

WENTWORTH GROUP

OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS

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COMMENT ON DRAFT REPORT OF THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION REPORT ON NATURAL DISASTER FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

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1. The Wentworth Group agrees with the key point that it is necessary to improve effective planning and mitigation of risks by governments, businesses and households given the recurring nature of natural disasters in Australia and the frequency to which different parts of the continent are exposed to natural hazards. We further agree that current arrangements are inadequate to meet current and future adverse impacts from natural disasters. Governments, especially the Australian Government, are overinvesting in post-disaster reconstruction, and underinvesting in mitigation that would limit the impact of natural disasters in the first place.
2. Specifically, the Wentworth Group supports the conclusion that provision of up to date information is very important in the management of risk associated with natural disasters and that there is scope for improved communication by governments and industry. We further agree with the conclusion that land use planning instruments can be better used by decision makers to ensure risks facing existing communities and new developments understand the magnitude and frequency of extreme events in their areas.
3. The Wentworth Group is concerned that the draft report does not fully utilise science knowledge on extreme events that is being generated by Australian scientists in universities and in government employment. In particular, there is a need for the Commission to place more emphasis on the role of anthropogenic forcing in causing a very large increase in the likelihood of some extreme events such as the record 2013 Australia-wide annual and spring temperatures recently published in the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society (Lewis and Karoly, September, 2014).¹ As part of any disaster mitigation program it should be made very clear that there is a key role for the Australian Government in supporting extreme event science and in communicating it to states and local governments to help facilitate better land use planning, advice to insurers and other mitigation actions. Experience in the USA shows how well resourced federal agencies such as NOAA and the USGS provide such support. The Australian Government should take similar responsibilities including support to other governments, industry and communities for coordinated, consistent mapping of areas of risk to natural disasters.

The Wentworth Group recommends that the national framework for disaster mitigation management embrace a mechanism for both investing in and communicating the science of extreme events to decision makers.

4. The Wentworth Group retains the view, as noted on page 208 of the Draft Report, that there should be a mechanism by which the Australian Government ensures a level of accountability from the states and local governments as to how they use land use planning instruments to mitigate disaster impacts. This should not be a matter left to the **sole** discretion of individual states and territories or to local councils. As noted by the Commission, there are several matters for consideration when land use planning and development approvals are made at state and local levels. Disaster risk is one. We wish the Commission to clarify how the preferred option for mitigation funding of state and territory governments by the Australian Government related to land use planning will meet national disaster mitigation priorities. As recognised by the Commission there are options for local and even state and territory governments to place other land use interests above that of disaster mitigation in known hazard areas. If the purpose is to reduce post-disaster funding exposure to the Australian Government, then there should be some level of federal oversight of planning actions. In our submission, we note the value of the governance model adopted by the Canadian Government, an integrated model that if adopted could ensure that across levels of government there would be an agreed process to identify areas at risk and the steps needed to adjust land use plans to mitigate the risk.

The Wentworth Group recommends that the national framework for disaster mitigation management embrace a mechanism for the Australian Government to have oversight of matching funds allocated to state and territory governments to ensure that the use of land use planning instruments in areas of known natural hazard gives priority to management of disaster risk.

5. In its submission to the Inquiry, the Wentworth Group stated that the economy suffers from lack of long-term strategic planning which takes into consideration adverse cumulative impacts to Australia's land, water and biodiversity assets. We note in the Draft Report that "others have argued that land use planning has been short term in its focus, with too little consideration for the extent of long-term disaster risks, and that poor decisions have been made as a result of political pressures" (p.410). In our view, regional and local land use plans frequently allow development decisions to be made in isolation of both cumulative impacts as well as risks faced in the future from extreme events. The Commission noted examples in Box 7.3 of ineffective natural disaster risk management in land use planning. When both cumulative impacts and risk to natural disasters are not incorporated into land use planning there exists problems of maladaptation to changing environmental conditions, in response to either human or natural factors. In our submission, we noted how modelling skills now exist at a regional scale to assist integrated land use planning using knowledge of landscape processes. It is very rare for such knowledge to be used by planners, given their traditional focus on land development. The Wentworth Group submission stated that when disaster planning is not incorporated into land use planning it causes problems of recovery and resilience and, potentially in the future, of maladaptation to climate change. The most effective way to manage the various pressures to both promote development and deliver sustainable environmental outcomes while minimising risks from extreme events, is for all levels of government to agree to adopt a land use planning system that embodies natural forces. This should involve an explicit role for the 54 regional Natural Resource Management bodies. Once we get these effective planning systems in place, the market will then allocate

capital to productive enterprises that do not cause long-term damage to the environment and economic capacity.

The Wentworth Group recommends that the national framework for natural disaster mitigation recognise the value of states and territories implementing a process of strategic land use planning that integrate understanding of cumulative impacts and disaster risk at regional planning scales.

¹ Lewis, S. C., and D. J. Karoly (2014) The role of anthropogenic forcing in the record 2013 Australia-wide annual and spring temperatures. *Bull. Am. Met Soc.*, **95** (9), S31-S34.