

# What a zero carbon act means for New Zealand

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Youth climate action group Generation Zero has drafted a zero carbon act for New Zealand.

Labour leader Jacinda Ardern has called climate change the "nuclear-free moment" of her generation. In short, it's a huge issue, and it's going to affect the whole world.

In her final report as Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Dr Jan Wright recommended a way for New Zealand to do something about it: a climate change or zero carbon act.

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Handily, youth climate change action group Generation Zero has drafted a zero carbon act already. So we know what one could look like. The group has answered a few questions below to explain the ins and outs of a climate act.

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Dr Jan Wright, has recommended New Zealand put in place a climate change or zero carbon act.

## HOW WOULD A ZERO CARBON ACT WORK?

The first step is to lock in a science-based long-term target for New Zealand's emissions. We [Generation Zero] think that requires net zero carbon emissions by 2050 or sooner (but methane would be treated a bit differently).

Governments then need to set binding five-year "carbon budgets" extending at least 12 years into the future. These create stepping stones towards the long-term target. Critically, the act would set up an independent Climate Commission to advise governments on this.

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The commission would map out the transition pathway to net zero emissions, recommend the level of each carbon budget, and show how they'd expect each sector to contribute to the emissions cuts.

Finally, governments need to produce a policy plan showing exactly how they will meet the carbon budgets. If the plan doesn't add up, the government can be taken to court and directed to make a plan that does.

## WHAT IS THE POINT OF A ZERO CARBON ACT?

The point is to ensure New Zealand has a credible and comprehensive plan to reduce our emissions, and to hold our government – and all future governments – to account on their promises.

It's also about making government think long term by working backwards from the end goal of zero carbon by 2050. It will take some of the politics out of the climate change debate and mean that we're planning over multiple election cycles, which gives people and businesses the certainty they need to invest in low carbon solutions.

## WHY DO WE NEED ONE?

Climate change is on our doorstep, and it's already impacting our homes and our livelihoods. We're getting hit with more extreme floods, droughts and wildfires, and things will only get worse unless we act. Unlike virtually all other developed countries, New Zealand's emissions are still climbing. What's embarrassing is that our emissions reductions target is nowhere near ambitious enough, and the worst part is we're not even on track to meet it.

The Government doesn't have a plan for how it will deliver on its climate change pledges, apart from buying carbon credits from other countries. It has continued to kick the can down the road, lumping all the problems onto the next generation.

Not only is that a moral failure, it risks trashing New Zealand's "clean and green" reputation that our export industries depend upon. What's more, our current approach is so complicated that few people realise how little we are doing to reduce emissions in New Zealand. There is little transparency, and no accountability.

We need a zero carbon act to transform the way our governments are dealing with this problem.

## WHEN SHOULD ONE BE IMPLEMENTED?

We think introducing a zero carbon act is the most urgent and important thing for the next parliament to do. We are calling on all political parties to set aside their differences and pass a zero carbon act. Depending on when this takes place, the first carbon budget period could be scheduled for 2021-2025 to align with the Paris Agreement.

## WHO WOULD IT AFFECT?

Climate change affects all of us, and the transition to a zero carbon country will involve everyone. The zero carbon act will help everyone to understand the changes that need to happen, and make it easier for people and businesses to be part of the solution.

Obviously the emissions-intensive parts of our economy – fossil fuel industries, farming and some manufacturers – face the need for change. Also, there are risks that the transition could happen in a way that makes life harder for people already struggling to get by.

That's why the zero carbon act is focused on ensuring a fair and cost-effective transition. Governments would need to consider the impact on jobs and people in poverty, and address those in the plans that they make – for example by providing help and opportunities for impacted workers and communities.

But it's important to realise that the zero carbon transition will create new jobs, new industries and new opportunities for New Zealanders. Delaying the inevitable doesn't do anyone any favours, and means we'll miss out on those opportunities. It's time to take control.

## HOW MUCH MIGHT IT COST?

The effects of runaway climate change will damage our economy much more than taking steps to reduce emissions. By joining the Paris Agreement, we've already committed to being part of the global transition to net zero emissions.

The zero carbon act will require the Government to set out a fair, sustainable and cost-efficient pathway for New Zealand to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. What will really cost is delay – delay in reducing our emissions, and in dealing with impacts of climate change that are already on our doorstep.

The longer we continue on our current path of emission growth, the more we lock in bad investments that will become stranded assets tomorrow. A smooth, well-managed transition is in New Zealand's best interests – otherwise we'll be forced to make a costly and abrupt transition later.

Insurers and local councils are also ringing the alarm bells that we need to get serious about adapting to climate impacts like sea level rise now. The longer we wait, the more risk and the more cost we are creating for ourselves.

If you want a further summary of the act, read on here.

## THE PRESSURE IS ON

There appears to be almost complete cross-party support for climate change as a policy priority.

During a climate change debate in the week before the election, representatives from six parties – Labour, the Greens, New Zealand First, United Future, The Opportunities Party and the Māori Party – ranked a zero carbon act 10 out of 10 on a priority scale.

Only National did not.

New Zealand signed up to the Paris Agreement in 2015, committing to reducing our net emissions of harmful gases to 57.7 million tonnes of CO<sup>2</sup> equivalent per year. The target for 2050 is 32.3 million tonnes per year.

Wright has no confidence those targets can be met and, as noted, has recommended a climate act and a commission. Generation Zero's zero carbon act, if adopted, would establish a climate commission of six to 10 Parliament-appointed experts.

Gary Taylor, the chairman and executive director of the Environmental Defence Society (EDS), argues the most important thing the next government could do would be establishing a climate act and commission.

In October, just after the election's special votes have been counted and negotiations to form the next government are underway, the EDS is holding a climate change and business conference. Speakers like Britain's Lord Deben – Chairman of the UK's independent Committee on Climate Change – will be attending.

Those present will discuss how to address climate change, including domestic and international policy.

And in the week following the election, the public's been voicing support for a National-Greens coalition. The parties haven't ruled out a deal. But it appears to show that people want a National government to do better on the environment and climate change.

Will those forming the next government be listening?

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