

CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REFORM

# Policy Brief — Climate Adaptation in Australia

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CLASSIFICATION

PUBLIC

PROJECT

climate-risk

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## Context

Australia faces escalating climate impacts that require coordinated adaptation policy across all levels of government. This policy brief synthesises findings from CSDR's Q1 2026 climate risk assessment programme and identifies priority adaptation domains for immediate policy attention.

Current climate trajectories indicate that Australian mean temperatures will exceed 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels within the decade, with disproportionate impacts on agriculture, coastal communities, and public health systems.

## Key Findings

### Agricultural Adaptation

Australian agricultural productivity is under increasing pressure from changing rainfall patterns and rising temperatures.

- South-eastern cropping zones experienced 18% below-average rainfall in Q1 2026
- Heat stress events reduced livestock productivity by an estimated 12% in northern Queensland
- Drought-resilient crop varieties currently account for only 15% of total plantings
- Adaptation investment of \$400M annually could offset 60% of projected yield losses by 2035

### Coastal Infrastructure

Sea-level rise and intensifying storm surge events present growing risks to coastal settlements and infrastructure.

- 2.1 million Australians live in areas exposed to coastal flooding under 2050 projections
- Estimated replacement value of at-risk infrastructure exceeds \$120B nationally
- Current adaptation spending addresses less than 5% of identified vulnerability
- Managed retreat programmes require lead times of 10–15 years for effective implementation

### Health System Preparedness

Climate-related health impacts are increasing in frequency and severity across the Australian population.

- Heat-related emergency presentations increased 35% over the past five years
- Vector-borne disease range is expanding southward at approximately 50 km per decade
- Mental health impacts from climate-related disasters affect an estimated 1 in 5 affected individuals
- Health system adaptation requires integrated early warning systems and surge capacity planning

## Recommendations

Priority recommendations for Australian climate adaptation policy:

Domain	Recommendation	Investment	Timeframe
Agriculture	Expand drought-resilient crop adoption to 40% of plantings	\$400M/year	2026–2030
Agriculture	Establish regional adaptation hubs for extension services	\$50M/year	2026–2028
Coastal	Develop national coastal adaptation framework	\$20M	2026–2027
Coastal	Fund local government managed retreat planning	\$200M	2026–2030
Health	Deploy heat-health early warning systems nationally	\$30M	2026–2028
Health	Build climate-health surveillance capacity	\$15M/year	2026–2030

## References

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