The Hon. Ted O’Brien Chair 26 November 2020
Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Mr O’Brien,

Climate change constitutes a serious threat to our planet and our existence.

Without vision, commitment, a preparedness to respect the science and take bold action, our very way of life is threatened. Our organisation, the Victorian Women’s Trust, knows only too well that it is one thing to advocate for gender equality; it is another to urgently steward our earth and very life on this earth.

*“No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it.”*

Albert Einstein

As a women’s organisation, we had the foresight and commitment seventeen years ago to undertake a visionary project called *Watermark Australia*. We saw the writing on the wall as to the heart-breaking degradation of our water systems around the country as well as the warning signals of dangerous climate change. We wanted to create an opportunity for women to enter the debate and discussion; and to empower them to take action around water scarcity and climate change.

To do this, we involved several thousand women and men in a unique process which brought science and community wisdom together in a framework document published in 2007 called *Our Water Mark: Australian Making a Difference in Water Reform.*

In the time since, it has been hugely frustrating to witness the sustained, lacklustre political leadership and policy inertia characterising Australia’s approach to the threat of climate change. Our political leaders continue to squander opportunity after opportunity to create a safe climate for all and restructure our economy to guarantee a prosperous future. This is both reckless and galling.

That is why we are writing to endorse the *Climate Change (National Framework for Adaption and Mitigation) Bill 2020* introduced by Independent MP Zali Steggall and to offer guiding principles for reform and policy action around achieving net-zero emissions and through the independent climate change commission proposed in the *Bill.*

Regards,

Mary Crooks AO Casimira Melican
Executive Director of the Victorian Women’s Trust Research & Advocacy Officer

**Introducing *Our Water Mark***

Some seventeen years ago, our organisation, the Victorian Women’s Trust, commenced what turned out to be a remarkable exercise and project, *Watermark Australia*. We had already conducted a pioneering community engagement process around Victoria, called the *Purple Sage* project. This was our first effort at designing our model of Kitchen Table Conversation. This model has since become much more commonly applied in different parts of Australia, notably in the adaption of the model we undertook for *Voices for Indi* which ultimately led to the election of an Independent, Cathy McGowan, in 2013.

*Three human lifetimes - about 214 years – is simply not long enough to become truly adapted to Australia’s unique conditions, for the process of co-evolving with the land is slow and uncertain. Yet it has begun, and the transformation must be completed,* ***for if we continue to live as strangers in this land – failing to understand it or live by its ecological dictums – we will forfeit out long-term future here by destroying the ability of Australia to support us.***
- Tim Flannery, 2002 Australia Day Address

We started planning the water initiative in 2001 because we saw the warning signals of climate change and its impacts on our rainfall and water resources. We wanted women to have the chance and the confidence to enter the debates because for far too long, these critical resource matters have been dominated by engineers, technocrats and vested political and sectoral interests.

The *Watermark Australia* project engaged several thousand people, coming together in small groups, on multiple occasions to discuss materials prepared by the *Watermark Australia* secretariat – all with a view to becoming more water literate. Their experiences, views and ideas were integrated with input from a small number of eminent scientists, as well as wide-ranging information and data in various government, scientific and other published reports.

This uniquely blended body of knowledge (refer attached pdf) and a framework for action culminated in the production of a public document, *Our Water Mark* which was released in July 2007. Since then, 37,000 copies of this document have been distributed nationally.

We have sent separately, by post, two copies of *Our Water Mark* for The Standing Committee. We would urge Committee members to read it carefully, and appreciatively, in the knowledge that the document serves as an important background resource informing the need for urgent action now on climate change and its rippling impacts on major resource issues such as Australia’s water systems and supplies.

**The reality that is not going away**

*Our Water mark*, 13 years ago, drew attention in no uncertain terms to the global warming crisis:

*If global warming continues and ambient temperatures are reset somewhere between 0.54°C and 1.24°C, annual surface-water runoff will be reset accordingly. Predictions for Victoria are alarming. By 2030 there will be a deficit in in surface-water runoff in 28 of the 29 surface-water management areas across the state of Victoria. The 2007 report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) forecasts rises in average daily temperatures by the end of this century in the range between 2.0°C and 4.5°C, with a 3.0°C rise a strong possibility. Furthermore, it states that the average rise in global temperatures by the end of the century is unlikely to be less than 1.5°C. This increase in average temperatures, and the consequent shift in local climate conditions, will become an overlay, accentuating any natural change in our weather pattern that may take place concurrently.* (*Our Watermark*, p.42)

*Supercomputer modelling of climate change have long anticipated changes in rainfall patterns that will unfold across the southern half of the Australian mainland. According to these models, a new rainfall pattern will first become evident on the western side of the continent and will slowly work its way west to become the dominant pattern over a large part of the eastern seaboard. While most people are aware of the expected hotter summers and warmer winters, they probably don’t appreciate that, with a medium rise in average daily temperatures (of about 0.85°C) annual rainfall across southern Australia is predicted to decline on average about 15%. An immediate consequence of this annual rainfall reduction will be a reduction in the volumes of surface water running into rivers and streams.*

*This predicted change will bring a new edge to Australia’s climate. Our weather will become even more variable than it is now. At the same time, it is predicted there will be more hot days, more dry days and more extreme storm events.*

*Now here is the double whammy! Whenever rain does fall, higher ambient temperatures mean that more water will evaporate from the land surface, while at the same time the drier soils will absorb more of this water, causing surface water runoff to reduce even further. Our major storages will fill at slower rates and our groundwater aquifers will also be recharged more slowly. Keep in mind here that, even without this further reduction in runoff, surface water and groundwater in many parts of the country are already being removed at rates exceeding the ability of these sources to be replenished naturally.*

*Cyclones may move further south creating local flooding in places which have seldom experienced such impacts. An alarming observation for eastern seaboard dwellers is that when Australia’s weather systems are under the influence of El Ni*ñ*o conditions, cyclones in the northeast have tended to move south AND to the east. A lot of the rain associated with these systems has fallen over the Pacific Ocean rather than over northern and central Queensland. In contrast, the northern regions of Western Australia have been getting wetter, with weather patterns moving in from the Indian Ocean and progressing in an easterly direction.* (*Our Watermark*, p. 70-1)
The entire body of global scientific opinion has reinforced these trends. How long do we have to wait for our national leadership to act on them?

*Our Watermark* emphasised that we have already degraded so much our Australian environment. Action on climate change must also incorporate land and water repair:

*We have extensively degraded many of our freshwater ecosystems. Some of this damage is beyond repair. Yet our very future rests not only on repairing as much as we can, but on adapting to the impacts of climate change. (Our Watermark*, p. 45)

**How must we act in the face of an existential crisis?**For too long in our country, our national leadership has refused to acknowledge the serious threat to the health of our planet. A “business as usual” approach is morally bankrupt.

*We find it almost impossible to imagine the End of Us. But then so did the Mayans, one imagines. Or even the Romans, with their milder catastrophe. Perhaps in the midst of the decline there were speeches in the Forum about what great shape the franchise was in. A little unrest with the Christians, a bit of bother with the barbarians but nothing the empire couldn’t deal with by ‘growing the business’. Bathhouse anyone?*
- F Souter, 10 June 2006 ((*Our Watermark*, p.92)

*We have become, by power of a glorious revolutionary accident called intelligence, the stewards of life’s continuity on Earth. We did not ask for this role, but we cannot abjure it. We may not be suited for, it, but here we are.*
- Stephen Jay Gould, 1997 (*Our Watermark*, p. 95)

Every day, every week, every month that our leadership fails to address climate change in all of its seriousness is an opportunity lost – for all time.

**Guiding principles and elements of the *Climate Change Bill 2020***

Part II of the *Our Water Mark* document sets out 20 guiding principles which were derived from all the Watermark Kitchen Table Conversations groups as well as from consultation with several of the scientists who gave their time to the project. The principles most relevant to the *Bill* refer to the role that governments’ central role in guiding the economy, mediating competing interests and enhancing society in relation to water management (but could be adapted to other sectors and industries).

These guiding principles support a number of the *Bill*’s elements: the importance of long-term emissions reduction commitment; that regular 5 year budgets in legislating net zero emissions by 2050 are crucial to the success of the proposed framework; why technological innovation and cost reduction in climate change solutions must be pursed; and importance of having an independent climate change commission and defining the skills needed on the commission.

***Our Water Mark Guiding Principles***

*Out Water mark* articulated 20 principles for wise management of our water resources, we have selected out here those applying specifically to Governments and we have amended them to apply generically to the challenge of climate change and not simply of water management:

* Governments have a particular and enduring responsibility to provide wide stewardship of the nation’s resources in the face of climate change.
* Governments in a market economy have an enduring responsibility to act as a balance to market forces in the management of our resources in the face of climate change.
* Governments should act as committed and independent regulators of our natural resources, considering urgency, social impact, fairness and community expectations.
* Governments have a responsibility to measure, monitor and report regularly on the status and the health of our natural resources are being degraded in the face of climate change.
* National and state government programs for climate change mitigation must be underpinned by appropriate public inquiry and consultation as well as being transparent, technically sound and socially and economically responsible.
* As a society, we need to share the significant medium-term financial costs that will be required to adapt and achieve a safe climate.
* All sectors of society should be prepared to rapidly adopt appropriate, proven, innovative technologies and actively support further innovation.
* Each of us have a responsibility to leave society and our environment in a better shape than we found it.