



Hansen to Australian PM: stop coal plants now

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James Hansen has written an (apparently) open letter to Kevin Rudd, urging that all new coal fired power plants be halted - via [Energy Bulletin](#), original at [Australian Science Media Centre](#) (pdf).

27 March 2008

The Hon Kevin Rudd, MP
Prime Minister of Australia
Australian Parliament
Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

Your leadership is needed on a matter concerning coal-fired power plants and carbon dioxide emission rates in your country, a matter with ramifications for life on our planet, including all species. Prospects for today's children, and especially the world's poor, hinge upon our success in stabilizing climate.

For the sake of identification, I am a United States citizen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies and Adjunct Professor at the Columbia University Earth Institute. I am a member of our National Academy of Sciences, have testified before our Senate and House of Representatives on many occasions, have advised our Vice President and Cabinet members on climate change and its relation to energy requirements, and have received numerous awards including the World Wildlife Fund's Duke of Edinburgh Conservation Medal from Prince Philip.

I write, however, as a private citizen, a resident of Kintnersville, Pennsylvania, USA. I was assisted in composing this letter by colleagues, including Australians, Americans, and Europeans, who commented upon a draft letter. Because of the urgency of the matter, I have not collected signatures, but your advisors will verify the authenticity of the science discussion.

I recognize that for years you have been a strong supporter of aggressive forward-looking actions to mitigate dangerous climate change. Also, since your election as Prime Minister of Australia, your government has been active in pressing the international community to take appropriate actions. We are now at a point that bold leadership is needed, leadership that could change the course of human history.

I have read and commend the Interim Report of Professor Ross Garnaut, submitted to your government. The conclusion that net carbon emissions must be cut to a fraction of current emissions must be stunning and sobering to policy-makers. Yet the science is unambiguous: if we burn most of the fossil fuels, releasing the CO₂ to the air, we will assuredly destroy much of the fabric of life on the planet. Achievement of required near-zero net emissions by mid-century implies a track with substantial cuts of emissions by 2020. Aggressive near-term fostering of energy efficiency and climate friendly technologies is an imperative for mitigation of the looming climate crisis and optimization of the economic pathway to the eventual clean-energy world.

Global climate is near critical tipping points that could lead to loss of all summer sea ice in the Arctic with detrimental effects on wildlife, initiation of ice sheet disintegration in West Antarctica and Greenland with progressive, unstoppable global sea level rise, shifting of climatic zones with extermination of many animal and plant species, reduction of freshwater supplies for hundreds of millions of people, and a more intense hydrologic cycle with stronger droughts and forest fires, but also heavier rains and floods, and stronger storms driven by latent heat, including tropical storms, tornados and thunderstorms.

Feasible actions now could still point the world onto a course that minimizes climate change. Coal clearly emerges as central to the climate problem from the facts summarized in the attached Fossil Fuel Facts. [See note below] Coal caused fully half of the fossil fuel increase of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the air today, and on the long run coal has the potential to be an even greater source of CO₂. Due to the dominant role of coal, solution to global warming must include phase-out of coal except for uses where the CO₂ is captured and sequestered. Failing that, we cannot avoid large climate change, because a substantial fraction of the emitted CO₂ will stay in the air more than 1000 years.

Yet there are plans for continuing mining of coal, export of coal, and construction of new coal-fired power plants around the world, including in Australia, plants that would have a lifetime of half a century or more. Your leadership in halting these plans could seed a transition that is needed to solve the global warming problem.

Choices among alternative energy sources - renewable energies, energy efficiency, nuclear power, fossil fuels with carbon capture - these are local matters. But decision to phase out coal use unless the CO₂ is captured is a global imperative, if we are to preserve the wonders of nature, our coastlines, and our social and economic well being.

Although coal is the dominant issue, there are many important subsidiary ramifications, including the need for rapid transition from oil-fired energy utilities, industrial facilities and transport systems, to clean (solar, hydrogen, gas, wind, geothermal, hot rocks, tide) energy sources, as well as removal of barriers to increased energy efficiency.

If the West makes a firm commitment to this course, discussion with developing countries can be prompt. Given the potential of technology assistance, realization of adverse impacts of climate change, and leverage and increasing interdependence from global trade, success in cooperation of developed and developing worlds is feasible.

The western world has contributed most to fossil fuel CO₂ in the air today, on a per capita basis. This is not an attempt to cast blame. It only recognizes the reality of the early industrial development in these countries, and points to a responsibility to lead in finding a solution to global warming.

A firm choice to halt building of coal-fired power plants that do not capture CO₂ would be a major step toward solution of the global warming problem. Australia has strong interest in solving the climate problem. Citizens in the United States are stepping up to

block one coal plant after another, and major changes can be anticipated after the upcoming national election.

If Australia halted construction of coal-fired power plants that do not capture and sequester the CO₂, it could be a tipping point for the world. There is still time to find that tipping point, but just barely. I hope that you will give these considerations your attention in setting your national policies. You have the potential to influence the future of the planet.

Prime Minister Rudd, we cannot avert our eyes from the basic fossil fuel facts, or the consequences for life on our planet of ignoring these fossil fuel facts. If we continue to build coal-fired power plants without carbon capture, we will lock in future climate disasters associated with passing climate tipping points. We must solve the coal problem now.

For your information, I plan to send a similar letter to the Australian States Premiers.

I commend to you the following Australian climate, paleoclimate and Earth scientists to provide further elaboration of the science reported in my attached paper (Hansen et al., 2008):

Professor Barry Brook, Professor of climate change, University of Adelaide

Dr Andrew Glikson, Australian National University

Professor Janette Lindesay, Australian National University

Dr Graeme Pearman, Monash University

Dr Barrie Pittock, CSIRO

Dr Michael Raupach CSIRO

Professor Will Steffen, Australian National University

Sincerely,

James E. Hansen

Kintnersville, Pennsylvania

United States of America



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