1 May 2015

Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for the Environment
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: Greg.Hunt.MP@aph.gov.au

Re: Approval of the Abbot Point coal port expansion

Dear Minister

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA), the peak organisation for public health in Australia, is aware that the Abbot Point coal port expansion has again come before you for a decision for allowing it to proceed.

PHAA would like to reiterate to you the health reasons for not permitting an expansion of coal mining in Australia, which is a consequence of this proposal. Fossil fuels have several types of impact on health. There are direct local and regional delayed effects from the extraction and burning on fossil fuels to generate electricity, power stationery engines and fuel transport. These include increases in rates of cardiac and respiratory disease, neoplasm (cancers), birth defects and others.

At a long term global level fossil fuel use emits greenhouse gasses to the atmosphere which drives six major environmental changes, which all act in concert:

- Sea level rise through thermal expansion of water, which will flood low lying land (unless extensive measures are taken) and increases the effects of storms
- Melt of ice in glaciers and polar ice caps which changes water availability for drinking water and agriculture in many parts of the world
- Increasing the acidity of the oceans which is having an effect on organisms that have shells including krill which is the foundation of ocean food chains; this will have impacts on human nutrition as well as disrupting ocean ecosystems with uncertain consequences
- Changes on the growth including reduction in nutritional value of and increases in toxins in plants used for food and fodder
- Increasing temperature and which have direct effects such as more frequent heat waves, more severe fire seasons, impacts on plant growth, increased evaporation rates so drying of soil and so more intense droughts
- Climate change, which results in more severe storms, changes in rainfall patterns and ranges, and contributes to storms, fires, droughts
Secondarily to these are a number of indirect effects on agriculture, ecosystem functions, availability of fresh water, and as a flow on consequence to all of these are disruptions to the economy that range from availability and price of food, exports, liveability of rural towns, and the psychosocial and mental health impacts that these impacts have on people.

These are not future events. Climate change effects are happening now at less than one degree average global warming. Therefore it is an emergent public health matter that greenhouse gas emissions are curtailed as much and as quickly as possible.

Queensland coal has the potential to contribute about 4000Mt (4 gigatonnes (Gt)) of carbon which is 14,500Mt of CO₂ to the atmosphere across the remainder of this century from the Carmichael mine alone (based on Queensland Department of State Development, Infrastructure and Planning forecasts of 60 Mt of coal per annum and Adani expectations of a 90 year mine life, and an estimate that 80% of coal is carbon).

Further to put this in context, The Direct Action Plan Emissions Reduction Fund intends to reduce Australia’s CO₂ emissions by 236 Mt (64Mt of carbon) to achieve our 5% reduction target over the next 5 years. If the Adani Carmichael mine puts 14,500Mt of CO₂ to the atmosphere across the remainder of this century, what does that effectively do to Australia’s initial post Kyoto reductions? Even a 50% emissions reduction is only 7% of the volume of coal being taken out of the Carmichael mine and put into the atmosphere.

If the government is fair dinkum about acting to curb greenhouse gas emissions, then regardless of the accounting mechanism for coal, there is a moral argument for not permitting this volume of carbon to be released into the atmosphere.

The PHAA calls on you to take a principled stand on this matter and help protect the health of Australians from the immediate and the longer term effects of coal use. We ask that you do not permit the Abbot’s Point project to proceed.

Yours faithfully

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