

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO THE
STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT REPORT
2015**

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Foreword

The Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment's 7th ACT State of the Environment Report 2015 (SOE Report) was received by the Government on 21 December 2015.

It covers the period 1 July 2011 to 30 June 2015 and provides an independent assessment of the ACT's environment by considering the state of its air, land, water, biodiversity and heritage. The SOE Report includes an assessment of the environmental implications of climate change and increasing human needs, two factors which are identified as key drivers of change.

Key points raised in the report include:

- Overall, the ACT rated high and was considered to be effective in its management of the environment
- Human impact has reached even the most remote areas of wilderness, and climate change poses a significant threat
- Reducing the environmental impact of our consumption of goods and services stands out as a major challenge
- The ACT's adaptive management approach, underpinned by informed decisions and an on-going effort to build our knowledge base, is a logical, rational and cost-effective way to proceed
- The ACT community and Government have acted locally and shown leadership that will hopefully inspire other jurisdictions to commit to action on climate change; and
- Where there were concerns and issues previously raised by the Office of the Commissioner, the report found that there was evidence of effort to address these.

Key challenges for our community were identified as:

- finding better ways of seeking out the goods and services that can be delivered in the most footprint-efficient way. This could mean choosing products that are energy and water efficient to use, durable, and recyclable when they are no longer useable
- seeking out alternatives to consuming products, including cultural, community, sporting groups and volunteer groups such as ParkCare and Landcare
- supporting a community focus on a range of activities for all age groups that will make it attractive to spend time in activities rather than money on goods.

Tabling of the SOE Report

The Minister for the Environment and Climate Change tabled the SOE Report on 18 February 2016.

In accordance with section 19(3) of the *Commissioner for the Environment Act 1993* (the Act) the Minister must within six months after the day of receiving an SOE Report, present to the Legislative Assembly either a statement that sets out the response of the Government to the

report, or a statement that sets out the reasons for not presenting a statement to the Assembly.

This document is the Government's response to the SOE Report as required by section 19(3) of the Act.

The SOE Report Recommendations and Government's Response

The Commissioner made ten main recommendations which are listed below with the Government's response.

Recommendation 1 – Climate Change

That the ACT Government ensures that the new Climate Change Adaptation Strategy is best practice, cross-sectoral and integrated into other key strategies, with effective monitoring, reporting and evaluation.

Government response: Supported

The ACT Government supports this recommendation. The ACT's approach to adaptation is consistent with the national Climate Adaptation Outlook: A Proposed National Adaptation Assessment Framework (2013). This framework presents strategies to build understanding and adaptive capacity, and to reduce sectoral and regional vulnerability to climate change impacts.

Informed by this framework, the draft Adaptation Strategy has been developed through a collaborative approach. Enabling Adaptation in the ACT (EnAACT) meetings and workshops were conducted in 2014 with the ACT Climate Change Council, local academics, peak bodies, neighbouring NSW governments and agencies across the ACT Government.

The draft Adaptation Strategy advocates that climate change impacts be 'mainstreamed' into policies and practices across government, households, businesses and the community. It identifies that some people in our community and some ecosystems in our region have a higher vulnerability to the risks from climate change and therefore warrant particular consideration.

It is the ACT Government's intention that climate change adaptation is mainstreamed, which is considered throughout the planning and delivery of systems and services such as buildings, power, water and health services, as well as in the management of natural resources and ecosystems; and preparedness for and response to natural disasters.

The ACT Government receives regular reports from agencies responsible for existing policies and strategies, for example on the Climate Change Action Plan 2 (AP2). An indication of progress is gained from monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the actions. It is proposed this existing mechanism be applied to include reporting progress on climate change adaptation.

When adopted, the final Adaptation Strategy will have a set of actions that, along with other existing climate-related government work, will be able to be routinely reported upon. This process already is applied to the actions in AP2, with six monthly updates provided to the government and made accessible online.

Additionally, each year the ACT Minister for the Environment tables a report in the Legislative Assembly on actions taken in responding to the challenges of climate change. This annual report, required under section 15 of the *Climate Change and Greenhouse Reduction Act 2010*, is also where whole-of-government progress on the Adaptation Strategy is proposed to be reported.

Recommendation 2 – Human Needs

That the ACT Government implements the monitoring, reporting and evaluation commitments in the ACT Planning Strategy and the ACT Waste Management Strategy, and details those for the ACT Nature Conservation Strategy.

Government response: Supported

A report card on progress on implementation of the ACT Planning Strategy is nearing completion. It will deliver the Strategy’s monitoring, reporting and evaluation commitments.

The ACT Waste Management Strategy 2011-2025 was reviewed in 2015. The review analysed implementation progress and provided recommendations for improving waste management in the ACT. The review is being used to inform planning for the future of waste management which is currently underway via the ACT Waste Feasibility Study. As part of the ACT Waste Feasibility Study the Government has reviewed and significantly improved how it collects waste generation and resource recovery data. This will enable more rigorous and transparent reporting and evaluation into the future.

In relation to the ACT Nature Conservation Strategy (NCS) 2013-23, the ACT Government has in place a 5 year NCS Implementation Plan for the period from 2013 to 2018, and proposes to develop a second NCS Implementation Plan for the period from 2018-2023. Each of the NCS Implementation Plans will be reported on through two implementation reports, mid-term and at the end of the period covered by the NCS Implementation Plan.

Recommendation 3 – Human Needs

That the ACT Government considers integrated monitoring, reporting and evaluation of all the key strategies to guide achievement of improved sustainability outcomes for the ACT,

including the ACT Planning Strategy, AP2, Transport for Canberra, the ACT Water Strategy, the ACT Nature Conservation Strategy and the ACT Waste Management Strategy.

Government response: Supported in principle

There is already a high level of integration in developing, monitoring and reviewing all the strategies referred to in the recommendation with the Environment and Planning Directorate having lead responsibility for the ACT Planning Strategy, AP2, Transport for Canberra, the ACT Water Strategy, the ACT Nature Conservation Strategy and the ACT Waste Management Strategy.

The ACT Government agrees to consider how it can complement this work by developing a suite of indicators to better assess the effectiveness of environmental management and sustainable development in the ACT.

Recommendation 4 – Air

That the ACT Government requires that the air quality impacts of future urban developments are explicitly considered – in particular, the impact of pollution from domestic wood heaters in greenfield developments.

Government response: Supported

Air quality impacts from emissions including wood heaters will continue to be considered in the forward planning stage that informs variations to the Territory Plan to rezone non-urban land to urban purposes (such as residential). If necessary, any requirement or limitation will be introduced through either a structure plan or concept plan, to give statutory effect. Restrictions on the installation of wood heaters are already in place in the Molonglo Valley (excluding Wright), East O'Malley and Dunlop as result of planning studies which determined there was the potential for adverse air quality impacts.

The ACT, through the Meeting of Environment Ministers, is also working towards cleaner air for the entire ACT on several fronts through the National Clean Air Agreement. This includes stricter emissions and efficiency standards for new wood heaters and non-road spark ignition engines, and strengthening reporting standards for particulate matter pollution through the National Environment Protection (Ambient Air Quality) Measure.

The National Clean Air Agreement seeks to strengthen management of air quality to reduce air pollution in Australia and to help deliver better air quality information. It also includes long term goals to drive improvements in air quality. This should result in better environmental outcomes for the entire ACT community.

The ACT is already at the forefront nationally in best practice regulation of in-service wood heaters through its education and regulatory framework which includes licensing of firewood merchants, regulatory compliance framework, and initiatives including the Wood Heater Replacement Program and 'Burn Right Tonight' and 'Don't Burn Tonight' public education campaigns.

These measures collectively help to ensure that the ACT continues to maintain high air quality standards.

Recommendation 5 – Land

That the ACT Government provides resources to fully implement priority actions in the ACT Nature Conservation Strategy, particularly actions aimed at developing foundation knowledge of landscape function and soils in the ACT.

Government response: Supported

The ACT Government has resourced priority actions in the ACT Nature Conservation Strategy 2013-23 including:

- Soil mapping: A soils map for the ACT at 1:100,000 scale has been completed. Twelve new soil landscapes have been described for the previously unmapped western portion of the ACT. Sites with significant soil degradation have been identified. The data generated will contribute to regional and national soil datasets. Soil mapping has informed development of a Hydrogeological Landscape (HGL) Framework.
- Hydrogeological Landscape (HGL) Framework: The ACT Government is currently completing a HGL Framework using information on soils, geology, lithology, slope, soil depth, vegetation and climate. By end 2015, 25 HGL units with management areas had been mapped for the ACT and a salinity hazard report finalised. In 2016, reports for erosion risk, wetlands and climate change refugia will become available.
- Vegetation mapping: At end 2015, high resolution vegetation mapping in the ACT had been completed over an area of 122,950 hectares (ha) including the Kowen, Jerrabomberra and Majura districts. A draft vegetation map of the whole ACT is expected to be completed by the end of June 2016.
- Habitat connectivity: A habitat connectivity map is available on ACTMAPi. Connectivity mapping data has been integrated into the ACT Environmental Offsets Calculator; and
- Conservation Effectiveness Monitoring Program: An ACT Conservation Effectiveness Monitoring Program is under development. It incorporates indicators for native vegetation condition.

Recommendation 6 – Land

The ACT Government uses strategic environmental assessments as provided for in the Planning and Development Act 2007 to reduce and manage cumulative and cross-sectoral impacts on the environment.

Government response: Supported in principle

Strategic environmental assessments under the ACT Planning and Development legislation are a potentially helpful policy tool to facilitate positive environmental outcomes. For example, strategic environmental assessments could be used to inform Action Plans under the Nature Conservation Act, or variations to the Territory Plan.

It should be noted that the ACT already has an Environmental Impact Statement process that facilitates environmental impact assessment in the ACT. This process is based on a

triple bottom line and risk assessment approach and can consider cumulative and off-site impacts.

It is also worth noting that ACT strategic environmental assessments are different from Strategic Assessments under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. Although the terminology is similar, the processes are different. The Commonwealth process is an approvals process, whereas the ACT process is intended to assess policy initiatives.

Government will examine options to implement the practical effect of the Commissioner's recommendation.

Recommendation 7 – Water

That the ACT Government assess the consequences of, and understand the driving mechanisms behind, the poor condition of water resources as shown by the indicators for total nitrogen, turbidity, chlorophyll-a and ecological biodiversity, and assess the need for collecting more information for indicators with little available data.

Government response: Supported

The ACT Government recognises the value of water quality data and supports Recommendation 7.

The ACT Wide Water Quality Monitoring Framework, a key output of the ACT's Basin Priority Project, is currently investigating what gaps exist, and how best to advance the understanding of water quality in the ACT. The project has established additional monitoring sites to develop a solid baseline for both monitoring water quality in the 6 Basin Priority Project sub-catchments, and for adaptive management of water systems and associated infrastructure both during and beyond the term of the project.

The ACT Government has developed water quality models to enable a representation of the existing condition, stormwater flows and pollutant loads throughout the ACT's urban catchments, and provide a tool for testing future scenarios of development, water sensitive urban design and water quality improvement. The data collected from these Basin Priority Project monitoring sites has been used to further update and better calibrate models to reflect the local condition and expected influences beyond the standard improved water sensitive urban design practice. This improvement in the modelling tools will allow an assessment of the effectiveness of any potential treatment options required to address water quality issues tailored to the urban catchments of the ACT.

An output of the comprehensive water quality monitoring framework is to provide recommendations for the existing monitoring network, including data capture and analysis, towards improving water quality throughout the territory.

The ACT Government notes the larger number of water quality monitoring sites situated within the territory's urban areas may generate a perception that the majority of the ACT suffers from poor water quality. The few monitoring reference sites situated within the conservation areas historically record results that are 'similar to reference' and/or 'more biologically diverse than reference' which, it is assumed, naturally maintains a high level of water quality with few pressures that may change or degrade the ecological condition. In contrast, the Territory's urban areas have a greater number of monitoring sites due to the many pressures that can impair and lead to declines in the freshwater ecosystem values.

Future SOE Reporting could consider incorporating available Waterwatch data that covers water quality, macroinvertebrate and riparian monitoring that is routinely collected throughout the conservation areas to complement AUSRIVAS monitoring. This approach would broaden the historical record of reference sites and highlight the disparity in ecosystem health between those areas with minimal pressures, and those areas facing a wide range of pressures.

The location of monitoring sites between conservation, agricultural and urban areas reflects the areas that require the most attention. It would be beneficial to closely link the results generated from each land use area and discuss the pressures of each, than focus on the overall ACT score of those within and exceeding the guidelines.

Recommendation 8 – Biodiversity

That the ACT Government provides the necessary resources to complete the next phases of the Conservation Effectiveness Monitoring Program.

Government response: Supported

The Government is continuing to fund the Conservation Effectiveness Monitoring Program (CEMP). The CEMP will provide field protocols for selected indicators and develop systems to compile, analyse and report on monitoring data to inform reserve management for eight ACT ecosystems:

- lowland native grasslands
- aquatic and riparian ecosystems
- lowland woodlands
- lowland dry forests
- upland montane grasslands
- upland woodlands
- upland forests
- upland bogs and fens.

The CEMP is being piloted in restoration programs including:

- the Grassland Enhancement Program (2016–18) that has established monitoring sites in six grassland nature reserves to assess effectiveness of mosaic burning and grazing treatments
- the ACT Woodland Restoration Program that has established 15 monitoring sites across the ACT and Greater Gorooyarroo.

The Government will work towards draft plans for the all eight ecosystems along with the development and testing of indicators to support the already completed information for the Grasslands and Riparian ecosystems.

Recommendation 9 – Biodiversity

That the ACT Government formalise biodiversity conservation data collection and storage protocols and procedures, to integrate reports commissioned by different agencies with existing government data.

Government response: Supported

The Government will consider options for improving biodiversity conservation data management and the feasibility of integrating data and information from different sources.

Environment Division is consolidating spatial data for internal government access through the Corporate Geographic Database. EPD has overhauled the interface and functionality of ACT Gov’s public portal for spatial data, ACTMAPi. The Office of Surveyor General has allocated an FTE to developing a Geospatial Data Catalogue to help improve community access and download corporate spatial data.

There has been progress in improving spatial data capture and storage. New applications such as Canberra Nature Map and Collector have created opportunities for data to be collected by a range of stakeholders to notify sightings of flora and fauna. New datasets, including for hydrogeological landscapes, vegetation mapping and LIDAR (Light Detection And Ranging) three dimensional landscape structure, high resolution aerial imagery are enriching our information base to support decision-making. Where possible, many datasets are being made accessible for example ArcGIS.

Recommendation 10 – Heritage

That the ACT Government and the ACT Heritage Council commence a program of audits to assess and monitor the condition of heritage places and objects on the ACT Heritage Register.

Government response: Supported

At present, Part 16 of the *Heritage Act 2004* (the Act) requires public authorities to report to the ACT Heritage Council (the Council) on registered heritage places and objects it has responsibility for. Reporting requirements include details about each place and object including current condition. The Council must review the report and give the authority any comments about the report including any recommendations relating to the conservation of

a heritage places or object. The Council must also provide a written summary of the report, and its comments and recommendations, to the Minister. Public authority heritage reports are required each successive three year period.

Further to this, a discussion paper on the development of an ACT Heritage Strategy is currently out for public consultation. The strategy will set a clear direction for the recognition, protection, conservation and promotion of heritage in the ACT. A long-term strategic vision for the ACT Heritage Register will be addressed as part of the strategy, including its content and size, ensure it contains appropriate representation of places and objects and ensure that threshold levels are consistently applied. This process would include review of the condition of registered places and objects, including non-government owned heritage assets, and identify any ongoing monitoring programs.