



Friends of Grasslands

supporting native grassy ecosystems

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Friends of Grasslands Budget Submission 2025-26

Introduction

Friends of Grasslands (FOG) is a community group dedicated to the conservation of grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia - natural temperate grasslands and box gum woodlands. Conservation of these critically endangered ecological communities and many threatened flora and fauna species is challenged by the establishment and expansion of the city of Canberra that has been built on these lowland areas. Although grassy ecosystems are represented within the reserve system, many remnants containing these threatened communities or threatened species habitat occur off-reserve in urban open space and other leaseholds, and are unprotected from loss and degradation.

FOG's focus is on longer-term priorities to strategically improve conservation of grassy ecosystems, while deconflicting broader development decisions in Canberra. We value our strong working relationship with the ACT Government and are represented on several stakeholder committees including the ACT Natural Resource Management Community Advisory Committee, Biodiversity Conservation Forum and Invasive Plants Working Group.

FOG believes that investing in ACT's natural environment is not only critical to maintaining biodiversity but also to the wellbeing of current and future generations, including the natural environment's role in mitigating against impacts of climate change. ACT residents strongly value connecting with nature, whether in nature reserves, national parks or urban areas, and Canberra's iconic status as a bush capital.

The proposals below are framed around key elements of *A Biodiversity Network for the ACT*¹ and the *ACT Labor Policy Position Statement 2024*.² We note that the upcoming merger of EPSDD and TCCS may present an opportunity to free additional staffing resources and create efficiencies across the new Directorate to deliver some outcomes without additional expenditure. We have broadly used the current Directorate structure for our proposals below.

ACT Budget 2025-26

1) Funding to implement the Biodiversity Network to better protect and manage areas of high conservation value

We acknowledge the progress made by the Government in recent years including the new connectivity mapping (Urban Ecological Network), introduction of the Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide, and undertaking detailed Plant Community Type (PCT) mapping of nature reserves and some areas of Urban Open Space. We are also heartened to see that key elements of the Biodiversity Network have been discussed in early conversations around the new Nature

¹ https://conservationcouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/BRIEFING_BIODIVERSITY-NETWORK-Final_Version_December.pdf Conservation Council and Friends of Grasslands, December 2022

² <https://www.actlabor.org.au/media/342plfst/act-labor-policy-position-statement-2024-7-october-2024.pdf>

Conservation (NC) Strategy and the development of site management plans to guide strategic management.

It is critical that funding is put aside this year and in subsequent budgets to ensure that the Government can deliver on the new NC Strategy and NC Act to protect and manage all areas of conservation value regardless of tenure and maintain biodiversity across the ACT. We believe that for many of the recommendations below, additional funding will be minor, given the proposals relate to existing programs and/or lend themselves to forming a specialized team working with existing staff and/or staffing levels. Such funding should include:

A. Planning and quarantining areas from development

- a) **Mapping:** Ongoing survey and data collation, analysis and mapping: Continuation of PCT targeted mapping and survey of woodland and grassland on unleased land and other relevant leaseholds to identify in advance areas of high conservation value and to steer development to uncontroversial lands where such developments can be expedited.
EPSDD (existing program)
- b) **Planning:** Identifying options within the Planning Act or new NC Act to ensure that off-reserve conservation areas are identified and quarantined from development, as an overlay or in other Government mapping, and to ensure the NC strategy is delivered and the Urban Open Space Land Management Plan is implemented.
EPSDD 2 FTE (existing program)

B. Supporting the establishment of a skilled workforce to manage conservation areas

Ensure the Government's land management workforce is sufficiently staffed and skilled to address ecological challenges, undertake best-practice ecological restoration and support and advise landcare volunteer groups. This should include establishing from within the existing staff base a unit of experienced land managers (this could include PCS and TCCS Rangers), working on and off reserve, with staff involved in conservation land management in ACT Government: Office of Nature Conservation, Fire Management teams, biosecurity team to:

- a) maintain best practice guidelines for ecological restoration and management;
- b) assist in developing operational plans for individual sites;
- c) provide support and advice to on-ground management staff, lessees, Commonwealth land managers, catchment management groups and conservation volunteers to coordinate management of areas of high conservation value or areas on important connectivity corridors where restoration is required.
- d) Explore innovative ways to manage off-reserve areas of high conservation value such as extending the off-reserve area under PCS-custodianship (noting the additional area would be small) or a trial where PCS undertook some land management functions (weed management and monitoring) on specific TCCS-managed sites.
- e) FOG supports the Government's commitment to also fund additional volunteer coordinators for the UPP program (noting that volunteer program management is a different role to land management).
EPSDD 5 FTE, TCCS 4 FTE (existing resources)

2. Continued support for Catchment Management groups

Providing continued and secure recurrent funding for Catchment Management Groups that provide important support and advice to landcare groups.

Refer submissions from Catchment groups and peak bodies

3. Increase funding for biosecurity

Managing both invasive weeds and pest animals will always be critical to maintaining and improving the condition of our natural areas. This is especially the case for lowland vegetation communities, natural temperate grasslands and box gum woodlands. FOG supports the ACT Government's commitment to increase funding for weed management and this should include:

- a) Support for highly skilled weeds officers in the Biosecurity Unit (working with the Conservation Management Team).
EPSDD Maintain or increase staffing in the Biosecurity unit

- b) Sufficient funding for weed control undertaken or contracted by ACT Parks and Conservation Service and City Services.
EPSDD/TCCS Increase funding for weed management

- c) Develop a renewed media and public education campaign about garden plants that are invasive in natural areas, along the lines of the leaflet "Are your garden plants going bush?". Ensure consistency in planting policies for areas adjoining nature reserves and areas of high conservation value across Government Directorates, including the Suburban Land Agency.
EPSDD 0.5 FTE plus campaign costs

We would welcome opportunities to work further with you and your ACT Government staff to elaborate and further advance the measures proposed above.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Jamie Pittock
President, Friends of Grasslands

26 March 2025