

Coastal IFOA Monitoring Program

NSW Forest Monitoring Steering Committee response to the independent evaluation of the adequacy of the Coastal Integrated Forestry Operations Approval (IFOA) monitoring program as part of the five-year of the program

Overview of the independent evaluation

- Coastal IFOA Protocol 38 requires a major review of the monitoring program with each formal review of the Coastal IFOA, including an assessment of the *adequacy* of the monitoring program. The review of the monitoring program will be overseen by the NSW Forest Monitoring Steering Committee (the Committee), independently chaired by the Natural Resources Commission (the Commission).
- On behalf of the Committee, the Commission engaged an independent reviewer to evaluate the adequacy of the Coastal IFOA monitoring program.
- The Committee endorsed a proposed evaluation framework to guide the evaluation:
 - assess the *adequacy* of the monitoring program (as directed by Protocol 38), including the extent to which it is meeting the requirements of Coastal IFOA Protocol 38 and the approved monitoring program
 - demonstrate (where relevant) the impact, value and outcomes of the program, for example the extent to which the program has built an objective, scientifically sound evidence base for decision making
 - ensure there is accountability and transparency associated with the program's design and delivery
 - identify opportunities for improvement.
- To support the evaluation, the Commission called for public submissions on the first five years of the monitoring program. Eight submissions were received from individuals or groups. The reviewer considered the submissions as evidence for the evaluation.
- The reviewer also interviewed 25 key stakeholders including research providers, representatives from key agencies, Committee members, Technical Working Group members, and representatives from industry and environmental interest groups.

Findings of the independent evaluation

- The evaluation found the program is a complicated and ambitious initiative but one that is critically important for the management of NSW forests. Overall, the review found the program has been *adequate*. Specifically:
 - the program's design is well-aligned with its objectives and the obligations outlined in Protocol 38
 - the program has been implemented effectively

- the Commission has worked well to independently coordinate the program
- while slow to start, the program's value is accelerating as new monitoring data begins to accumulate and is being analysed and reported on
- the program is providing useful data that is informing decisions about forest management
- with the establishment phase now passed, there are opportunities to further refine and update the Monitoring Program.

Identified opportunities to improve and Committee response

- **Table 1** details the opportunities to improve identified by the independent reviewer, and the proposed response for the Committee's consideration.

Table 1: Committee responses to opportunities for improvement

Opportunities for improvement	Committee response
Continue to improve public-facing communication. While the program has helped improve transparency in this space, there is the potential to further improve public reporting given the high levels of public interest and scrutiny in this space.	Support The Committee will improve approaches to ensure programs outputs are visible, timely and accessible. The Commission will improve current initiatives such as the Coastal IFOA monitoring program web pages, providing alerts for new reports and data on LinkedIn, continue to upload data to public portals and delivering webinars. The Commission will regularly monitor and improve these existing approaches to promote program results. The Commission will improve reporting approaches, such as implementing new web-based, user-friendly, interactive dashboards, as well as StoryMaps, to improve the audience interface and useability of data. Other approaches to increase audience reach and impact will also be considered, for example sharing program results at relevant conferences. The Committee members will seek to promote program findings more broadly through their networks and affiliations or links on their webpages.
Review and refresh the program priorities as part of the 5-year review of the monitoring program. This includes considering and recommending how Protocol 38 is structured and a renewed appraisal of where the uncertainties and risks are for forests into the future. There is the potential to use the prioritisation process to more clearly set expectations about what the monitoring program might be able to test and achieve over what timeframes this is likely to happen.	Support The Committee supports seeking opportunities to improve the monitoring program including a sharper focus on research and monitoring priorities. As noted, the Committee is overseeing the major review of the monitoring program, which must report on progress and results, detailed analysis of trends, and the adequacy of the monitoring program. As required by Protocol 38 and outlined in the approved monitoring program, the Commission as the independent chair of the Committee will provide advice and recommendations to the EPA and DPIRD regarding changes to the Coastal IFOA, which may also include Protocol 38 and monitoring priorities. The Commission will also provide the advice to relevant Ministers and publish. The EPA and DPIRD will consider this advice on changes to the Coastal IFOA, as part of its formal five-year review.

Opportunities for improvement	Committee response
Develop clearer processes for how the Monitoring Program should inform management. This includes both FCNSW and EPA considering how a more structured adaptive management approach might be implemented to test the efficacy of different approaches to achieving the outcomes outlined in the CIFOA.	Support The approved Coastal IFOA monitoring program framework sets out adaptive management opportunities including annual health checks and the five yearly review. However, the evaluation found that the results of the monitoring program to date have had limited impact on the Coastal IFOA conditions. The evaluation noted there is potential to consider whether there are other ways in which findings from monitoring projects might flow through to improved management. The Committee, along with the EPA and FCNSW will consider options to achieve a more structured and collaborative adaptive management approach during the 5 yearly review of the monitoring program to support and achieve the Coastal IFOA outcomes. The Commission as the independent chair of the Committee will provide advice and recommendations to the EPA and DPIRD regarding changes to the Coastal IFOA, which may also include Protocol 38 and monitoring priorities. The Commission will also provide the advice to relevant Ministers and publish. The EPA and DPIRD will consider this advice on changes to the Coastal IFOA, as part of its formal five-year review.
Continue to improve data management. This was seen as an area in need of more attention, including the need for a comprehensive data management plan.	Support The Commission supports the need to improve data management including a comprehensive data management plan, which is being finalised. This will include approaches to leverage existing systems and expertise to cost-effectively manage and share monitoring data in a timely manner.
Consider the structure of the program and how it engages with research partners. Part of the success of the program so far has been in its targeted use of agency, university and other experts. There is the potential to combine this focus on the 'core' monitoring program work, with a model that also seeks to guide and support complementary (but lower priority) work among researchers, students and others.	Support The Committee supports seeking opportunities to improve the delivery model by focussing partnerships on core monitoring program activities such as fauna occupancy and forest structure and health. This provides opportunities to leverage other resources within research institutes and agencies on related activities. The Committee will outline its delivery model in its revised monitoring program after the five yearly review has been delivered.
Improve forward planning to facilitate better participation by agency staff in the design and review of Monitoring Program projects, which could help agency staff who are often under time and resourcing pressures.	Support The Committee acknowledges resource pressures in all areas of NSW Government operations and will support improved forward planning to facilitate agency staff participation in the monitoring program. The Commission will implement improved communications and forward planning with the Technical Working Groups.