

Consultation on setting New Zealand's post-2020 climate change target



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Objectives for the contribution

Do you agree with these objectives for our contribution? Yes

1b. What is most important to you?

That New Zealand takes a long-term view, since this is an extraordinary problem, acting on a time scale that we have seldom seen before. In addition, this is a global phenomenon, so I very much hope that New Zealand will accept the social justice elements of climate change, and grasp the opportunity to be a progressive leader. We have done this before as a country - here is a chance to once more be an opinion leader internationally, and to model the behaviours we believe are just and necessary. The argument that we are only a minor contributor world-wide is pathetic - on these grounds, we would never have bothered giving women the vote, considering the tiny fraction of that gender on the planet who live in New Zealand.

What would be a fair contribution for New Zealand?

2. What do you think the nature of New Zealand's emissions and economy means for the level of target that we set?

We must accept that New Zealand is a high per-capita emitter, taking account of all greenhouse emissions (not just CO₂), and we have enjoyed a long history of high carbon use. These factors places a significant responsibility on us to make higher than average reductions. The "contract and converge" model of emissions reduction is surely the fair way to go - I don't know of any serious alternative contenders for an acceptable course of action, globally.

How will our contribution affect New Zealanders?

3. What level of cost is appropriate for New Zealand to reduce it's greenhouse gas emissions? For example, what would be a reasonable reduction in annual household consumption?

This question is not the right one, in my view. The first consideration is the costs of unabated climate change. The second is the opportunities that thoughtful and innovative responses to climate change present this country. When we have a clear view on these two matters, then we can look at how heavily emissions can be cut in New Zealand, where the priorities fall, and how the costs can be minimised.

What constitutes a "reasonable reduction in household consumption" depends on a host of policies and interventions. For instance, in the presence of more compact cities, with high quality attractive public transport, it would be reasonable to radically reduce the use of private motor vehicles. Without such changes in the urban environment, a "reasonable" reduction might be much less.

4. Of the opportunities for New Zealand to reduce its emissions (as outlined on page 15 of the discussion document), which do you think are the most likely to occur, or be most important for New Zealand?

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Energy efficiency is the simplest measure to introduce - by and large we already know what steps to take, it is a matter of implementation. New technologies such as electric cars are some way off, and it isn't clear at this stage what the net savings will be. Slowing the rate of forest clearance and resuming large scale planting programmes would also be practical, important and effective in the short to medium term. In the longer term, cities are the big burner of energy, and we need to shift from a distributed high carbon model to a 21st century sustainability paradigm. Won't happen quickly, but governments national and local need to come to agreement quickly on how to proceed, due to the long lags in planning and installing infrastructure.

Summary

5. How should New Zealand take into account the future uncertainties of technologies and costs when setting its target?

Climate change is about risk management - this was the central message of the 5th assessment report by the IPCC. So uncertainty is key. But it isn't just the technologies for mitigation and the costs that are uncertain; this applies also on the impacts side. I suggest the government's planning for climate change needs to shift from the conventional predict and prescribe model of the physical and biological sciences, to a risk assessment framework, akin to that applies by insurance companies and the military. This involves thinking not about what is most likely, but about what is most important to avoid. Then we can give proper consideration to costs.

Other comments

6. Is there any further information you wish the Government to consider? Please explain.
Maybe I missed it, but on a quick read I saw no reference to New Zealand's responsibilities in the Pacific. There are many populations in our region much more vulnerable than we are to climate change, who have contributed very little to the cause of the problem. On the other hand we in New Zealand have contributed a great deal (per person) to the thickening blanket of greenhouse gases, and have benefited greatly in terms of national development in the past.