

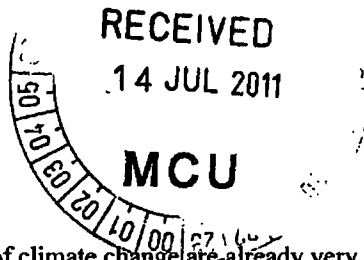


TORRES STRAIT ISLAND REGIONAL COUNCIL

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11th July, 2011

The Hon. Julia Gillard, MP
 Prime Minister of Australia



Dear Prime Minister,

More than most parts of Australia, the impacts of climate change are already very real for the communities living in the Torres Strait. Already we have to rebuild makeshift sea walls every year to protect our communities as best we can from king tides. The effects are physically evident as islands erode and sea levels rise; as homes are inundated and infrastructure is ruined; as trees and wildlife diminish and as entire communities face potential relocation in the medium term.

The one-metre sea level rise that you recently identified as one of the risks to Australia would devastate many of our low-lying communities if adaptation activities are not immediately begun. The federal report, the *Climate Change Strategy 2010 – 2013*, lists the actions required to address climate change threats to infrastructure, ecosystems, culture and people and communities. We know what needs to be done and it has been fully costed.

Just over a month ago, Cr Toshie Kris, the Chairperson for the Torres Strait Regional Authority was invited to address the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. He noted that although the plight of low-lying Pacific Islands is better known, Torres Strait Islanders from far-north Queensland are also at the front line of climate change impacts. At least six of our Islands urgently require the construction of sea walls and coastal erosion control measures, costed at \$22 million, to protect communities and critical infrastructure from the encroaching seas. Affected infrastructure includes schools, significant cultural sites, health clinics, water lagoons, reservoirs, sewage treatment plants, pump stations, stores and homes. Provision of these funds would go a long way to protect the communities and the significant infrastructure investments already made in the Torres Strait.


The land and sea in the Torres Strait is a critical part of our spiritual and physical identity as Torres Strait Islanders. Inaction on climate change puts at risk the survival of our people and our way of life, a unique and important part of Australia's cultural heritage. This problem has been known for some time. On 10 October 2006, North Queensland Labor Senator Jan McLucas addressed the Senate, calling on the Howard Government to show leadership in combating the effects of climate change on Torres Strait Island communities. In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change noted the impacts of climate change on Indigenous Australians, including Torres Strait Islanders. The Garnaut Report identified the Torres Strait as especially vulnerable in 2008. And last year, the then Climate Change Minister Penny Wong, saw first-hand the problems associated with rising seas when she came to visit.

Despite this we are still waiting for assistance from the Australian and Queensland governments to help us adapt to the already changing climate – and we cannot afford to keep waiting forever. Failure to act on desperately needed adaptation measures in the Torres Strait puts Australia at risk of being the first developed nation with internally displaced climate change refugees. This will cost far more in money and social upheaval than action taken today.

Yours faithfully,

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 Fred Gela
Mayor

 John Sorce
CEO

Fred Gela