



EcoNetwork Port Stephens

26 April 2025

Submission Natural Resources Commission Review - Plan for Nature

About EcoNetwork Port Stephens

EcoNetwork Port Stephens is a not-for-profit, politically unaligned, 100% volunteer-run conservation organisation with a membership base of over 30 community groups and businesses. Our purpose is to support our members to advocate on environmental issues that impact Port Stephens communities. EcoNetwork Port Stephens has been undertaking advocacy, action and education for the environment since 1993.

Submission

To protect and restore biodiversity and ecosystem function on private lands, as a priority, the NSW Government need to remove the code-base land clearing allowances under the Land Management (Native Vegetation) Code 2018, that are empowered by the Local Land Services Act 2013. These laws rely on land-owners self-assessing whether they can clear their land or not, which enables careless and rampant land clearing. After these laws came into force in 2017, land clearing rates on private property have tripled. Over the past five years an average of 84,000 hectares of bush have been cleared on private properties. This is an unsustainable and unacceptable level of clearing. Instead, the NSW Government need to introduce a clear and meaningful approval pathway that aims to protect habitat and reduce land clearing. The approval system needs to have Government oversight and transparent reporting.

Under current rules in NSW, land cleared before 1990 is exempt from regulation. This is outdated and needs to be changed. Such lands may now contain native regrowth nearly 35 years old. New research has shown regrown forests and woodlands can provide valuable habitat and food for threatened species after an average of 15 years. For example, some species like the koala use regrowth as young as nine years old. We note – some species, like greater gliders need much older mature forests – so it is important to have policies that retain both young and old forests.

EcoNetwork believes that we can improve natural management practices while delivering sustainable economic outcomes by shifting the culture so that landowners value native vegetation on their land are incentivised to protect it – rather than destroy it. First and foremost, we need a strong regulatory system that encourages landholders to protect native vegetation. This system, needs to be supported by strong education and engagement so that landowners are aware of the laws, how to follow them and are inspired by the benefits to people, economies, biodiversity and the ongoing fruitfulness of the land. The regulatory system should be bolstered by economic incentives to landowners. In NSW, over 300,000 hectares of habitat is currently protected forever by voluntary conservation agreements. This program is delivered by the Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT). Funding and staffing for the BCT should be increased, to scale-up the number of private properties entering conservation agreements. We also need to revisit how we protect regrowth vegetation. Protecting native regrowth is more cost-effective and efficient than planting new trees.

EcoNetwork also considers that the most effective way to support and enable landholders to deliver sustainable land management outcomes is by accompanying policies and reforms with a clear communications and engagement plan. Previous research undertaken by the Local Land Services revealed that a majority of landholders DO NOT know about the rules and resources available. There needs to be a onestop platform that landholders can use to make decisions, including a finalised and enforceable native vegetation regulatory map so that people understand what biodiversity values are on their land.

We need more permanent staff working in the Biodiversity Conservation Trust and Local Land Services. Increased staffing is necessary to roll-out and scale-up conservation initiatives with landholders.

EcoNetwork urges the Government to make these changes this year. NSW does not have much nature left. But protecting what is left – is good for biodiversity, human health, climate resilience & future generations.

Regards,



EcoNetwork Port Stephens



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