



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Budget Consultation – Priorities for the 2024/2025 ACT Budget

November 2023

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. Since 1981, we have spoken up for a healthy environment and a sustainable future for our region. We harness the collective energy, expertise and experience of our more than 40 member groups to promote sound policy and action on the environment.

We campaign for a safe climate, to protect biodiversity in our urban and natural areas, to protect and enhance our waterways, reduce waste, and promote sustainable transport and planning for our city. Working in the ACT and region to influence governments and build widespread support within the community and business, we put forward evidence-based solutions and innovative ideas for how we can live sustainably.

At a time when we need to reimagine a better future, we understand that the changes we need will only happen with the collective support of our community.

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Priorities

- Champion Environment and Climate Organisations
- Invest in Electrification for a Safe Climate
- Invest in Safe, Convenient and Accessible Active Travel
- Invest in the rapid phase-out of wood-burning heaters from ACT suburbs
- Invest in Biodiversity
- Invest in Invasive Species Management

Champion Environment and Climate organisations

Environment and climate is identified as one of the 12 domains of wellbeing for the ACT.¹ Canberra based Environment and Climate community organisations play a crucial role in Government strategies to reduce emissions on the pathway to net zero emissions by 2045, for a circular economy and to restore and conserve natural places in the ACT region. Many of these organisations do not have sufficient funds or secure, appropriate and affordable tenancy. This prevents the organisations from being as effective as possible and therefore contributing as fully to environment and climate justice in our region. Lack of funding certainty makes it difficult to invest in our people and systems, plan for the future and retain staff. It also has negative impacts to staff physical and mental wellbeing due to overwork. Consequently, the Conservation Council cannot continue to operate at the capacity level required to contribute fully to environmental and climate action in our region, including supporting and implementing the ACT Government's own strategies. Without more staff it is impossible to participate in all of the requested government roundtables, consultations, forums and community consultations. CCACT is essential in protecting and enhancing biodiversity and on the journey to net zero emissions by 2045 and to build a more sustainable Canberra.

Recommendations

- Increase operational funding for the Conservation Council ACT Region, SEE Change and the Canberra Environment Centre to increase the organisations' impacts to reduce greenhouse emissions, promote sustainability and conserve biodiversity.
- An Environment and Sustainability hub for Canberra. This dedicated centre would host organisations including the Canberra Environment Centre, SEE Change, the Community Toolbox Canberra and Repair Cafes.
 - This hub must be multipurpose and accessible, being suitable for meetings, workshops, a demonstration garden, office space and work rooms.
- Provide adequate yearly ongoing funding for LandcareACT and the three member Catchment Groups.
- Operational funding for the National Parks Association of the ACT to undertake vital activities including Indigenous engagement programs, part-time office support and ongoing IT support.

¹ https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1498198/ACT-wellbeing-framework.pdf

Invest in Electrification for a Safe Climate

Climate change is the most significant threat to the survival of all life on earth, and requires immediate and significant global action. The impacts of a changing climate are well upon us; increasingly severe fires, storms and droughts are forcing societies and natural ecosystems to transform the way they function. Responding to climate change continues to require both adaptation (actions to adjust to changes that have happened and are predicted) and mitigation (actions to avoid and minimise further emissions).

The Synthesis Report of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6-SYR) released in March 2023 is unequivocal in its statements about the urgency required in global emissions reductions.

“Keeping warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels requires deep, rapid and sustained greenhouse gas emissions reductions in all sectors. Emissions should be decreasing by now and will need to be cut by almost half by 2030, if warming is to be limited to 1.5°C.”²

The ACT has demonstrated leadership by purchasing the Territory's electricity from renewable sources and setting a target of net-zero emissions by 2045 including phasing out fossil gas. But we must bring forward that target date and invest heavily now in making the deep emissions reductions urged by the IPCC.

Almost 90% of the ACT's emissions come from transport, fugitive emissions and the gas network³. The solutions for eliminating emissions from these sectors are technologically straightforward – electrification of buildings and vehicles and increased active transport. Implementing them requires investment in infrastructure, supply chains, trade skills and public behaviour-change programs, as well as regulation to accelerate the transition. The “replace when your existing appliance breaks down” approach is inconsistent with the pace of the climate emergency, as declared by the ACT Government in 2019.

As an agile and relatively wealthy community, we can continue to show what is possible and implement innovative policies to decarbonise all sectors. Ensuring that emissions reduction policies and programs are designed to prioritise helping our most vulnerable residents and those with least capacity to act – those people on low incomes, with a disability or living in public housing, rental properties and apartment buildings – will have the co-benefit of building social equity and resilience to deal with the climate changes that are already occurring and increasing.

The ACT Government must also consider the scope 3 emissions impacts of electrification, that is, the materials and energy used in manufacturing and importing the electric appliances to replace gas. Applying a circular economy approach and investing in materials recovery will be critical in diverting removed gas appliances from landfill and increasing public confidence and participation in the transition.

Government and community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate that we can make rapid and previously unthinkable changes when the need is considered sufficiently dire.

² IPCC, 2023, 'Urgent climate action can secure a liveable future for all', Press release, 20 March, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/press/IPCC_AR6_SYR_PressRelease_en.pdf

³ Point Advisory, 2021, ACT Greenhouse Gas Inventory for 2020–21, https://www.environment.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1918038/ACT-Greenhouse-Gas-Emissions-Inventory-Report-2020-21.pdf

Recommendations

- Fund a pathway for all ACT Government Assets including social housing, schools, health facilities and office blocks to replace gas appliances with all electric alternatives by 2030 (noting that an audit is underway to inform this)
- Fund industry information campaigns on the phase out of gas (including for architects, builders, developers, plumbers, gasfitters, appliance retailers, chefs, cooks, real estate agents and property managers).
- Support trades sector training institutions in regards to electrification and gas transition, such as funding a free, mandatory training/information session for all current chefs, cooks, builders, gas fitters and plumbers.
- Invest in industry research partnerships to develop electrification solutions for complex buildings, and consider an industry contribution scheme to fund retrofitting of existing buildings.
- Fund materials recovery of removed gas appliances to divert resources from landfill.
- Continue to support low-income households to reduce energy use through energy efficiency measures, electrification and energy-efficient appliances.
- Review the Sustainable Households Scheme to determine if lower income households are being adequately supported through the scheme. Extend the scheme including implementing an objective review.
- Extend the Home Energy Support Program from 5 years to 10 years.
- Consider developing regulation for electrification of rental properties, similar to the ceiling insulation Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard.
- Increase the funding for the Community Zero Emissions Grant Program to \$200,000 per year and continue beyond 2025.
- Require all government agencies to prepare, implement and publicly report on progress with climate change adaptation plans.
- Prepare a separate annual Budget Paper on the funding of the Climate Change Strategy, and annual reporting on its delivery.

Invest in Active Travel

Canberrans travel around the city daily for social, recreational, household and employment activities. Transport emissions contribute 63% to the ACT's direct greenhouse emissions, primarily through the use of petrol and diesel vehicles. Our transport choices have a significant impact on our environment, the liveability of our city, and our productivity, health and wellbeing. We need to:

- build a strong public transport network
- enable safe, accessible, convenient and comfortable active travel as a viable and attractive option for commuters
- reduce emissions from use of cars
- transition to an electrified transport system, which can run on 100% renewable energy.

The unfolding climate emergency, combined with the need for all of our streets to be safe, accessible and welcoming for active travel underlines the importance of adequate funding in this area. The urgency is underpinned by the Declaration of a Climate Emergency that was passed by the Legislative Assembly in 2019. The ACT Government needs to reprioritise spending to ensure that there are significant investments in active travel over and above what has been

allocated to date, and that bold steps are taken to send a strong signal to the community that active travel is a strong priority for the government.

Transport equity must be addressed in allocating funding to active travel. Paths need to be connected to services, integrated and wide to allow access for all ages and abilities. Better streets will create cleaner and healthier communities. While access to active travel will reduce cost of living pressures.

While hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated for the construction and upgrade to roads, funding for active travel infrastructure has been small by comparison. Where funding is allocated for active travel infrastructure, expenditure of the funds has seen delays.

Maintenance of paths is a huge issue. In all but the very newest suburbs, paths being in poor and/or dangerous condition and piecemeal and slow maintenance. There are many upgrades, connections and paths that are required to be constructed and/ or completed. Without reprioritising funding from car-based travel towards walking and cycling, there won't be an increase in the uptake of active travel until the infrastructure supports safe, efficient use.

Accounting for large chunks of funding for road upgrades that include things such as on-road cycling paths or road shoulders where cars drive at 100 km/hr (such as the Monaro Highway shoulder) as part of the Active Travel budget results in heavily skewed figures that give the impression of high investment, but in reality those kind of projects have limited capacity to build engagement in active travel or support a high number of active travel users. In addition, while the inclusion of active travel provisions in large projects is welcome in the main (as long as they are suitable), it should not negate the need for investment within the existing urban form.

In addition, for the purposes of transparency around funding, all active travel expenditure and funding should be clearly identified in budget papers, including the maintenance funding. The accountability indicators in Budget Statements also need to reflect publicly-stated Government priorities and goals and ensure the indicators for active travel infrastructure match those for roads.

Recommendations

- Increase and provide sufficient funding for the annual maintenance budget for active travel infrastructure. This includes addressing the maintenance backlog within the next five years.
- Build a connected, safe, and convenient cycle network, as proposed as priority two of the ACT Government's (draft) Active Travel Plan, within the next five years. This will prioritise:
 - The construction of safe and convenient cycling routes to and from all Canberra schools, health facilities, town centres, and major public transport stops.
 - The expansion and upgrading of all principal cycle routes, including the construction of raised pedestrian crossing at all road crossings on these routes.
 - The conversion of all on-road cycle lanes on roads 60 km or above to be replaced by segregated cycle lanes. This can occur with quick-build protected cycling lanes – initially on Northbourne Avenue, Bowen Drive and Commonwealth Avenue, but rolling out to all trunk roads including Belconnen Way, Drakeford Drive etc.

- Increase the number of crossing supervisors at schools to encourage students to commute to school using active travel.
- Invest in pedestrian crossings near bus stops on roads with high levels of traffic.
- Upgrade bus stops to shelter people during extreme weather.
- Continue the Slower streets program as a priority, and make “street calming” design changes to suburban streets in consultation with local residents as an effective way to slow traffic.
- Invest in community engagement programs that support and incentivise people to make sustainable transport choices including encouraging people to use active travel for short trips to work, school and the shops.
- Expand the Sustainable Household Scheme to include electric bikes and second hand Electric Vehicles.
- Expanded the Canberra Electric Bike Library run by SEE Change and Switched on Cycles, including a Southside location.
- Invest in secure electric bike parking cages with charging facilities in multi-unit developments, new office buildings, new residential precincts and at already established suburban hubs.
- Invest in expanding community transport options including electric bus services and bike and walking use. This includes for vulnerable children to attend early learning centres who have transport barriers preventing them.
- Fill in missing links in the bus network including investing in sufficient transport options for university and CIT students.
- Review the current public transport concession arrangements.

Invest in the Rapid Phase-out of Wood-Burning Heaters from ACT suburbs

The Conservation Council ACT Region supports the recent commitment to phase out wood burning heaters from ACT suburbs. However, the target phase out date of 2045 must be accelerated. Burning wood for energy in wood-burning heaters increases emissions and is a risk to the health of our community. Wood heaters impact the environment in several ways. First, wood heaters often produce methane and black carbon which exacerbate climate change. Second, firewood for wood heaters impact forests and woodlands. In NSW and Victoria, more than 60 per cent of firewood harvested is sourced from native old growth forests. Even the legal removal of standing dead wood often has a negative impact on ecosystems, by reducing the availability of tree hollows and input of material to the litter layer which are critical for a range of native species.

Recommendations

- Accelerate the target date for the replacement of wood heaters with electric alternatives in all ACT suburbs (excluding rural areas), as has been done for fossil-fuel gas. This should be supported through accessible financial support for lower income households.
- Remove and replace all wood-burning heaters in Government owned buildings including social housing as quickly as possible.

- Fund a community education program that includes explicit messaging about the health risks associated with wood heater usage in ACT Government education and communication activities.
- Investment in further air quality monitoring stations. There are currently only three monitoring stations across the Territory. The inadequacy of this was highlighted in 19/20 bushfire season.

Invest in Biodiversity

In July 2022, a landmark National State of Environment Report was released outlining that overall Australia's natural environment is "poor and deteriorating". The cause of this extreme loss: climate stresses, habitat loss and degradation. Nature in the ACT suffers the same fate as the rest of the country. Approximately 6.2% of Canberra's mature trees have been removed in the past 5 years; our beloved faunal emblem, the Gang-gang Cockatoo is endangered; and our natural areas are at increasing risk from invasive plants and animals.

Investing in protecting, restoring and enhancing natural places in the ACT region has cross community benefits including for supporting tourism, livelihoods, health and wellbeing. Furthermore it is invaluable that the ACT plays a stewardship role in the protection of important local species and ecosystems. Investing in maintaining high-quality urban greenspace will help build resilience against the impacts of climate change, enhance nature connectivity across the urban landscape, and deliver quality-of-life benefits to the community. Trees and shrubs provide vital refuge for wildlife and pollinators across the urban landscape and cool the urban environment.

Current ACT Government initiatives have already identified the importance of biodiversity for our region. Such initiatives including the Urban Forest Strategy and Connecting Nature Connecting People require adequate management and maintenance.

Significantly the maintenance of ACT waterways, parks, reserves and urban green spaces is heavily dependent on volunteer labour and small organisations including the National Parks Association of the ACT, LandcareACT and the three Catchment Groups. Activities including citizen science, weeding, work parties, planting and activities such as NPA's Goanna project are invaluable in supporting biodiversity in the ACT. This work should be valued as core business for managing the bush capital's ecosystems and habitats. Investment is required for these organisations not just to cover ground costs but to increase their capacity, and upskill.

Recommendations

- Operational funding for LandcareACT and the three member Catchment Groups; and the National Parks Association of the ACT.
- Increased staffing to manage enforcement and compliance of Construction Environment Management Plans.
- Increased staffing for Urban Parks and Places management. Currently there is only one Urban Parks and Places Volunteer Coordinator for over 80 groups.
- Implement the [Biodiversity Network](#) - including introduction of voluntary stewardship / custodianship agreements. To combat biodiversity loss across the Territory, the Conservation Council's Biodiversity Working Group and Friends of Grasslands have co-authored a paper that outlines a key part of the solution to protecting and enhancing

the ACT's remaining natural places: The Biodiversity Network.

- Fund and fully implement all existing action plans and conservation strategies, applying specific timeframes to improve accountability.
- Fund community groups to collaborate with the *Connecting Nature Connecting People* program to continue the program beyond the first two years. Resource the community to deliver services.
- Invest in incorporating Bluetts Block – Piney Ridge into the Molonglo River Reserve. Bluetts Block – Piney Ridge is home to over 100 plant species as well as rare marsupial populations of Dunnart and Antechinus. Protecting the area as reserve will provide physical and mental wellbeing benefits to nearby residents and allow the ACT to play a stewardship role in securing habitat for such species as the endangered Superb Parrot and Gang-gang Cockatoo.
- Construction Environment Management Plan
- Invest in Healthy Waterways:
 - Commit to a schedule and funding to repair, modify and progressively ecologically upgrade existing major creeks and stormwater channels including Tuggeranong Creek, Weston Creek, Yarralumla Creek, Jerrabomberra Creek and Sullivan's Creek.
 - Develop an incentive scheme to encourage developers and homeowners to install permeable surfaces on residential properties.

Invest in Invasive Species Management

To ensure Canberra's nature, people and culture can flourish, our urban landscapes need to host biodiverse and resilient green spaces. Biodiversity in the ACT region is under strain from invasive plants and animals. Across the country nature is under stress: there are more non-native plants than native ones and natural areas are becoming increasingly degraded from invasive plants and animals.⁴

As the impacts of a changing climate continue and worsen the ACT must be prepared for Biosecurity threats. This includes reducing the risks by changing internal practices such as inadequate staffing and planting guides that include invasive species. Funding of new staff needs to be on an ongoing basis to ensure forward momentum is not jeopardised. The ACT has a responsibility to rapidly respond to biosecurity threats accelerated by climate change, through sustained intervention and management of invasive plants that have been bolstered by a prolonged period of frequent rain. Invasive species degrade our waterways, natural landscape, habitats, biodiversity and threaten the production of food in our region.

There has not been an investment in community organisations which contribute heavily to the protection, Volunteer labour is relied on heavily for the management of invasive plants including LandcareACT, the three member Catchment Groups, National Parks Association of the ACT, Friends of Grasslands and Park Care Groups.

⁴ State of Environment Report, 2021.

Clarity on the invasive species budget is required as it is spread across Parks and Conservation, City Services and Rural Services. Therefore it is unclear how much has been allocated. Additionally ongoing funding beyond 22/23 is unclear and is urgently required.

Recommendations

- Ongoing recurrent funding to manage invasive plant and pest species including adequate funding for further Parks and Conservation staff
- As previously stated, fund and champion the small organisations and volunteer labour relied on for invasive plant management including LandcareACT, the three Catchment Groups and the National Parks Association of the ACT. Additionally increased staffing for Urban Parks and Places management to support volunteer weeding work parties.
- Extend the rapid response biosecurity team including increased ongoing funding and additional staff.
- Audit all the planting guide lists to remove invasive plants. Please see Attachment 1 below.
- Increase funds for the maintenance of the Canberra Nature Map and iNaturalist
- Extend annual funding with a multi-year security for citizen science programs, such as VegWatch, to complement other biodiversity monitoring programs.
- Implement a cat containment education program for 3 years.
- Implement an invasive plant species education program for 3 years including education on the use of the Canberra Nature Map to track, report and respond to invasive species.

Attachment I: PLANTING GUIDE AUDIT PROJECT IN THE ACT

PLANTING GUIDE AUDIT PROJECT IN THE ACT

<i>RESOURCE NAME/ LINK</i>	<i>RESOURCE TYPE</i>	<i>YEAR PUBLISHED</i>
Canberra Plant Selector Website	Online database (342 species)	n/d.
Plant Species for Municipal infrastructure standards	TCCS publication	Feb, 2021
ACT Gov/ Yarralumla Nursery Fact Sheets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire retardant plants • Hardy Shrubs for Hot, Dry, spots • Hedging plants for Canberra Gardens • Bog plants for Canberra gardens • Small eucalypts for Canberra Gardens • Small trees for Canberra gardens • Deciduous trees for Canberra gardens 	Yarralumla Nursery/ ACT Gov. publication	n/d.
Urban Forest Tree Species ANU research	ANU research published for EPSDD	2019
Pest species declaration	Legislation	Latest update 2021
Climate wise planting guide	SLA publication	2021

Yarralumla Nursery Initiatives

- [Free Plant Scheme](#)
- [Lone Pine scheme](#)

Other resources

- [Nature strip guidelines](#) (2019)
- [Yarralumla Nursery Catalogue](#)