

Call for Australia to set 'zero pollution' goal

May 18 2021



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A group of eminent scientists has urged Australian governments, Federal and State, to adopt a zero pollution target for air, water and land.

The researchers have released a powerful new report warning that [chemical pollution](#) represents 'a growing peril and potential catastrophic

risk to humanity' on a scale equivalent to [climate change](#).

Their report was published in the respected journal *Environment International* on the same day the European Commission (EC) announced an action plan for zero pollution of air, water and soil.

Laureate Professor Ravi Naidu, CEO of the Cooperative Research Centre for Contamination Assessment and Remediation of the Environment (CRC CARE), said that acting on the pollution threat was not only urgent from a health perspective, but also offered huge opportunities from an economic and employment standpoint.

"In our report, and in the EC's, it is made clear that pollution now kills 9 million people a year. This is by far the worst case of preventable death and injury in [human history](#). Action is overdue in every country on Earth, not least Australia.

"Chemical pollution is associated with heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and a rising epidemic of brain damage and mental disability as well as industrial fatalities. Many of these conditions are preventable if we can clean up our nation."

Clean-up is already a \$3 billion industry in Australia and our skills and technologies are being exported round the world to help countries like China and India overcome the effects of industrialisation, he said.

"Effective clean-up can make our cities healthier, can lift the value of remediated land, can save lives and reduce healthcare costs to government, and can reduce the level of disability in the community. The history of asbestos and the threat of emerging contaminants such as PFAS illustrate the urgency of innovative R&D. Clean-up is a vibrant, high-tech industry in its own right, which is on a strong growth trajectory worldwide. We need governments to help make it go faster."

Prof. Naidu, who is also Director of the Global Centre for Environmental Remediation at the University of Newcastle, said that human chemical emissions now total four or five times our climate emissions—making chemical contamination a global threat as large, or larger, than climate change.

"Most people are concerned about climate change and many are making changes in their lives and work to curb it. This does not yet apply to chemical contamination, which is growing out of control around the world, including Australia.

"It is unleashing a pandemic of new diseases and existing conditions that far exceeds COVID-19 in terms of the death and disability caused. Yet we hear little about it when leaders speak about the challenges we face."

Prof. Naidu said that chemical contamination was not only a threat to the lives and wellbeing of every Australian—but its clean-up held vast opportunities for new, clean industries and exports.

"Australia has built its prosperity on the export of its resources. We now need to build our future prosperity on the export on knowledge about how to make this a safer, healthier and cleaner world."

"My colleagues and I urge Australia's leaders in federal, state and local government to focus on this enormous challenge—and equally enormous opportunity—and build a new road to prosperity through clean-up.

"We urge all thinking Australians to read our report in Environment International, the EC's Action Plan and The Lancet Commission report on Pollution and Health to understand the scale of the threat—and of the magnificent opportunity that clean-up presents to those who lead."

Prof. Naidu added that Australia was already a world leader in trying to

build an international alliance to tackle the global [pollution](#) threat.

"The globalCARE Alliance is a scientific initiative to define, quantify, set limits to, help clean up, and devise new ways to curb the growing impact of chemical contamination on human health and the environment.

"It is a global partnering of scientific, government, industry and community organisations and individuals dedicated to making ours a cleaner, healthier and safer world."

As part of globalCARE, Prof. Naidu is also calling for a Global Contamination Accord. Anyone wishing to support the Accord is encouraged to sign a pledge by way of a very brief online survey.

"We appeal to the governments and businesses of Australia to support globalCARE in any way they can, and make clean-up a dynamic part of the nation's post-COVID recovery program."

More information: Ravi Naidu et al. Chemical pollution: A growing peril and potential catastrophic risk to humanity, *Environment International* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.envint.2021.106616](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2021.106616)

Provided by CRC for Contamination Assessment and Remediation of the Environment (CARE)

Citation: Call for Australia to set 'zero pollution' goal (2021, May 18) retrieved 15 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-05-australia-pollution-goal.html>

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