

Australian parliament approves emissions caps on big polluters

March 30 2023, by Steven TRASK



Large Australian coal mines will be among the polluters required to cut emissions by 4.9 percent a year under the new law.

Australia's parliament passed breakthrough climate laws targeting the nation's worst polluters on Thursday, forcing coal mines and oil refineries to curb emissions by about five percent each year.

The laws apply to 215 major industrial facilities—each producing more than 100,000 tonnes of greenhouse gases a year—and form the backbone of Australia's pledge to reach net zero emissions by 2050.

Experts said the laws signalled the end of Australia's bitter "[climate wars](#)"—a decade of political brawling that has repeatedly derailed attempts to tackle the country's contribution to [global warming](#).

With the [new legislation](#), the country's centre-left Labor government has forecast it can stop 200 million tonnes of carbon from being pumped into the atmosphere over the next decade.

"What the parliament has done today is safeguard our climate, safeguard our economy and safeguard our future," Australia's Climate Change Minister Chris Bowen told MPs.

"What the parliament has done today is brought an end to 10 years of dysfunction and 10 years of delay."

Aluminium smelters, [coal mines](#), [oil refineries](#) and other large polluters will be forced to cut their emissions by 4.9 percent each year.

"It's the first time greenhouse gas emissions reduction has been written into Australian law," University of New South Wales sustainability expert Tommy Wiedmann told AFP.

"That's obviously a good thing. We have a [climate policy](#) now."

In the weeks ahead of the vote, the government struck a deal on the so-called Safeguard Mechanism after engaging in high-stakes bargaining with the left-wing Greens party.

The previously sceptical Greens, whose support was needed to pass the

laws, agreed to back the carbon plan after persuading the government to put a hard cap on emissions.

Greens leader Adam Bandt said the move compelled oil and gas corporations to slash their emissions "for the first time ever in law".

Climate 'stalemate'

Australia's economy is fuelled by mining and coal exports—and it is among the biggest emitters of carbon dioxide, per capita, in the world.

For years, Australia had the reputation of acting as a laggard on global action to stop climate change.

But a series of severe natural disasters helped convince the country's leaders to take the climate emergency seriously.

Heavy storms in 2022 caused catastrophic floods on Australia's east coast, in which more than 20 people died.

The "Black Summer" bushfires of 2019-2020 burned more than eight million hectares of native vegetation, while marine heatwaves caused mass coral bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef in 2016, 2017 and 2020.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government was swept to power last year promising to change the pro-fossil fuel stance of the previous decade-old conservative government.

Although many praised the laws as a crucial first step, sustainability expert Wiedmann warned Australia could not rest on its laurels.

"It's not enough on its own to reduce emissions and avoid dangerous [climate change](#)," he said.

"The hard decisions will come in the next few years."

Murdoch University sustainability expert Martin Brueckner said the plan ended Australia's climate "stalemate", and gave a strong signal to businesses.

"It pretty much pushes climate denialists in a corner," he told AFP.

"We had a lot of market investment uncertainty over the last 10 years under the poorly defined climate policy.

"Having made that first policy step—as small as it may be—I think it paves the way for more progressive policies to follow."

Biggest polluters

Australia's mining industry has warned that the financial burden of compliance could lead to massive job losses.

"If we are not careful, some facilities in Australia will close," the Minerals Council of Australia said before the laws passed.

"Not only would that damage our economy and slash tens of thousands of regional jobs and billions in investment, it also would push the emissions reduction burden onto other nations that are less able or less willing to decarbonise."

Global mining giants Rio Tinto and BHP operate a number of mines and smelters that will be forced to make emissions cuts.

Australia's Climate Council has estimated that the 215 facilities are responsible for almost 30 percent of the country's total emissions.

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Citation: Australian parliament approves emissions caps on big polluters (2023, March 30)
retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-australian-parliament-emissions-caps-big.html>

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