



**Nature Conservation Council**  
The voice for nature in NSW



**Submission on the Natural Resources Commission review of options to further protect and restore biodiversity and ecosystem functions in regional landscapes, and enhance value and support for landholders**

**8 May 2025**

## About NCC

The Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales (NCC) is the state's peak environment organisation. We represent over 200 environment groups across NSW. Together we are dedicated to protecting and conserving the wildlife, landscapes and natural resources of NSW.

[www.nature.org.au](http://www.nature.org.au)

**For further information about this submission, please contact:**



## Acknowledgement

The Nature Conservation Council NSW acknowledges that we live and work on the land of First Nations. This land has been cared for since time immemorial by Traditional Owners, whose sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to the Traditional Owners past and present of the many Countries within so-called New South Wales.

We respect the leadership of Traditional Owners in caring for Country, and support the development of treaties that meaningfully empower them to do so. We acknowledge the dispossession of First Nations People and the harm inflicted on people and Country since colonisation began. We acknowledge that colonisation is an unjust and brutal process that continues to impact First Nations people today. As people living and working on First Nations Country it is incumbent on us to play our part in righting the historical and ongoing wrongs of colonisation. Indeed, our vision of a society in which nature and communities thrive together depends upon it.

The Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC) respects and supports all First Nations people's right to self-determination as outlined by the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which extends to recognising the many different First Nations within Australia and the Torres Strait Islands. NCC commits to maintain open lines of communication and to build respectful mutual relationships with First Nations people in all the work we do and wherever possible, seek aligned outcomes with and support the goals of First Nations groups.

We commit, as an organisation, to empower and work together with First Nations people to protect, conserve and restore the land, waters, air, wildlife, climate and culture of the many First Nations people in NSW.



Via Mr Ben Russell  
Natural Resources Commission  
Email to [nrc@nrc.nsw.gov.au](mailto:nrc@nrc.nsw.gov.au) and [Ben.Russell@nrc.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Ben.Russell@nrc.nsw.gov.au)

**Submission on the Natural Resources Commission's review of options to further protect and restore biodiversity and ecosystem functions in regional landscapes, and enhance value and support for landholders**

Dear NRC team,

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this review as a chance for NSW to develop a clear pathway to aligning our land management framework with the urgency of conserving what remains of precious habitats across NSW.

Australia has the world's [worst track record](#) for mammal extinctions, and we are living in an [extinction crisis](#). The NSW threatened species list includes 1043 species.

The accelerating loss of flora and fauna impacts the health, well-being and identity of the NSW community, and harms the rich cultural heritage of First Nations peoples. The trajectory of biodiversity and the precarious ecological health of NSW is of great concern.

When the land management and biodiversity conservation laws were made seven years ago, they were made as a full package of reforms. The changes to land clearing regulation were to be counterbalanced by changed approaches to biodiversity conservation through offsetting and investment.

Since, there has been higher levels of clearing on rural regulated land. Combined with the impacts of intensifying natural disasters; drought, bushfire and flood, the native vegetation provisions in Part 5A and Schedule 5B of the LLS Act are facilitating Australia's continued leadership in biodiversity loss.

A key relevant question for this review, well in scope of the Terms of Reference, therefore is whether the impacts of relaxing land clearing rules and allowing more unregulated clearing under the LLS Act are being adequately moderated by current levels of investment in conservation and the biodiversity offsets scheme under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (the BC Act)? Mechanisms that may support the protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystem functions in regional landscapes in the BC Act and its interaction with the Part 5A of the LLS Act should be considered by the NRC in undertaking this review.

Healthy ecosystems are our first line of defense against floods, storms, fires, and drought. As biodiversity declines, we pay the price—through economic loss, food insecurity, climate instability and rising commodity and insurance costs.

According to recent publications by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, agricultural landscapes have significantly declined in their capacity for maintaining agricultural productivity, for supporting native systems, and as a base for the growth of repaired vegetation communities.

**We face an urgent repair effort.** Repairing landscapes is about improving the integrity of the whole. To achieve this, more than a tweaking of the current land management framework is required. Simply tightening regulation of land use will not suffice.

**Significant reform is needed to return the objectives and outcomes of land management regulation to *reducing* land clearing, *restoring* habitat and *improving* biodiversity outcomes.** Actions to protect and restore need to be undertaken together, at a regional scale and in a way that accounts for interdependencies, dynamics and uncertainty. The opportunities presented by the NSW Plan for Nature and the Nature Strategy must be coordinated with reforms to rural land management.

Key to the whole suite of reforms to biodiversity conservation and land management commencing in NSW, NCC advocates:

- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as stewards of Country for over 60,000 years with continuing cultural connections to land and waters, have leading roles in developing the system which will facilitate better management of natural resources, managing and repairing landscapes, and the achievement of sustainable development to support traditional and ongoing social, economic, cultural, and spiritual values.<sup>1</sup>
- for the incorporation of the impacts of climate change into the regulatory system, using predictive modelling to help ascertain the landscape scale consequences of land clearing on native vegetation, water availability and landscape health.
- recognition also of the benefits to resilience and adaptation of native vegetation restoration and protection in the context of climate change.
- that the work of revaluing nature and biodiversity be done alongside landholders, using relevant and legitimate incentives and effective communication.

**Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this consultation.**

Your key contact point for further questions and correspondence is [REDACTED]. We welcome further conversation on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## Table of contents

Summary of recommendations for the NRC review on enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem restoration in regional landscapes .....	6
1. Previous NCC publications relevant to the NRC's Terms of Reference .....	7
Submissions .....	7
Reports .....	8
2. Actions to protect and restore biodiversity and ecosystem function on private lands .....	9
End the policies which enable ongoing rampant destruction .....	9
Implement a requirement for overall benefit to biodiversity .....	12
Support and incentivise rural land holders to protect and restore their property. ...	13
Accompany reforms with strong communications and engagement .....	16

# Summary of recommendations for the NRC review on enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem restoration in regional landscapes

## **End policies which enable ongoing rampant destruction**

- Re-instate the objectives of the repealed *Native Vegetation Act 2003* which were more effective at minimising habitat clearing, namely ‘to prevent broadscale clearing unless it improves or maintains environmental outcomes’
- Implement regulatory reforms to the *Local Land Services Act 2013* which remove the reliance on self-assessment and self-approval processes for vegetation removal, instead increasing regulatory approvals
- If land management is to remain in its current legislative framework, make a series of long-advocated changes to the Codes as detailed below
- Revisit and finalise the Native Vegetation Regulatory map
- Reform other frameworks that are facilitating unjustified habitat clearing, such as the rural boundary clearing and 10:50 clearing codes.
- Ensure cross-government collaboration so that policies and programs (such as strategies guiding the agricultural sector) are harmonised in a way that does not encourage the clearing of land.

## **Implement a requirement for overall benefit to biodiversity**

- End land clearing in all habitats important to the survival of species and ecosystems
- Implement a legislative objective of maintaining and improving environmental outcomes on regional land overall
- Consider climate change and cumulative impacts in any development or clearing assessment and approval process

## **Support and incentivise rural land holders to protect and restore their property**

- Increase public funding to support private protected areas and conservation agreements
- Protection and restoration programs should be regionally designed and prioritised, ideally using a whole-of-catchment or landscape-scale approach and aligned with the future NSW Nature Strategy
- The NRC should consider options including restoration, private land conservation programs under the BCA, land trusts, innovative conservation for the ‘commons’ and financial mechanisms. Efficiency can be gained where multiple benefits intersect.
- Strengthen protection options for private landholders that enter conservation agreements so that privately protected areas are safe from future resource extraction, such as mining.

## **Accompany reforms with strong communications and engagement**

- Reforms must be supported by a clear, multi-format communications strategy, including in-person community education

- Review and streamline existing online platforms targeted at landholders to establish easy-to-access and clear information for landholders for the long-term.
- Increasing staffing for agencies that provide on-property advice and conservation support is important to success

### **Recognise and respond to the government's incentives to restore biodiversity**

- Use this process to progress toward the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (30x30), to which Australia is a signatory
- Take advantage of employment opportunities offered by restoration and conservation activities
- Support Indigenous leadership and self-determination

## **1. Previous NCC publications relevant to the NRC's Terms of Reference**

NCC has contributed many submissions and several reports to the dialogue on rural and regional land management that should inform this review. These are summarised below:

### **Submissions**

#### **2023**

##### **Submission to the five-year statutory review of the native vegetation provisions contained in Part 5A and Schedule 5B of the Local Land Services Act 2013. [Link](#)**

**Summary:** NCC called for significant reform of land management regulation to return its objectives and outcomes to reducing land clearing, restoring habitat, and improving biodiversity outcomes.

#### **2021**

##### **Submission for the inquiry on the integrity of the NSW Biodiversity Offset Scheme. [Link](#)**

**Summary:** NCC expressed its opposition to biodiversity offsetting. We called for the fixing of the Land Management and Biodiversity Conservation Framework, with integrity in the Biodiversity Offset Scheme design, implementation, and ecological outcomes.

##### **Submission on the Native Vegetation Regulatory Map 2021 Annual Update (no public link)**

**Summary:** NCC expressed concern at the delays to the finalisation of the Native Vegetation Regulatory Map. We called for the map to include all critical habitat for threatened species and Threatened Ecological Communities. NCC stressed the importance of a robust and comprehensive NVR Map to accurately capture environmental values and limit inappropriate vegetation clearing across NSW.

#### **2017**



**Submission on the proposed Regulations and Codes under the *Biodiversity Conservation Bill 2016* and *Local Land Services Amendment Act 2016*. [Link](#)**

**Summary:** An alliance of environment, wildlife and heritage groups in NSW urged the Government to abandon the draft Land Management Framework Regulations and Codes and instead focus on developing strong biodiversity laws that were scientifically robust and that able deliver improved environmental outcomes.

**2016**

**Submission on the proposed biodiversity conservation reform package. [Link](#)**

**Summary:** NCC expressed its opposition to the proposed biodiversity conservation reform package. We urged the Government to abandon the draft Biodiversity Conservation Bill 2016 and Local Land Services Amendment Bill 2016, and instead develop strong biodiversity conservation laws that are scientifically robust and able to deliver improved environmental outcomes.

**Reports**

**2023**

**The path to a nature positive NSW - [Link](#)**

*Alliance for Nature New South Wales*

**Summary:** Taking up the commitment of the NSW Labor Government elected in March 2023 to ‘end runaway land clearing’, ‘fix the biodiversity offsetting scheme’ and create a Great Koala National Park, this report identified the immediate and urgent changes the government could make to stem the accelerating decline of biodiversity health in the state. The ten recommendations included changes to the land management framework and support for landholders to restore and protect biodiversity.

**2021**

**State of Nature 2021- [Link](#)**

**Summary:** This report takes a snapshot of each of the broad and ranging environmental challenges facing NSW. The key issues, recent developments, threats, opportunities regarding biodiversity and land management are explored and essential reforms listed.

**2019**

**New South Wales Deforestation Data Analysis. Three case studies 2016 to 2018 - [Link](#)**

*NCC and World Wildlife Fund*

**Summary:** This report examined changes in the rate and extent of deforestation and land clearing in three regions of NSW following the repeal of the NSW Native Vegetation Act 2003. Instances of deforestation were detected by comparing satellite images. Clearing rates were



found to have nearly doubled overall in one year. Impacts on native plants and animals are explored, along with recommendations reflected in other reports and submissions listed here.

**2018**

**Towards Zero Deforestation: a plan to end deforestation and excessive land clearing in NSW - [Link](#)**

*NCC, The Wilderness Society, World Wildlife Fund, National Parks Association of NSW*

**Summary:** This report outlined the state of nature in NSW, describes the harm deforestation does to wildlife and communities, and provides positive policies the NSW Government can implement to preserve NSW landscapes, plants, and animals. The report details how ending deforestation and land clearing and restoring our forests and bushland will protect water supplies, wildlife and plant species, preserve soils and improve the quality, productivity and sustainability of agricultural land. The report details the human health and climate change mitigation benefits of healthy ecosystems.

Policy recommendations made in the report reflect those made in the submissions listed above.

In particular, the report proposes a Land and Biodiversity Fund which should be considered in the context of the NSW Nature Strategy for supporting farmers and Indigenous landholders to protect trees and revegetate landscapes.

## 2. Actions to protect and restore biodiversity and ecosystem function on private lands

Ahead of the 2023 election, the NSW Labor government committed to end excess land clearing and strengthen environmental protections. That intention must be translated into legal frameworks and policy implementation. Ambitious policies and incentives are needed, combined with tight regulation.

### End the policies which enable ongoing rampant destruction

#### **At a bare minimum, changes to the Codes are necessary**

The current land management framework allows landholders to self-assess whether they can clear land under provisions in the *Local Land Services Act 2013* and the *Land Management (Native Vegetation Code) 2018*. This self-regulated approach has failed to control habitat destruction and has led to increased land misuse. Since the enactment of these laws in 2017, land clearing on private property has tripled. Code-based clearing laws relying on self-assessment must be repealed.

The now-repealed *Native Vegetation Act* provided clarity for landholders and kept clearing rates lower. The Natural Resources Commission (NRC) should review the success of this former

legal framework when making recommendations for protecting and restoring biodiversity in regional landscapes. Notably, the *Native Vegetation Act*:

- prohibited broadscale clearing unless it improved or maintained environmental outcomes;
- included “red lights” identifying unacceptable clearing that could not meet environmental standards (similar to “no go zones” currently being advocated by environment groups; and
- Required Property Vegetation Plans—legally enforceable agreements allowing landholders to clear vegetation under specified conditions while retaining high-conservation-value areas.

**At a minimum, the following changes must be made to the Land Management Codes and related regulations:**

- Remove the Exempt category of vegetation, so habitat across millions of hectares is brought under regulation.
- Exclude Code-based clearing from all vulnerable, endangered, and critically endangered ecological communities by expanding Category 2 – sensitive regulated land – to cover a wider range of high conservation value areas.
- Update the statutory threshold for regrowth native vegetation to an ecologically-based timeframe, such as 10–15 years.<sup>2</sup>
- Prohibit unassessed clearing in the entire coastal zone, steep and erodible areas, travelling stock reserves, and all small holdings.
- Remove Part 5 Equity and Part 6 Farm Plan of the Code in full.
- Prohibit all Code-based clearing of koala habitat and complete koala habitat mapping using a broader definition of koala habitat.
- Require landscape-scale assessments for Code-based set-asides and clearing approvals, to ensure optimal connectivity and conservation outcomes.
- Strengthen the power of decision-makers to refuse Code-compliant certificates by making refusal under clause 16 mandatory and defining “excessive or broadscale clearing” with objective, evidence-based criteria and guidelines. Authorities must be adequately resourced for monitoring and enforcement.
- Enhance civil and criminal penalties for breaches.
- Properly protect Areas of Outstanding Biodiversity Value.

**Legislative changes are needed, incentives cannot stand alone**

While we acknowledge the importance of schemes that incentivise landholders to voluntarily conserve nature, we emphasise the need for strong regulation to reduce clearing rates. The current Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT) established in 2017 can be credited for increasing the rate of privately protected areas to an average of 45,000 hectares per year.<sup>3</sup> However, simultaneous changes to legislation in 2017, including the repeal of the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*, saw the clearing of native vegetation on agricultural land average 70,500 hectares per

year between 2018-2022, and exceeding 85,000 hectares in 2018.<sup>4</sup> These figures show that private land protection has not occurred at the same rate as agricultural clearing. Environmental gains possible through the strong BCT functions and collaboration with landholders have been negated by weak land clearing laws. Furthermore, it has been shown that incentives are not enough to change land-use decisions at scale.<sup>5</sup> Conservation agreements are more likely to capture sympathetic audiences where land is already safe, thus tight regulations are needed to capture unsympathetic audiences, to achieve genuine, avoided losses of nature.

### **Update the legislative exemptions for regrowth vegetation to reflect current knowledge**

Under the *Local Land Services Act 2013* land cleared before 1990 is exempt from regulation. In 2025, such lands could contain regrowth vegetation that is over 35 years old. New Australian research has found that regrown forests and woodlands provide valuable habitat and food for native wildlife after an average of 15 years.<sup>6</sup> The research found that some species, such as the koala, could use regrowth as young as nine years old, while the brush-tailed rock wallaby could use vegetation as young as 11 years old – two species classified as endangered in NSW. Such research demonstrates that a blanket exemption on land cleared before 1990 is not scientifically or environmentally sound, and permits the unregulated clearing on potentially ecologically important lands. Such exemptions should be removed.

### **Finalise or rethink the Native Vegetation Regulatory (NVR) Map**

The NVR map must be finalised after years in draft and transitional form.

We support calls by the Environmental Defenders Office for the NRC to investigate barriers to the map's finalisation and to recommend ways to overcome them.

According to a survey of 2,400 NSW landholders undertaken by the Local Land Services, just 38% of landholders were aware that the NVR exists, and only 55% had looked at it for native vegetation clearing guidance on their property.<sup>7</sup> Of the NVR map users – 50% reported that it was not useful.

### **Reform other regulatory frameworks facilitating unchecked land clearing**

The *Rural Boundary Clearing Code* and *10/50 Vegetation Clearing Code of Practice*, made under the *Rural Fires Act 1997*, pose serious risks to nature by allowing the clearing of extensive wildlife habitat without independent ecological assessment or monitoring. The 25m clearing rule in particular was not recommended by the NSW Bushfire Inquiry<sup>8</sup> and does not reduce fire risk in extreme conditions. It is unsupported by scientific evidence or recent experience.

The NRC should explore withdrawing these Codes in favour of evidence-based bushfire mitigation strategies.

### **Ensure environmental reforms are not undermined by other government policies**

Analysis has indicated that government policies and agendas on agriculture can unintentionally (or intentionally) promote the accelerated clearing and loss of habitat from farmed properties. For example, during the time when the NSW 2021 plan and NSW Agriculture Industry Action Plan 2014 sought to cut red-tape and maximise the economic value of agriculture industries, we saw the reversal of on-farm native vegetation protections through the repeal of the Native Vegetation Act.

Effort must be taken to ensure that agricultural agendas do not impede the ability to make meaningful progress to environmental protection goals. At the moment, NSW DPI has a goal to increase the Gross Value of Production (GVP) of primary industries in NSW to \$23.6 billion by 2030,<sup>9</sup> while industry are pushing to increase GVP to \$30 billion by 2030. This creates the risk of an imbalance between quick economic opportunities and environmental protection. Collaboration must occur across government so that policies and programs are harmonised in a way that does not encourage the clearing of land.

## Implement a requirement for overall benefit to biodiversity

The environment movement has consistently advocated for the primacy of environmental laws across the NSW legislative landscape. Although this position was supported by Ken Henry, it was not adopted by the NSW Government.

In the absence of legal primacy, land management regulation must commit to a central objective: biodiversity must be protected, restored, and improved. This is essential to safeguard ecosystem services, resilience, and cultural values.

A key outcome of this review should be policy recommendations which will allow the NSW government to establish an overarching requirement that land clearing must stop in habitats important to the survival of species and ecosystems, and efforts must be made and resourced to maintain or improve environmental outcomes on regional land overall. This approach is critical to restoring biodiversity and maintaining ecosystem function in regional areas.

This requirement must apply across the entire land management framework and its operative provisions, including allowable activities and Code-based clearing.

## Consider cumulative impacts and climate change in land management decisions

The current framework fails to adequately account for the cumulative impacts of clearing or its consequences in the context of a changing climate. Robust tools are needed to ensure decision-makers consider these critical factors in all land management decisions.

### **Example: Catchment-wide regulation in the NSW integrated catchment management program**

By connecting land and water decisions within a catchment-scale regulatory framework, the Integrated Catchment Management Work Program aims to provide a

practical mechanism to ensure that the environmental objectives embedded in State and Commonwealth legislation are not only aspirational, but actionable.

This integrated approach enables better coordination, clearer accountability, and the ability to enforce compliance—essential tools in reversing ongoing environmental degradation and preventing future ecological disasters.

The program can leverage existing legislative provisions, showing a commitment to more effectively implement the tools already available to safeguard environmental health.

## Support and incentivise rural land holders to protect and restore their property.

Sustainable and productive agriculture is essential. The health of habitats in regional agricultural areas impact not only wildlife but also the long-term productivity and health of agricultural land. Tree cover is essential for sustaining local rainfall, controlling salinity, and maintaining water and soil quality—foundations for a sustainable and productive farming future. Healthy ecosystems also provide protection from natural disasters such as storms, fires and drought.<sup>10</sup>

Tightening land management requirements cannot be the only pathway toward more resilient and better-connected ecosystems. Land managers are dealing with rapidly changing and challenging environmental conditions, evolving supply chain accountability requirements and a multitude of nascent programs and complex opportunities in natural capital, carbon and ‘the green economy’. Effective regulation of the bad actors accountable for broadscale and damaging land clearing must occur alongside the empowerment of regional communities to defend what remains.

Expanding private protected areas with stewardship payments aligns with NSW’s commitment to protect 30% of land by 2030. Increased support for Indigenous land rights, including private land acquisition and management, is also crucial to achieving long-term conservation and justice goals.

There is a better way to approach land management in NSW that enables farmers and land managers to adopt regenerative and sustainable practices.

### **New and expanded incentives should be determined in partnership with landholders.**

Landholders, communities, and governments must be effectively supported and incentivised to protect critical habitat. Policies must be directed at a range of motivators; from a love of nature; a love of sustainable farming; a desire for income stream diversity and efficiency to the motivation to grow financially and a combination of the above.

We must urgently shift away from a regulatory system that rewards destructive practices and disadvantages landholders committed to nature conservation. Unavoidably, government must

lead with increased public funding to support private protected areas and conservation agreements. Fair and just transition pathways, along with economic diversification programs for landholders and regional communities, are also essential.

There are many opportunities for incentivising landholders that should be considered by the NRC. Programs should be regionally designed and prioritised, ideally using a whole-of-catchment or landscape-scale approach and aligned with a future NSW Nature Strategy. Incentives can and should be context-specific. They must draw on the knowledge and commitment of regional communities, while recognising that landholder motivations and barriers will vary across the state.

**Restoration:** Investment and technical assistance provided for restoration projects on private land should be expanded. These should prioritise projects that return the most value to people and nature, such as historically cleared riparian corridors or endangered ecological communities. For public and private restoration investment to be made accessible to landholders, regulatory and planning processes must be streamlined, particularly through the development of dedicated restoration approvals pathways.

This includes a wide range of actions that can facilitate ecosystem restoration, such as returning natural tidal flows to floodplains – a process not currently recognised or supported by any NSW legislation. Riverine and aquatic restoration is particularly unduly prohibited by the current regulatory regime, preventing landscape-scale restoration with outsized benefits for nature and landholders.

**Private land conservation as set out in the BCA:** There are three private land conservation agreement types currently being run by the Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT) in NSW. These voluntary agreements include biodiversity stewardship agreements, conservation agreements and wildlife refuge agreements. Each has strengths and weaknesses. Investment of the BCT has been guided by the Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategy. This Strategy is now 7 years old, and no independent review of the strategy appears to have been undertaken. The investment strategy should be reviewed and updated such that the most effective elements can be brought forward into the future NSW Nature Strategy and investment most effectively directed.

Opportunities to strengthen the BCT program should be sought – including greater investment and staffing. The BCT 2023-24 annual report indicates it takes about two years to reach an outcome from a conservation tender from landholder engagement through to finalisation of a conservation agreement, and that more bids were received than could be fulfilled.<sup>11</sup> Any prevailing barriers to processing procedures should be identified and solutions developed to increase the capacity of the BCT to increase the number of properties entering conservation agreements. The BCT 2023-24 annual report also indicated a strong interest in conservation tenders – with 155 expressions of interest (EOIs) received, resulting in 59 bids and 32 approved offers. While all the EOIs could not be satisfied – quick, efficient pathways should exist to capitalise on those expressing an interest in protecting nature, before the opportunity is lost and they seek alternate uses of their lands.



In all voluntary conservation agreements, tax concessions and incentives should be available, and active management costs covered.

Available voluntary conservation agreements should offer landholders the highest level of protection for their natural resources, including minerals and gas. Exemptions exist within the current *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* that could allow development on land under conservation agreements under specific circumstances. If landholders had the option to guarantee protection of all resources on their land in perpetuity, similar to National Parks-level protections, this may create a new incentive to enter a conservation agreement.

**Land trusts:** Partnerships between private investors, government, and landholders offer strong potential. Effective use of land trusts requires clearly defined priority landscapes, government co-investment, and supportive governance structures.

**Innovative conservation models for the commons:** Organisations such as Biodiversity Legacy should be supported to scale up their work returning habitat to community care and care for conservation in perpetuity. Their model includes establishing land governance structures that allow community ownership and other enduring protection mechanisms.

**Financial mechanisms:** Carbon credits, biodiversity covenants, natural capital programs and incentives for regenerative agriculture offer promising financial tools to support biodiversity-positive land use.

Expanding these programs will be critical to conserving critically endangered habitats. Their success at actually improving outcomes for biodiversity depends completely on high-integrity methodologies and cost-effective monitoring. Further, for landholders, incentivised by financial returns, critical to the success of financial mechanisms will be the extent to which incentives outweigh the opportunity of expanding cleared land.

Market-based stewardship mechanisms (e.g., carbon and natural capital markets) offer both opportunities and risks and must be carefully managed. Critically, they must not be used as a source of offsets.

#### **Example: The United Kingdom's new approach to land management**

In 2023, the UK initiated a new Environmental Land Management Scheme that offered to pay farmers for providing environmental “goods and services” alongside food production on their land. The scheme was intended to be simple to understand and includes measures like direct Government payments for nature restoration on farmers' properties. While different in context, schemes such as this in international jurisdictions can provide direction and data for what works and what does not for the protection and restoration of biodiversity on regional privately held land.

#### **Strategic and efficient opportunities**



Matching land attributes with the most appropriate use will also be essential to all mechanisms which incentivise conservation and restoration. The most effective conservation efforts will occur in areas where multiple benefits intersect such as biodiversity value, carbon sequestration potential, and opportunities for reducing sediment flow into waterways.<sup>12</sup> For example, agriculturally unproductive land could be cheaper to pay a landholder to conserve and would constitute an additional income stream, whereas asking landholders to restore vegetation at the cost of an agricultural income would be less efficient.

### **Example: Efficient and effective use of land attributes**

Incentivising landholders to retire their farmland along the banks of Australia's major and minor rivers and major natural lakes has multiple benefits.

The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists' 2024 Report 'Blueprint to Repair Australia's landscapes' identified riparian (buffer zone) restoration as a key objective for landscape-scale regeneration, given the critical role they play for people and nature in maintaining catchment health and providing ecosystem services.

The report identified and fully costed four effective actions to be prioritised:

- Restore, conserve, and manage 100 m wide strips of healthy riparian vegetation along the banks of Australia's major perennial rivers.
- Restore, conserve, and manage 200 m wide strips of healthy riparian vegetation on the banks of Australia's major perennial lakes.
- Restore, conserve, and manage 200 m wide strips of healthy riparian vegetation on the banks of Australia's major perennial lakes.

The NRC should recommend that the restoration of riparian vegetation be prioritised to maintain and restore catchment health, agricultural productivity, and biodiversity along riparian corridors.

## **Accompany reforms with strong communications and engagement**

Regulations cannot succeed unless landholders are aware of, understand, and can apply them. Similarly, financial and other incentives must be easy to access and navigate. Reforms must be supported by a clear, multi-format communications strategy, including in-person community education.

Existing information about the available schemes and conservation initiatives is dispersed across multiple platforms, hard to navigate and understand – creating barriers for interested parties to take the first step to be nature-forward.

A one-stop web platform should be developed for landholders, including a finalised and enforceable vegetation regulatory map. Information must be accessible to help landholders

understand their opportunities and obligations, and make it easy to do the right thing. Increasing staffing for agencies that provide on-property advice and conservation support, particularly the Biodiversity Conservation Trust and Local Land Services ought to be included in a reform package.

## Recognise and respond to the government's own incentives and need to restore biodiversity

The NSW government must acknowledge its own powerful incentives to protect and restore biodiversity.

Healthy ecosystems underpin both society and the economy. Approximately 49.3% of Australia's GDP—\$892.8 billion—is moderately to highly dependent on ecosystem services (arguably all economic activity depends on a healthy, functioning biosphere). Highly dependent sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, food manufacturing, construction, and waste/water services generate \$293.6 billion annually (as of 2022), or 15.9% of GDP.<sup>13</sup>

Investing in ecological health is an economic imperative. There are also significant employment opportunities in large-scale conservation. Programs co-designed with Traditional Owners can grow Indigenous businesses, increase Aboriginal land management, and help achieve NSW's protected area and conservation goals.

Furthermore, restoring 30% of degraded ecosystems is a target of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (30x30), to which Australia is a signatory.

### **Employment opportunities through restoration**

A well-funded restoration economy can support a wide range of services and technologies, especially in rural areas. Investment in land management and conservation work provides meaningful jobs, including in pest and weed control, erosion prevention, river restoration, bushfire recovery and resilience, and carbon sequestration.<sup>14</sup> Services provided by restored ecosystems can also yield job opportunities in well-regulated beneficiary industries, such as oysteries, fisheries, tourism, and recreation economies.

Revegetation targets, set under the NSW Nature Strategy, should guide investments to improve native vegetation at regional and state levels.

Such programs will only succeed with strong environmental laws and compliance mechanisms that protect all remaining and regenerating high-conservation-value bushland. Funding must be directed only to lands protected by perpetual conservation agreements to ensure long-term impact.

### **Support Indigenous leadership and self-determination**

Long-term funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to care for Country brings cultural, environmental, and socio-economic benefits.

Returning land to First Nations ownership and stewardship is essential to any program of conservation, restoration and meeting 30x30 targets. We echo the calls from the Wentworth Group and Reimagining Conservation conferences, which emphasise the necessity and value of:

- Respectfully accessing traditional knowledge alongside scientific expertise;
- Employing Indigenous knowledge holders and protecting their intellectual property; and
- Building a skilled workforce rooted in local communities.<sup>15</sup>

Indigenous land and sea ranger programs are a key opportunity, as are support services such as nurseries, aquaculture, and fencing contractors. Land management programs must meet cultural and socio-economic needs alongside environmental goals. Self-determination is fundamental.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Chapple R, Wilson J, McCreedy E, Archer R, Gore-Birch C, Hunter B, Davey K, Malcolm L, Cochrane P, Humann D. 2023. 'Reimagining Conservation: Working Together for Healthy Country', report of 3-day Reimagining Conservation Forum, Meanjin / Brisbane, November 2022, produced by the North Australian Indigenous Land & Sea Management Alliance, Australian Committee for IUCN, and the Protected Areas Collaboration, Australia.  
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