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2 June 2015

Re: Ministry for the Environment consultation on New Zealand's post-2020 climate target

Dear Ministry for the Environment,

I am writing in response to the Ministry for the Environment's call for public submissions on New Zealand's post-2020 climate targets

I travelled to South America last year to attend the COP20 Lima climate talks as a representative of civil society. I met with our New Zealand negotiators almost daily and the Minister for Climate Change Tim Groser several times. I tracked the negotiations closely, specifically New Zealand's performance within the talks.

I've travelled quite a bit, and I've always felt proud to be a New Zealander overseas because the response I get whenever I tell people I'm a Kiwi is a smile, and some iteration of "Oh, New Zealand! Such a beautiful country, I'd love to visit".

The climate negotiations in Lima last year was the first time I've ever felt ashamed to be a New Zealander.

I was ashamed sitting through New Zealand's Multilateral Assessment, the part of the negotiations where countries present and justify their efforts to combat the effects of climate change, to the international community – a kind of peer review. It was embarrassing when other countries laughed at New Zealand for the way we tried to argue that we're on track for a 5% reduction in emissions from 1990 levels by 2020, when our net emissions have increased by more than 40% since 1990, and we're making up the difference by buying cheap and dodgy carbon credits that other countries won't touch. It was embarrassing because it was so clearly evident that New Zealand's response to climate change has fallen significantly behind that of other developed countries, and behind that which is considered reasonable by the international community. I wish that those people reading this submission right now could have been there in Lima to feel this embarrassment and shame, because it is difficult to communicate in words alone.

My experiences in Lima were hard to reconcile with my identity as a New Zealander because I know that we are better than this. New Zealand is a country that has historically punched above its weight on issues that mattered: on nuclear power, apartheid, on tobacco control and more. New Zealand can do so much better than our current climate policy, and we must do.

I'm a sixth year medical student, qualifying as a doctor this November. My six years of training in the medical sciences teaches me to understand and communicate science, and I've used this literacy in scientific methods to understand the science around climate change. My clinical experience teaches me to advocate for communities and protect vulnerable people, and it's for this reason that I write to you today.

Climate change is a challenge that will disproportionately affect those with the least resources to adapt to it: in New Zealand, those most affected will be people of low socio-economic status and Maori and Pacific peoples.¹ These people have lesser power to influence decision-makers, and I write to you on their behalf as their doctor and advocate.

New Zealand has some of the worst domestic climate policy in the world.² We are part of a negotiating bloc at the COP negotiations called the Umbrella Group, which is known for advocating for climate policy that mandates inaction and fails to protect vulnerable people in developing countries. Now, New Zealand is failing to protect its own vulnerable people by justifying its own poor climate policy to the public in the discussion document that the Ministry for the Environment produced for this process.

This document was one sided and focused on the costs of taking action, while making no attempt to estimate the long-term greater economic costs of not taking action. It made no mention of any of the opportunities that climate change presents for us to diversify and grow our economy, such as those documented in the recent Stern report.³ It was full of excuses, written in a way that pre-empted inaction. I'm trained to appraise scientific evidence, and this discussion document wasn't scientific at all: it was our government cherry-picking evidence to justify their current position, and not much else.

The Government's attitude towards the short term costs of taking action is stuck in the 20th century, while other countries have since moved on. Inaction on climate now will only sign New Zealand for much greater costs in the long term – the more action is delayed, the more costs will rise for the next generation.⁴

This Government's attitudes to climate change also fail to take into account the many opportunities that action on climate change presents to us to improve the health of our citizens. Action on climate involves significant health co-benefits that can help to offset the short-term cost of climate action.¹

New Zealand can be a leader in taking ambitious action on climate, taking advantages of all the economic opportunities that climate change presents and resurrecting our reputation as a clean, green country and a good international citizen. Unfortunately, our current climate policy and leadership is dragging us down.

I'm a young New Zealander who is informed about climate policy and understands the science behind it. I know we need a target of at least 40 percent reduction on 1990 emissions levels by 2030, heading towards a net zero carbon economy by 2050. We also need a credible, pragmatic plan for how we're

going to get there that doesn't change every time the government does. To achieve this, we need cross-party consensus on climate change and stable climate policy that stands apart from party politics. We should take inspiration from the UK Climate Change Act and develop our own domestic legislation that puts national emissions into domestic law, and set up an independent Climate Commission to inform policy-making and provide non-partisan direction on climate.

I want New Zealand to support small island developing states by advocating for a 5-year commitment term at the Paris negotiations. I also want transparency for all submissions to this consultation process and all records of all public meetings.

We urgently need to stop treating climate change as a political hot potato and start prioritising the well-being of our vulnerable New Zealanders and future generations of Kiwis, who will inherit huge costs if we fail to take action now.

Every day in my clinical practice as a doctor, I put together the pieces as our most vulnerable citizens suffer with poor health, insecurity, family violence and poverty. Continuation of New Zealand's current climate policy will further harm these people.

2015 is a time for us to invest in strong climate policy to protect our most vulnerable and to take advantage of the opportunities climate change represents. New Zealand's Intended Nationally Determined Contribution needs to be just, ambitious and consistent with our historic national values – of protecting the vulnerable, of being a responsible international citizen and of taking a stance on an issue even when it is difficult.

Please make me proud to be a New Zealander again.

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Yours sincerely,

Suzy McKinney

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References

1. Hayley Bennett, Rhys Jones, Gay Keating, Alistair Woodward, Simon Hales, Scott Metcalfe. (2014) [Health and equity impacts of climate change in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and health gains from climate action.](#)
2. Jan Burck, Franziska Marten, Christoph Bals. (2015). [The Climate Change Performance Index Results 2015.](#)
3. Global Commission on the Climate and Economy (2014). [Better Growth, Better Climate - New Climate Economy Report.](#)
4. The Treasury. (2014) [Briefings to Incoming Ministers Information Release](#)