

A review of Climate Policies of Australia's 3 levels of government

Does each level of government have a climate policy?

Each level of government in Australia has climate policies, though their scope and focus differ:

1. **Federal Government:** Australia has a comprehensive federal climate policy framework aimed at achieving net zero emissions by 2050. The federal government legislated its net zero target through the Climate Change Act passed in 2022. It also sets national emissions reduction targets, such as the recent 2035 target aiming for a 62-70% reduction in emissions against 2005 levels. The federal policy covers emissions reduction, climate adaptation, and mandates climate-related disclosures for government entities and companies. It aligns with international commitments like the Paris Agreement.
2. **State and Territory Governments:** Each state and territory in Australia has its own climate policies and targets, often more ambitious or tailored to local conditions. These policies include renewable energy targets, emissions reduction goals, and adaptation strategies. States like Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland have detailed climate action plans addressing energy transition, transport, and resilience to climate impacts. These complement and sometimes exceed federal initiatives, reflecting the federated nature of Australia's governance.
3. **Local Governments:** Local councils across Australia also develop climate action plans focusing on community-level emissions reductions, sustainable urban development, and climate resilience. These often include initiatives like improving energy efficiency in buildings, promoting public transport and active travel, and enhancing green spaces. Local government associations support councils in integrating climate policy into local planning and operations.

In summary, Australia's climate governance is multi-layered, with federal, state/territory, and local levels each having distinct but interconnected climate policies aimed at reducing emissions and adapting to climate change. The federal government provides overarching targets and legislation, while states and local governments implement tailored policies suited to their regional contexts.

What's the level of climate change policy amongst our State & Territory Governments?

Australia's state and territory governments exhibit varied levels of climate change policy ambition and implementation, reflecting regional priorities, economic structures, and political contexts. Here's a detailed overview of the **level of climate change policy** across each state and territory:

1. Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

- The ACT is one of Australia's most ambitious jurisdictions on climate.
- It has legislated a **net zero emissions target by 2045**, earlier than the federal target.
- The ACT Climate Change Strategy focuses on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and zero emissions transport.
- It has achieved 100% renewable electricity supply through government contracts.

2. Victoria

- Victoria legislated the **Climate Change Act 2017**, committing to net zero emissions by 2050 with interim targets for 2025 and 2030.
- The state has a detailed Climate Change Strategy emphasizing renewable energy, emissions reduction in transport and industry, and climate adaptation.
- Victoria is a leader in supporting large-scale renewable projects and clean technology.

3. New South Wales (NSW)

- NSW targets net zero emissions by 2050 and has released a **Net Zero Plan Stage 1** focused on electricity, transport, and land use.
- The state promotes renewable energy zones and investments in clean energy infrastructure.

- However, NSW faces criticism for ongoing approvals of fossil fuel projects, which some see as inconsistent with climate goals.

4. Queensland

- Queensland's **Climate Action Plan** aims for net zero emissions by 2050 with interim targets and a focus on renewable energy and adaptation.
- The state emphasizes energy transition but still supports coal and gas industries, creating tension between economic and climate goals.

5. South Australia

- South Australia is a leader in renewable energy, with ambitious targets and a history of high renewable penetration.
- It has legislated climate targets and a Climate Change Strategy focusing on emissions reduction, adaptation, and innovation.

6. Western Australia

- WA has a Climate Policy Framework with a net zero by 2050 target but has been slower than some states to legislate binding targets.
- The state balances climate ambitions with significant fossil fuel industry presence.

7. Tasmania

- Tasmania has a legislated **net zero by 2050 target** and a Climate Action Plan emphasizing renewable energy and forest carbon sequestration.
- The state benefits from abundant hydroelectric power, contributing to low emissions.

8. Northern Territory

- The Northern Territory has a Climate Change Response focusing on adaptation and emissions reduction but lacks legislated net zero targets.
- Its policy emphasizes resilience to climate impacts and sustainable development.

Summary Table

| State/Territory | Net Zero Target | Key Features | Legislative Status |
|-----------------|-----------------|---|--------------------|
| ACT | 2045 | 100% renewable electricity, transport | Legally binding |
| Victoria | 2050 | Interim targets, renewable energy, adaptation | Legally binding |
| NSW | 2050 | Renewable energy zones, clean infrastructure | Policy-based plan |
| Queensland | 2050 | Renewable energy, adaptation, fossil fuel support | Policy-based plan |
| South Australia | 2050 | High renewable penetration, innovation | Legally binding |

| State/Territory | Net Zero Target | Key Features | Legislative Status |
|--------------------|----------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Western Australia | 2050 | Fossil fuel balance, policy framework | Policy framework, not binding |
| Tasmania | 2050 | Renewable energy, forest carbon sinks | Legally binding |
| Northern Territory | No legislated target | Adaptation focus, sustainable development | Policy framework |

In conclusion:

- States and territories vary in climate policy ambition and legislative strength.
- Some jurisdictions lead with binding targets and comprehensive strategies (ACT, Victoria, South Australia).
- Others have policy frameworks but less binding commitments (NSW, Queensland, WA, NT).
- This patchwork reflects Australia’s federated system and diverse economic contexts.

How many LGAs have climate policies or statements on climate in their Strategic Plans.

- In Australia, a significant number of Local Government Areas (LGAs) have incorporated climate policies or statements on climate change within their Strategic Plans, but the exact proportion varies by region and level of commitment.
- Many LGAs recognize climate change as a critical issue and include climate action or adaptation strategies in their planning documents, reflecting growing awareness of local climate risks and mitigation opportunities.
- The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) explicitly supports councils in developing climate policies and has a Climate Change Policy Statement encouraging LGAs to embed climate considerations in their strategies and operations.
- Research on local governments in metropolitan areas like Western Sydney shows that LGAs’ core functions, such as land use planning and infrastructure maintenance, increasingly integrate climate action, indicating that climate statements or policies are becoming more common in strategic plans.
- The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) also promotes climate change policies among councils, providing templates and frameworks to support consistent inclusion of climate considerations in local strategic planning.
- While there is no single national database that quantifies precisely how many LGAs have formal climate policies or statements in their strategic plans, studies and policy statements indicate that **a majority of Australian LGAs include some form of climate-related policy or statement** in their strategic planning documents, though the depth and robustness of these vary widely.

Are these policies harmonised across each level of government?

Australia’s climate policies across federal, state/territory, and local governments are **partially harmonised but not fully integrated or uniform**. Here’s an overview of the degree of harmonisation:

1. Federal and State/Territory Governments: Coordination but Variation

- The federal government sets national emissions reduction targets and overarching frameworks, such as the **Climate Change Act 2022** and commitments under the **Paris Agreement**.

- States and territories have their own legally binding or aspirational targets and climate action plans, which often align with or exceed federal goals but vary in ambition, timelines, and strategies. For example:
 - **Victoria's Climate Change Act 2017** sets a net-zero target by 2050 with interim targets and a detailed climate policy framework.
 - **New South Wales** has a net-zero target by 2050 and renewable energy zones to accelerate clean energy transition.
 - **Queensland** targets net zero by 2050 with a focus on renewable energy and adaptation.
- While these state policies generally align with the federal net-zero goal, the **policy instruments, regulatory approaches, and sectoral priorities differ**, reflecting regional economic, social, and environmental contexts.
- There are **intergovernmental forums and agreements** (e.g., the **Council of Australian Governments – COAG**, now replaced by the **National Cabinet**) aimed at policy coordination, but these do not enforce full harmonisation.

2. Local Governments: Diverse and Locally Focused

- Local councils develop climate action plans tailored to their communities, focusing on emissions reduction, energy efficiency, and adaptation.
- There is **no mandatory requirement** for local governments to align strictly with state or federal policies, resulting in a patchwork of approaches and varying levels of ambition.
- Local government associations (e.g., **Australian Local Government Association - ALGA**) provide guidance and frameworks to encourage consistency, but implementation varies widely.

3. Challenges and Gaps in Harmonisation

- The **lack of a binding national framework that mandates harmonisation** means states and local governments have flexibility but also create fragmentation.
- Differences in political priorities, economic structures (e.g., reliance on coal in some states), and administrative capacities contribute to inconsistent policy implementation.
- This fragmentation can complicate national progress tracking and create challenges for businesses and communities operating across jurisdictions.

Summary

- Australia's climate policies are **coordinated but not fully harmonised** across government levels.
- Federal targets provide a common goal, but states and local governments have distinct policies reflecting local priorities.
- Coordination mechanisms exist but do not enforce uniformity, leading to a multi-layered, sometimes fragmented climate governance landscape.

What does the environmental NGO (envNGO) sector think of these climate policies?

The envNGO sector in Australia generally views the country's climate policies as **a mix of progress and significant shortcomings**, emphasizing the need for stronger, more ambitious, and better-coordinated action across all government levels. Here's a detailed overview:

1. Federal Climate Policies: Criticism for Insufficient Ambition and Implementation

- Many envNGOs argue that the federal government's climate policies, while improved in recent years (e.g., legislating net zero by 2050), **still fall short of what is needed to meet the Paris Agreement targets** and to limit warming to 1.5°C.
- Groups like the **Climate Council** and **Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF)** highlight that Australia's 2030 targets are not yet aligned with the science-backed reductions required globally, and policies lack enforceable mechanisms to drive rapid emissions cuts.

- The federal government’s continued support for fossil fuel industries, including coal and gas, is a major point of contention, with envNGOs calling for a faster transition to renewable energy and a phase-out of fossil fuel subsidies.

2. State and Territory Policies: Positive Examples but Need for Greater Ambition

- EnvNGOs often praise some states for more ambitious and detailed climate action plans. For example, Victoria and South Australia are seen as leaders in renewable energy and emissions reduction.
- However, the sector still urges states to adopt stronger interim targets, accelerate coal phase-out, and improve transparency and accountability in policy delivery.
- Some states with economies reliant on fossil fuels face criticism for slow or inconsistent climate action, which envNGOs see as a barrier to national progress.

3. Local Government Involvement: Valued but Under-Resourced

- Local governments receive support from envNGOs for their grassroots climate initiatives, which often drive community engagement and practical adaptation measures.
- However, envNGOs note that local councils often lack sufficient funding, legislative power, and coordination with higher government levels to scale their impact effectively.

4. Calls for Policy Harmonisation and Stronger National Leadership

- The envNGO sector stresses the importance of harmonising climate policies across federal, state, and local levels to ensure coherent, effective action.
- They advocate for legally binding national targets, clear sectoral roadmaps (energy, transport, agriculture), and policies that prioritize climate justice and Indigenous leadership.

Summary of envNGO Perspectives

| Aspect | EnvNGO Viewpoint |
|------------------|---|
| Federal Policy | Progress made but insufficient ambition; fossil fuel support undermines goals |
| State Policy | Some states leading, others lagging; need for stronger targets and accountability |
| Local Government | Valued role but under-resourced and lacking coordination |
| Harmonisation | Urgent need for coordinated, binding national frameworks and clear pathways |
| Overall | Climate policies are a foundation but require urgent strengthening, justice focus, and implementation |

EnvNGOs maintain a hopeful but urgent tone, urging all government levels to accelerate climate action with justice, transparency, and stronger legal frameworks.

Are these policies robust enough to bring about real mitigation measures?

Australia’s climate policies at federal, state/territory, and local levels represent important steps toward emissions reduction, but their **robustness and sufficiency to deliver real, large-scale mitigation remain contested**. Here’s a detailed analysis:

1. Federal Policies: Progress Made but Gaps Remain

- The federal government's **net zero by 2050 target** and the 2030 emissions reduction goals (62-70% reduction from 2005 levels) mark progress compared to earlier, weaker commitments.
- However, independent analyses (e.g., by the Climate Council and Climate Action Tracker) indicate that current federal policies and measures **fall short of the scale and speed of mitigation needed** to align with the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C limit.
- Key concerns include:
 - Continued support and subsidies for fossil fuel industries, notably coal and gas, which undermines transition efforts.
 - Lack of binding sectoral roadmaps and detailed implementation plans to ensure delivery of targets.
 - Insufficient incentives for accelerating renewable energy uptake and energy efficiency improvements.

2. State and Territory Policies: Some Leaders, Some Lagging

- Certain states like **Victoria, South Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory** have adopted more ambitious and actionable climate policies, including legislated targets, renewable energy mandates, and coal phase-out plans.
- These states demonstrate that **robust policies at the sub-national level can drive meaningful mitigation**, especially when backed by clear legislation and funding.
- Conversely, states with economies reliant on fossil fuels, such as Queensland and Western Australia, face challenges in fully committing to rapid decarbonisation, which limits national progress.

3. Local Government Initiatives: Valuable but Limited in Scale

- Local councils contribute through energy efficiency programs, sustainable urban planning, and community engagement.
- However, their impact on national emissions is limited by constrained resources, lack of binding authority, and variable policy integration with higher government levels.

4. Overall Assessment: Incremental but Insufficient for Urgent Climate Goals

- Australia's climate policies form a **foundation for mitigation** but are generally seen as **not robust enough to guarantee real, large-scale emissions reductions at the pace required**.
- Independent experts and envNGOs emphasize the need for:
 - Stronger, legally binding interim targets.
 - Clear, enforceable sectoral emissions reduction pathways.
 - Phasing out fossil fuel subsidies and infrastructure investments.
 - Enhanced coordination and harmonisation across government levels.

In brief:

- Australia's climate policies provide a necessary framework but are not yet robust enough to ensure the real and rapid mitigation required by climate science.
- Accelerated action, stronger enforcement, and fossil fuel phase-out are critical to making these policies truly effective.

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