



Friends of Grasslands

supporting native grassy ecosystems

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Re. 2023-24 budget submission

Friends of Grasslands (FOG) is a community group dedicated to the conservation of natural temperate grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia. FOG advocates, educates and advises on matters to do with the conservation of native grassy ecosystems, and carries out surveys and other on-ground work. FOG is based in Canberra and its members include professional scientists, landowners, land managers and interested members of the public.

Introduction

The ACT has been the leading jurisdiction in many areas of national policy, such as with the ACT's Climate Strategy to a Net Zero Emissions Territory policy. Friends of Grasslands advocates for the conservation of some Australia's most threatened flora and fauna, namely the native grasslands and grassy woodlands, whose remnants are found in the lowland areas of the ACT. We argue in this submission that the ACT Government can and should also be the national leader in demonstrating how to conserve biodiversity while developing a sustainable economy.

In our response to the opportunity to provide input into the Budget 2023-04 process, FOG has considered the 2020 election platforms of the Labor and Greens parties, as well as the Parliamentary Agreement made between the Labor and Greens ([Parliamentary and Government Agreement for the 10th-Legislative-Assembly.pdf \(act.gov.au\)](#)). The stated mandate and the political emphasis of all political parties are to improve the environment of the ACT, including particularly the natural environment but also the general blue-green environment. Details of the Greens policy platform and Labor platform that relate to our submission are in Attachment A.

We support wholeheartedly the increasing number of worthwhile and effective programs that are being funded to support ecological outcomes, including the Connecting Nature, Connecting People program and linking this with the urban forest program, the proposed Urban Open Space Land Management Plan and implementing management of the Blue-Green Network and the Territory agreement to implement 'other effective area based conservation measures' (OECMs)¹. These programs however, could be significantly more effective if better managed inclusively, in order to take into account overlaps and synergistic interactions.

Restoring our reserves, protecting and restoring our biodiverse remnants and eventually restoring the indigenous vegetation and ecological function across all tenures would justify the identification of Canberra as a National Park City².

Protection and effective management of conservation areas across all tenures

Friends of Grasslands applauds the opportunities that have arisen as a result of the Planning Review and subsequent recommendations by the Assembly Planning Committee for additional inclusion of ecological and other environmental matters in the planning legislation. In addition, we are heartened by

¹ <https://consult.dcceew.gov.au/consult-draft-principles-for-oecms-in-australia>

² <https://www.nationalparkcity.org/>

Labor and Greens support of off-reserve protection and management, and believe that the agreement reached between the Commonwealth, States and Territories to introduce OECMs as a measure that enables long-term conservation of important biodiverse areas outside the reserve system whilst enabling other land uses to continue. We call on the government in this budget to increase funding for conservation of biodiverse areas outside reserves in Canberra to: a) recover the habitats of threatened species and ecosystems and b) improve the well-being of Canberrans. There are two key areas where enhanced funding is needed.

1. *The Biodiversity Network*

The Conservation Council and Friends of Grasslands are advocating the establishment of a Biodiversity Network on leased and unleased ACT government land that have high biodiversity values³. These include remnants of threatened and rare ecological communities, and habitat for threatened species. Establishment of this network is critical for connecting remnant vegetation and habitat, increasing the populations of threatened species and health of threatened ecosystems. Such proactive conservation will provide greater certainty for implementation of biodiversity protection. Further, as this network is in our city it provides ways of better engaging citizens in nature for people's well-being and for conservation.

The Biodiversity Network is broadly equivalent to the Blue-Green Network identified in the ACT Government's District Strategies⁴, and the necessary actions are exemplified by the pilot projects being established in the Connecting Nature, Connecting People program.

2. *Conservation management*

The condition of threatened ecological communities, especially natural temperate grasslands and the habitat for associated threatened and rare species, is diminishing not only off reserve, but also in our nature reserves. This decline has been exacerbated by two years of high rainfall, as evidenced by the increase in area covered by weeds and huge biomass build up. The current resources for ACT Government rangers and other on-ground staff have not been adequate to deal with these matters. We call on the government in this budget to increase funding to better manage biomass (e.g. by burning), mitigate against on-going weed invasions and ensure implementation of best practice management.

In the last ten years a greater workload has fallen on volunteers⁵. Volunteers can achieve important outcomes, but they are not a replacement for a skilled rangers and weed and other contractors. However, together with professional managers, they form a significant and effective partnership. FOG has been arguing for some time that greater expertise is required for the management of our conservation areas, and grassy ecosystems in particular.

Increased understanding and implementation of traditional Aboriginal land management applied to conservation areas is required.

Goals

This budget submission asks the government to strategically fund actions to achieve the goals of the biodiversity network (effectively, the Blue-Green Network):

- a) long-term legislative protection of conservation areas across all land tenures,
- b) coordinated and effective ecological management for important biodiversity areas (particularly but not exclusively those containing threatened species or habitat) within and outside the reserve system, including on leased land, and
- c) actions to encourage the ACT population to increase understanding of our natural assets, help manage them better, and improve peoples' wellbeing.

³ <https://conservationcouncil.org.au/blog/2023/01/13/a-biodiversity-network-for-the-act/>

⁴ <https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/act-planning-review>

⁵ <https://actenvirovolunteers.com.au/the-report/>

These goals are consistent with the Labor and Greens policy platforms and Parliamentary and Government Agreement (Attachment A).

Budget

More specifically, FOG is requesting ACT Government consideration of increased funding for the following programs in the 2023-2024 budget. We urge that existing programs and strategies are adequately supported, in such a way that identified goals of the Government programs can be achieved in a realistic time frame.

1. Establish bigger and more effective conservation management teams across directorates for:

- conservation area identification and mapping,
 - site management planning,
 - management implementation including weed control and ecological burning, and
 - community engagement.
- a) Establish a cross-tenure specialist conservation management team skilled in regeneration and restoration to improve management outcomes on all government land and leased land (urban and rural leases) (application of evidence informed management of ecosystems (ACT Greens 2020).
 - b) Step up funding for the Connecting Nature, Connecting People program to enhance and restore connectivity.
 - c) Further invest in production of native plant seeds (we applaud the creation by ESPDD of two seed production sites). Additional opportunities should be sought for partnerships with lessees or private businesses.
 - d) Ensure secure, predictable recurrent funding for weed and pest management (ACT Labor Party, 2022: p. 45), with no net loss of funds to control and contain existing infestations according to the strategic approach identified in the Invasive Plants Control Plan 2020-25⁶.
 - e) Continue to support trials and develop and implement a monitoring and evaluation system to measure ecological and cultural outcomes for cultural burn practices.
 - f) Increase the budget to enable more ecological burning on high conservation value sites across land tenures.
 - g) Enhance the existing citizen science programs to include vegetation monitoring (e.g. Vegwatch), continue support of existing programs including Frogwatch, Waterwatch, Canberra Nature Map and iNaturalist.

2. Improve threatened species management:

- a) Fund programs to mitigate against the decline in distribution and populations of threatened species and threatened grasslands and grassy woodlands, and in particular the decline of the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon that is under significant threat from loss of habitat and inappropriate management.
- b) Fund implementation of priority actions in the ACT Government's ACT Native Grassland Strategy and Action Plans⁷ and the ACT Lowland Woodland Conservation Strategy.⁸

⁶ <https://actgov.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html>

⁷ <https://www.environment.act.gov.au/nature-conservation/conservation-and-ecological-communities/grasslands>

⁸ <https://www.environment.act.gov.au/nature-conservation/conservation-and-ecological-communities/protecting-woodlands>

3. Maintain the support base for environmental NGOs and volunteers

- a) Continue funding peak community organisations including ACT catchment groups, Landcare ACT and Conservation Council to facilitate community volunteering and advocacy for the environment.
- b) Support volunteer groups by increasing their capacity, cover on-ground costs and upskilling.
- c) Provide additional Urban Parks and Places coordinators (TCCS current employs 1 coordinator compared to 4 Parks and Conservation coordinators, even though each program serves over 70 volunteer community groups).
- d) Continue to support existing citizen science monitoring programs, including Waterwatch and Frogwatch and provide support to fund Vegwatch⁹.

Yours sincerely



Professor Jamie Pittock
President, Friends of Grasslands
6 June 2023

⁹ Sharp S., April 2020. Vegwatch Monitoring Program: Practice and Findings 2011 to 2018. [Vegwatch Review 2020 \(molonglo.org.au\)](https://www.molonglo.org.au/vegwatch-review-2020)

Attachment A. Platforms and election commitments, 2020

ACT Greens Party platform 2022: Natural Environment

- 17.1 Better protect remnant grasslands, woodlands and key waterways as nature reserves or similar protective zoning
- 17.2 Increase PCS funding to manage Canberra Nature Park and Namadgi National Park (\$4M each over 4 years)
- 17.3 Create a separate biodiversity offsets management fund
- 17.4 Increase funding for weeds and invasive species management (\$7.5M over 4 years)
- 17.5 Increase funding for local environmental volunteer-based groups (\$3.2M over 4 years)
- 17.6 Employ an additional 10 Ngunnawal rangers and incorporate cultural land and water management practices
- 17.7 Establish a wildlife corridors program and install 5,000 nesting boxes
- 17.8 Ban neonicotinoids and reduce the use of glyphosate and other pesticides
- 17.9 Expand the Healthy Waterways program (\$30 M over 4 years)
- 17.10 Create a ten year stormwater upgrade plan to handle climate change storm events
- 17.11 Maintain Coombs Peninsula as green space
- 17.12 Establish more air quality monitoring stations, including in Fyshwick

ACT Labor Platform ([Policy Platform \(actlabor.org.au\)](http://actlabor.org.au))

Environment Strategies

Biodiversity and Conservation

- 11. Strengthen and where necessary extend the legislative protection given to wilderness areas, national parks, Canberra Nature Park and nature reserves.
- 12. Promote the responsible and sustainable public enjoyment of wilderness areas, national parks, Canberra Nature Park and nature reserves, flora and fauna.
- 13. Provide a well-resourced park and conservation service to:
 - a. Manage and protect National Parks, Nature Reserves and flora and fauna;
 - b. Provide for educational activities in National Parks and Nature Reserves;
 - c. Provide essential environment services to ensure pollution abatement, feral animal control and the eradication of invasive weeds; and
 - d. Develop and implement a comprehensive feral animal's strategy.
- 14. Ensure Canberra's biodiversity is properly restored and conserved, not only through documentation and plans of management, but also through improved resourcing.
- 15. Ensure secure, predictable recurrent funding for weed and pest management.
- 16. Develop and implement a long term strategy for the containment of African Love Grass.
- 17. Protect and enhance all river and creek corridors.
- 18. Ensure that conservation values and ecological sustainability of native woodlands and grasslands are incorporated into land use planning, natural resources management and leasehold management.
- 19. Ensure that environment policies are adequately resourced and driven by legislative arrangements that have effective implementation strategies.
- 20. Strictly enforce all existing legal controls on all forms of pollution and provide for a well-resourced Environmental Protection Service.

21. Ensure pollution reports are freely available.
22. Encourage the use of lower-grade water for irrigation purposes and the use of domestic grey water.
23. Ensure stringent monitoring measures are taken to guard against any pollution reaching the Murrumbidgee River or any other waterway.
24. Monitor domestic and industrial chemicals that could impact on the sewerage and stormwater systems.
25. Continue to work with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission in addressing water resource problems in the Murray-Darling basin.
26. Require that any proposed export of water from the ACT Should be carefully evaluated to ensure catchment integrity is maintained and the need for any additional dams is curtailed.
27. Provide for the conservation of native forest areas on both private and public land through sensible and sustainable forest planting and management programs that maintain high levels of biodiversity, protect water catchments and take into account current and future needs for timber.
28. Maintain a strong planting program, using appropriate seedling stock that will maximise native forest cover in the ACT.
29. Phase out the use of persistent herbicide/pesticide chemicals, particularly in close proximity to residential areas, streams and waterways, and investigate effective and economical alternatives to the use of chemicals.
30. Strengthen the program of feral pine removal from Namadgi National Park and halt any further encroachment of pines into the Park.

Built and Natural Environment Integration

31. Maintain a network of open space and green belt features in suburban areas.
32. Establish and maintain wildlife corridors in urban and commercial areas for native flora and fauna.
33. Reduce noise generated by traffic, industry and residential activity in urban areas by planting trees and shrubs, noise barriers and other planning and landscaping measures.
34. Maintain and extend the tree canopy throughout Canberra's urban areas including the allocation of adequate resources for tree management, and the implementation of a tree regime with legislative backing, leasehold management controls and sanctions to ensure compliance.
35. Vigorously enforce current environmental protection guidelines for urban development sites.
36. Develop and implement environmentally sensitive guidelines for future urban renewal projects.
37. Require projects involving substantial earth-moving activity to include landscaping as an integral part of the project.
38. Maximise the use of flora species native to the Canberra region, including grasses and those requiring minimal watering.
39. Provide incentives for the use of washing machines with a Water Efficiency Labelling and Standards (WELS) rating of at least 5-star.
40. Identify and implement a living on the urban edge policy which is communicated to the public.
41. Develop and implement a management plan for off-reserve areas of ecological significance within the urban environment.
42. Develop and implement a recreation plan which protects key reserves and biodiversity while promoting active health lifestyle for the ACT's residents.