendable, but the proposed 5–15 per cent reduction target is far too low and subsidies to carbon-intensive 'big polluters' far too high.

The government's case for a smaller 5 per cent cut in total emissions was based to a large extent on a comparison of Australia's projected per capita emissions cuts with Europe's, which has set a target of a 20 per cent cut in emissions (relative to 1990 levels) by 2020.

The projected faster growth of Australia's population compared to Europe's over 1990–2020 justifies a lower 5–15 per cent emissions cut because it 'translates to a 34–41 per cent reduction in the per capita emissions over this period', according to the White Paper.

'Five per cent below 2000 levels is our minimum, unconditional commitment to reduce emissions by 2020, irrespective of the actions of other nations,' said Prime Minister Kevin Rudd at the launch of the document.

'Fifteen per cent below 2000 levels is our commitment to reduce emissions further, if there is a global agreement where all major economies commit to substantially restrain

emissions and advanced economies take on comparable reductions to that of Australia.

'Australia stands ready to adjust our post-2020 targets to play our full part in achieving a 450 ppm agreement [including] reconsidering our 2050 target, should it become necessary.'

'If we had a stronger target like a 20 per cent cut, it would provide a clear economic incentive for companies to realise significant energy efficiency savings by 2020.'

Professor David Karoly, an Australian climate change scientist and member of the core team that wrote the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's landmark 2007 synthesis report, said the per-capita-cuts rationale is an 'interesting spin job'.

'It misses a central point – per capita emissions in Europe are already between 33 and 50 per cent lower than ours,' he says. 'So to arrive at the same per capita emissions levels by 2020, Australia needs to make more substantial cuts than Europe.'

University of NSW economist Dr Regina Betz said the Rudd Government's proposed targets were 'inconsistent with

Australian support for an effective global solution to the climate change challenge'.

'Weak targets and a CPRS design with substantial borrowing, price caps, ongoing major subsidies to large emitters, unlimited use of what are increasingly questionable international CDM (Clean Development Mechanism)¹ emission reduction credits, and voluntary forestry opt-in mean potentially only very limited reductions in Australian emissions by 2020.'

Michael Smith from The Natural Edge Project sustainability think-tank was disappointed the government underplayed the role of energy efficiency, as he says it could rapidly reduce emissions while boosting economic growth.

'If we had a stronger target like a 20 per cent cut, it would provide a clear economic incentive for companies to realise significant energy efficiency savings by 2020.'

'This would have increased company profits, created jobs and flattened currently rising electricity demand in Australia, removing any need to build more coal-fired power stations.'

Australian Conservation Foundation Executive Director, Don Henry, commented: 'The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's advice that developed countries, as a group, must reduce their carbon pollution by 25–40 per cent is already on the table of international negotiations.'

'The Prime Minister said Australia would seek a 450 ppm outcome in the international negotiations, noting that this would give the world a chance of avoiding the worst of climate change; however, the proposed cut does not fit with his target numbers.'

Dr Richard Denniss, Executive Director of the Australia Institute, said the government's own Treasury modelling shows the cost difference between implementing 5 or 25 per cent emissions cuts (relative to 2000 emissions) would be 'trivial'.

'According to Treasury if we aim for a 5 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, average personal incomes will rise by \$29 000 by 2050, but if we aim for a 25 per cent reduction in emissions, incomes will still rise by \$28 000.'

● **Mary-Lou Considine**

¹ The CDM allows emission-reduction projects in developing countries to earn certified emission reduction credits that can be used by industrialised countries to meet a part of their emission reduction targets under the Kyoto Protocol.