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Ken Henry Pushes for Nature Law Overhaul Citing Intergenerational Failure

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Former Treasury Secretary Ken Henry has sharply criticised Australia's environmental laws, warning that decades of inaction have left the country vulnerable to economic and environmental decline. In a National Press Club address on 16 July 2025, Henry argued that urgent reform of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act is critical to boost productivity and halt ecological degradation. He warned

that the Albanese government's economic and housing targets are unlikely to succeed without a fundamental overhaul of environmental regulation.

Henry, who now chairs the Australian Climate and Biodiversity Foundation, said the EPBC Act has failed to prevent environmental decline while simultaneously creating unnecessary delays for critical infrastructure projects. He estimated that 25 years of weak productivity growth has cost Australians approximately \$500,000 each—an outcome he links, in part, to outdated regulatory systems that obstruct initiatives such as housing and renewable energy projects.

“Our destruction of the natural environment now poses an existential threat to everything we value,” Henry said during the address. He argued that reforming the EPBC Act could unlock economic prosperity while better protecting Australia's biodiversity. He advocated for legally enforceable National Environmental Standards and the creation of an independent Environmental Protection Agency to oversee implementation, consistent with recommendations from the 2020 Samuel Review of the EPBC Act.

Henry specifically cautioned that the federal government's pledge to build 1.2 million homes by 2029 and reach net-zero emissions is at risk unless environmental laws are modernised to provide clearer and faster project approvals. He described the current system as “not fit for purpose,” echoing criticism that it burdens both the environment and the economy.

In addition to his comments on environmental law, Henry reignited the debate over climate policy by calling for the return of a carbon tax. He

labelled the 2014 repeal of the Gillard-era carbon pricing mechanism “mind-boggling,” describing it as “the world’s best carbon policy.” He argued that market-based mechanisms, such as carbon pricing, remain the most effective way to reduce emissions without unnecessary economic distortion.

With the government’s Economic Reform Roundtable approaching, Henry’s comments add pressure on the Albanese administration to act decisively on both environmental and economic fronts. He emphasised that failure to reform the regulatory framework would entrench poor productivity outcomes and accelerate environmental damage, leaving future generations to bear the cost.