

Climate and Health

POSITION STATEMENT



College position

There is substantial evidence that the impacts of climate change has created a global health emergency and that the effects are being felt especially by rural and remote communities in Australia and across the world.¹

All levels of government in Australia need to take immediate and sustained action to reduce the impacts of climate change. This includes a policy approach which reflects the contexts and needs of rural, remote and First Nations communities.

In responding to the impact of climate change the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) will:

- Ensure that the College curriculum and training programs for Rural Generalist practice provide an understanding of the emerging challenges affecting rural, remote and First Nations people who are at the forefront of the impacts of climate change, including physical, mental, social and economic challenges, and how to best support communities through these challenges;
- Advocate with peak bodies and related organisations for training, support and resources for rural, remote and First Nations communities to strengthen their capacity to mitigate the impacts of climate change and to be better able to meet the challenges posed by climate change;
- Measure and take steps to reduce its carbon footprint and provide leadership to its members in their efforts to do the same within their own practices and work environments;
- Champion the role of the Rural Generalist in responding to health impacts of climate change; contributing to natural disaster and health service planning; and responding and supporting community resilience.
- Contribute to global efforts to raise awareness of the impacts of climate change on human health and to advocate for positive action.
- Acknowledge the deep knowledge and connection to Country of our First Nations peoples who must be part of decision-making on climate and health policy at all levels.

ACRRM calls on government at all levels to apply a “rural-proofing lens” to all climate change policy to ensure the health and sustainability of our population living in rural, remote and First Nations communities in Australia.

Climate Change and Rural and Remote Communities

Australia’s rural, remote and First Nations communities are more vulnerable to the health risks posed by climate change. This includes exacerbation of many of the health inequalities already experienced by people living in these communities.²

Impacts from climate change vary considerably across Australia,³ and in rural and remote areas the health impacts are broad, damaging, increasing and often under-estimated. These include (but are not limited to) the following: increasing heat stress; exacerbation of non-communicable diseases; increasing exposure to infectious diseases; increasing frequency and severity of hydrometeorological disasters (droughts, floods and tropical cyclones); and psychological distress.⁴

With many rural and remote areas reliant on primary agriculture production and vulnerable to drought, bushfires, cyclones, floods and heatwaves, these areas stand to be disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, particularly as water and soil security are inherently threatened by changes in climate.

These communities are also more reliant on resource-based industries and fossil fuels, but less likely to be able to respond and adapt to strategies designed to reduce the impacts of climate change. They will require additional and targeted support to enable them to do so.

The National Farmers Federation has cited climate change as the biggest issue ever faced by Australian agriculture. Its impacts are leading to reduced food availability and quality, increased food prices, and economic instability, all of which contribute to greater health risks, including malnutrition, stress-related conditions, and reduced access to healthcare.⁵

The Role of the Rural Generalist

Rural Generalists are uniquely placed to respond to the burden of disease resulting from climate change, provide high quality continuity of care and primary and preventative services, and keep people healthy and out of hospital.

Their understanding of their communities, together with their broader training in public and preventative health, mean that they are ideally placed to initiate and deliver preventative care, support community resilience, and provide input into climate change policy and planning at the national and community levels.

With their ability to provide and coordinate a wider range of health care services within their communities, including supporting telehealth services, RGs can reduce the need for patient travel or transfer to larger facilities and the consequent environmental impacts.

ACRRM Fellows are purpose-trained to provide comprehensive primary, secondary and emergency care, as well as population and public health services and preventative care, within the clinical and social context of rural, remote and First Nations locations. The College is committed to ensuring that Fellows continue to have the necessary training, skills and support to equip them to provide support to help people better prepare for and respond effectively to a wide range of emergency situations including those arising from natural disasters.

The National and Global Response

The College broadly supports the core objectives and key actions documented in the **National Health and Climate Strategy** which was launched in December 2023.

As part of this strategy, ACRRM calls on the **National Health, Sustainability and Climate Unit** to:

- Establish a well-equipped and appropriately-skilled surge health and medical workforce for deployment in response to extreme weather events, alongside maximising the potential from existing locally based services.
- Develop and roll out guidelines and training to support locally led climate risk and vulnerability assessment, adaptation, and resilience planning, co-designed, and where appropriate, guided by First Nations leadership.
- Develop a range of targeted climate resources; resilience initiatives; and appropriate workshops and training for rural, remote and First Nations practitioners and communities.
- Improve integration to improve healthcare outcomes for rural, remote and First Nations communities which are geographically isolated and rely on collaboration to maximise local capacity.

Globally, the College acknowledges the World Health Organisation's prediction that areas with weak health infrastructure – such as developing countries and remote communities, will be the least able to cope with the negative effects of climate change.⁶

ACRRM is committed to ensuring that existing global health inequities are not increased by the impacts of climate change. The College is a signatory to the **WONCA open letter** which is a call from family doctors to secure a just and equitable transition to sustainable energy and safeguard health from the climate emergency.

The Healthcare Sector Response

The Australian healthcare sector contributes around 7% of Australia's total emissions.⁷ Health service organisations must be supported to deliver sustainable, adaptable, and resilient care health care within a framework of environmental sustainability.

Climate risk literacy will need to be substantially improved across organisations through education, training, and support to ensure the workforce is upskilled to meet the challenges associated with delivering sustainable health services in the future.

ACRRM, together with other medical colleges is a signature to the **Joint Statement** from the Australian Commission on Safety and Health Care and the Interim Australian Centre for Disease Control, committing the signatories to supporting clinicians to deliver high-value care that protects and promotes health in a changing climate.

It is essential that the medical workforce, workplaces and facilities in rural, remote and First Nations communities are sufficiently funded and supported to achieve these outcomes.

The College Response

At the global and national levels, the College will:

- Contribute and support global efforts to raise awareness of the impacts of climate change on human health and to advocate for positive action with a focus on support for those countries and communities which are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.
- Support national campaigns where these acknowledge the unique needs and circumstances of rural, remote and First Nations communities and the provision for appropriate and targeted support for these communities.
- Champion the role of the Rural Generalist in responding to health impacts of climate change, particularly in rural, remote and First Nations communities. This includes addressing the burden of disease, providing high quality continuity of care and contributing to natural disaster planning and response and supporting community resilience.

- Advocate for additional support for rural, remote and First Nations communities, health professionals, workplaces and healthcare facilities, to allow them to respond and adapt to climate change and associated mitigation strategies.

Internally, ACRRM will:

- Ensure that the College curriculum and training programs for Rural Generalist practice provide an understanding of the emerging challenges affecting rural, remote and First Nations people who are at the forefront of the impacts of climate change, including physical, mental, social and economic challenges, and how to best support communities through these challenges;
- Advocate with peak bodies and related organisations for training, support and resources for rural, remote and First Nations communities to strengthen their capacity to mitigate the impacts of climate change and to be better able to meet the challenges posed by climate change;
- Measure and take steps to reduce its carbon footprint and provide leadership to its members in their efforts to do the same within their own practices and work environments;
- Champion the role of the Rural Generalist in responding to health impacts of climate change; contributing to natural disaster and health service planning and emergency response; and supporting community resilience.
- Acknowledge the deep knowledge and connection to Country of our First Nations peoples who must be part of decision-making on climate and health policy at all levels.

Endnotes

- 1 Romanello, M., Di Napoli, C., Green, C., Kennard, H., Lampard, P., Scamman, D., ... & Costello, A. (2023). The 2023 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: the imperative for a health-centred response in a world facing irreversible harms. *The Lancet*, 402(10419), 2346-2394 [http://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(23\)01859-7](http://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)01859-7).
- 2 Austin, E. K., Rich, J. L., Kiem, A. S., Handley, T., Perkins, D., & Kelly, B. J. (2020). Concerns about climate change among rural residents in Australia. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 75, 98-109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.01.010>.
- 3 Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, Lowitja Institute, November 2021. Available at: <https://www.lowitja.org.au/resource/climate-change-and-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health>.
- 4 Hanna, E. G., & McIver, L. J. (2018). Climate change: a brief overview of the science and health impacts for Australia. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 208(7), 311-315. Available at: [Climate change: a brief overview of the science and health impacts for Australia \(mja.com.au\)](https://www.mja.com.au).
- 5 National Farmers' Federation. (n.d.). Climate change and agriculture. National Farmers' Federation. Retrieved from <https://nff.org.au/key-issue/climate-change>.
- 6 World Health Organization. (2023, October 12). Climate change. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>.
- 7 Malik, A., Lenzen, M., McAlister, S., & McGain, F. (2018). The carbon footprint of Australian health care. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 2(1), e27-e35. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(17\)30180-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(17)30180-8).

Find out more

If you have any queries relating to this Position Statement, please contact us by:

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ACRRM acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the custodians of the lands and waters where our members and staff work and live across Australia. We pay respect to their elders, lores, customs and Dreaming. We recognise these lands and waters have always been a place of teaching, learning, and healing.