

# Blueprint for a healthy Country and thriving regions

Unlocking new opportunities for healthy  
and productive landscapes in NSW

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March 2026

WENTWORTH GROUP OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS

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## Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists

**Prof Justine Bell-James**, Professor, TC Beirne School of Law, University of Queensland · Director, National Environmental Law Association · Member, UQ's Centre for Biodiversity.

**Dr Matthew Colloff**, Environmental scientist, Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University · Former Principal Research Scientist, CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems.

**Mr Mike Grundy FAIA**, Former Research Director, Soil and Landscapes, CSIRO · Adjunct Professor, University of Sydney.

**Prof Emerita Lesley Hughes**, Ecologist, Macquarie University · Councillor, Australian Climate Council · Lead Author, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Working Group II.

**Prof Emeritus David Karoly FAA**, School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Melbourne · Councillor, Climate Council of Australia.

**Prof Richard Kingsford**, Scientia Professor and Director, Centre for Ecosystem Science, UNSW Sydney.

**Prof Martine Maron**, Professor of Environmental Management, University of Queensland.

**Prof Bradley Moggridge**, Kamilaroi · Indigenous Water Science and Associate Dean, University of Technology Sydney.

**Prof Jamie Pittock**, Environmental Scientist, Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University · Board member, Natural Resource Management Regions Australia and WWF Australia.

**Prof Fran Sheldon**, Ecologist · School of Environment and Science, Griffith University · Member, Australian Rivers Institute.

**Dr Teagan Shields**, Indigenous Ecologist, Curtin University.

**Emeritus Professor Bruce Thom, AM, FIAG, FTSE, FRSN**, Geographer, University of Sydney - Chair · 2001 Australian State of Environment Report-Director Australian Coastal Society.

**Mr Martijn Wilder AM**, Managing Partner & Co-Founder, Pollination · Former Chairman, Australian Renewable Energy Agency · Former Director, Clean Energy Finance Corporation · Former President, WWF Australia · Former Director, the Climate Council.

## In Association with

**Ms Debbie Medaris**, Ecologist, Former-Director, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists

**Dr Celine Steinfeld**, Geographer, CEO, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists · Adjunct Associate Professor, UNSW Sydney.

**Ms Michaelie Trenbath**, Geographer, Healthy Landscapes Project Officer, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists.

**Ms Lucy Broad**, Strategic Communications Adviser, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists.

**Ms Siobhan Isherwood**, Environmental Scientist, NSW Policy Analyst, Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists.

**Mr Guy Fitzhardinge**, Associate Adjunct Professor at The Centre for the Study of the Inland at La Trobe University.

**Mr Jack Archer**, Founder - Projects JSA Regional Advisory · Former CEO Regional Australia Institute.

**Professor Tony Auld**, Centre for Ecosystem Science, University of NSW Sydney.

**Ms Rachel Walmsley**, Environmental Defenders Office.

**Prof. Cathleen Waters**, Head of Science, GreenCollar.

**Ms Ilona Miller**, Partner, Gilbert + Tobin.

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For further information contact:

Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists

Phone: +61 (2) 9251 3811

Email: [information@wentworthgroup.org](mailto:information@wentworthgroup.org)

Web: [www.wentworthgroup.org](http://www.wentworthgroup.org)

Address: Suite 4, 3B Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000

ABN: 357 181 218 50

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# Acknowledgement of Aboriginal People and their Country

The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists acknowledges and celebrates Aboriginal people, the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of NSW. We pay our respects to their elders past and present.

Aboriginal people have been stewards of Country for over 60,000 years and have continuing cultural connections to lands and waters. Indigenous ownership was never ceded.

From 1788 to today, the connections and role in stewardship of Country all changed for Aboriginal people following dispossession from their lands.

Leading Indigenous experts have documented major issues affecting Australia's environment.<sup>1</sup> The current state of Country is far from healthy.

Aboriginal people now need to have leading roles in repairing and managing healthy landscapes, including to support social, economic, cultural, and spiritual values. Healthy Country means healthy people.<sup>2</sup>

Together, in repairing Country with Aboriginal people, NSW can advance reconciliation and improve the health of our lands and waters for the benefit of all people.

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# Executive summary

The NSW Government has committed to the most significant reform to the state's land management framework in over 20 years.

This reform provides an opportunity to reverse the trajectory of environmental decline and put in place a whole-of-landscape approach that recognises the importance of natural capital in underpinning community well-being, supporting rich and diverse ecosystems, improving agricultural productivity, ensuring climate change resilience and respecting Aboriginal peoples' deep connections to Country.

Our Blueprint for a Healthy Country and Thriving Regions has been designed to harness this rare opportunity. It outlines a model for landscape management in NSW, building on the NSW Plan for Nature and opportunities presented by the Commonwealth's Nature Positive Plan and informed by the generous sharing of wisdom of subject matter experts, land managers and policy experts across NSW.

A central tenet that underpins this Blueprint is that reform will only be successful if we work directly with the local land managers, regional communities and Aboriginal nations, who are responsible for caring for their lands, and who understand the interconnectedness of the NSW landscape and live and breathe its extremes of prosperity and failure.

By working alongside them, we can design more effective and lasting reforms that encourage more people to value, protect, and restore nature, by choice.

The model presented here places regional communities at the centre, rebuilds trust and offers them greater agency in their future.

Changes in seasonal conditions over the last 20 years have significantly impacted NSW's ecosystems, communities and industries. Climate change is now viewed by many as the single greatest threat to our landscapes and the future of farming in Australia.

Restoring landscapes offers significant carbon sequestration potential, and high-integrity carbon projects undertaken strategically in the landscape can help mitigate climate change, generate revenue and deliver outcomes for nature.

Mounting evidence that protecting nature is linked to prosperity is motivating action to unlock the value of biodiversity at scale. Improving natural capital has the potential to increase productivity on farms, and provide health and quality of life benefits for communities.

Our model is about creating a future where regional communities are backed with first class science and adequate funds to take advantage of these opportunities. It is about valuing healthy landscapes so they can support us for centuries to come.

We demonstrate how NSW can take the lead on international and national commitments to 'nature positive'.<sup>3</sup> Our Blueprint is affordable given the tight fiscal environment and cost of living pressures, with law reforms that are practical, risk-focused and evidence-based.

At its heart, our model provides a collaborative framework for people across NSW to work together to protect and restore ecosystems as a whole. And in doing so, it builds long-term prosperity for nature, communities and the economy, now and for future generations.

# SEVEN COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL



1 ESTABLISH AN ABORIGINAL LAND AND SEA COMMISSIONER TO REALISE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE'S ASPIRATIONS



2 CREATE A SPATIAL TOOL AS AN INFORMATION ASSET FOR ALL



3 DEVELOP A NSW HEALTHY LANDSCAPES STRATEGY TO FOCUS REGIONAL AND STATE-WIDE EFFORTS



4 REBUILD TRUST WITH COMMUNITIES THROUGH AN INTEGRATED REGIONAL APPROACH TO SUPPORT LONG-TERM OUTCOMES



5 IMPLEMENT A LAND STEWARDSHIP PACKAGE TO REWARD LAND MANAGERS FOR RESTORING NATURE



6 REFORM LAWS SO THEY WORK FOR PEOPLE AND NATURE



7 ENABLE CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH ACCOUNTABILITY, INTEGRITY AND TRANSPARENCY

# Seven components of the model

The Wentworth Group model includes seven key components as an integrated package. It builds on the elements of the existing land management framework that have proven successful and draws on and gives effect to commitments in the NSW Plan for Nature.

## **1. Establish an Aboriginal Land and Sea Commissioner to support the important role of Aboriginal people in repairing Country.**

An ongoing Aboriginal Land and Sea Commissioner would guide the integration of Aboriginal knowledge, aspirations and obligations to care for Country into reform design and implementation. The Commissioner should be appropriately resourced, with a legislative mandate to take a leading role in advising on landscape protection and restoration in NSW, ensuring meaningful engagement with Aboriginal people, enabling communities to care for Country, creating opportunities to embed Indigenous knowledge into decision-making, and expanding Aboriginal ownership and management of land and water.

## **2. Create an online spatial tool which identifies natural and Traditional ecological values and tracks changes in their condition.**

A user-friendly, fit-for-purpose, transparent online spatial tool is needed to identify and track changes in biodiversity and Traditional ecological values across the state, and streamline access to environmental, regulatory, and natural capital information for stakeholders. The tool could be used by Government to establish baselines from which to set targets and measure progress, guide investment, inform policy and

regulation and underpin environmental accounts. Land managers could use this tool to help identify values on their land, access incentives for protection and restoration, and demonstrate measurable outcomes.

## **3. Develop a NSW healthy landscape strategy that takes an ecosystem approach to managing landscapes.**

A whole-of-portfolio, statutory, science-based Healthy Landscape Strategy should set out objectives, targets, actions, investment and measurable outcomes needed to turn around the trajectory of environmental decline and deliver the objectives of the Biodiversity Act. The strategy should take a whole-of-landscape, ecosystem-scale approach that recognises the important functional drivers of ecosystems and their services to people. The strategy should identify regional-scale contributions needed to achieve state-wide outcomes, and these contributions should be reflected in strategic Natural Resource Management (NRM) Plans for each Local Land Services (LLS) region. Plans, policies and programs across NSW Government should be updated to be consistent with the Healthy Landscape Strategy.

## **4. Rebuild trust by designing and delivering reforms with communities using an integrated regional approach.**

Regional communities need a central role in design and delivery of the reforms. Effective regional delivery will require genuine engagement with regional communities led by trusted community representatives. This will require expanding the role and capacity of LLS to undertake the work needed with regional communities to design and implement locally-appropriate solutions. Genuine engagement, revitalisation of

extension and adoption services and long-term resourcing will be important to overcome the trust deficit.

### **5. Implement a Land Stewardship Package to reward land managers for improving outcomes for nature.**

We recommend creating a Land Stewardship Package to leverage goodwill and drive investment in biodiversity protection and restoration across tenures, and at scale. Diverse incentives would be needed to significantly increase the number of land managers who are protecting and managing natural values on their properties and contributing to regional and state protection and restoration targets, while maintaining and enhancing productivity. These should include flexible, entry-level conservation programs that do not require in-perpetuity contracts, have low administrative burden and are easily integrated into day-to-day farm management. Funding should come from better coordination of existing programs, increased public expenditure and carbon market and emerging nature market revenue.

### **6. Safeguard NSW's irreplaceable<sup>4</sup> biodiversity and cultural values through nuanced law reforms that work for people and nature.**

We are proposing law reforms that ensure irreplaceable biodiversity and cultural values are protected for current and future generations, such as threatened species breeding or foraging habitat that cannot be

replaced by humans in ecologically meaningful timeframes. This would require the development of outcomes-focussed environmental standards to guide decision-making. For legislative reforms to be effective, they should be practical, evidence-based and sustainably resourced. Land managers need to be supported to understand the changes and how they apply. Reforms should be accompanied by stable, long-term policy and resourcing pathways to create greater certainty for land managers and opportunities for investment.

### **7. Deliver continual improvement through accountability, integrity and transparency.**

Rigorous, transparent and regular reporting on progress against the Healthy Landscapes Strategy targets should be legislated, with a focus on continual improvement. Where the program is not on track to meet its intended objectives, pre-agreed actions should be undertaken to enable the program to be realigned. We also recommend the establishment of an environmental accounts program to measure and track progress. Existing independent statutory bodies, such as the Natural Resources Commission and the Natural Resources Access Regulator, should be given stronger roles in monitoring, evaluation and reporting, and compliance and enforcement of rules in NSW, respectively. These functions need to be adequately resourced to ensure the appropriate expertise and capacity to support them.

# Introduction

## Our rich and diverse landscapes underpin the wellbeing of communities and our economy

NSW encompasses a rich diversity of landscapes that have underpinned the health and livelihoods of people for over 60,000 years. Our abundance of natural assets, and unique ecosystems from Gondwana rainforests to Alpine environments to deserts and Ramsar wetlands are a source of pride for our communities and a drawcard for visitors.

Of the 80 million hectares of land in NSW, agriculture, including grazing, cropping and horticulture, account for 77% of land use. Just over 10% is conserved land, while minimal use, forestry, water and infrastructure make up the remaining land use.<sup>5</sup> Just under 3% of land is owned or managed by Aboriginal people, predominantly represented by co-owned and managed National Parks<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 1). Natural assets exist across all these tenures.

Today, our landscapes support prosperous industries and diverse communities. Access to healthy landscapes provides physical and mental health benefits, and our economic prosperity relies upon it.

Over recent decades Australia has enjoyed strong economic prosperity and steady population growth.<sup>7</sup> Achievements in the land sector have included sustained productivity growth, increased crop yields and animal production, and growing food availability.<sup>8</sup> Yet many of these achievements have come at a cost to the natural environment.

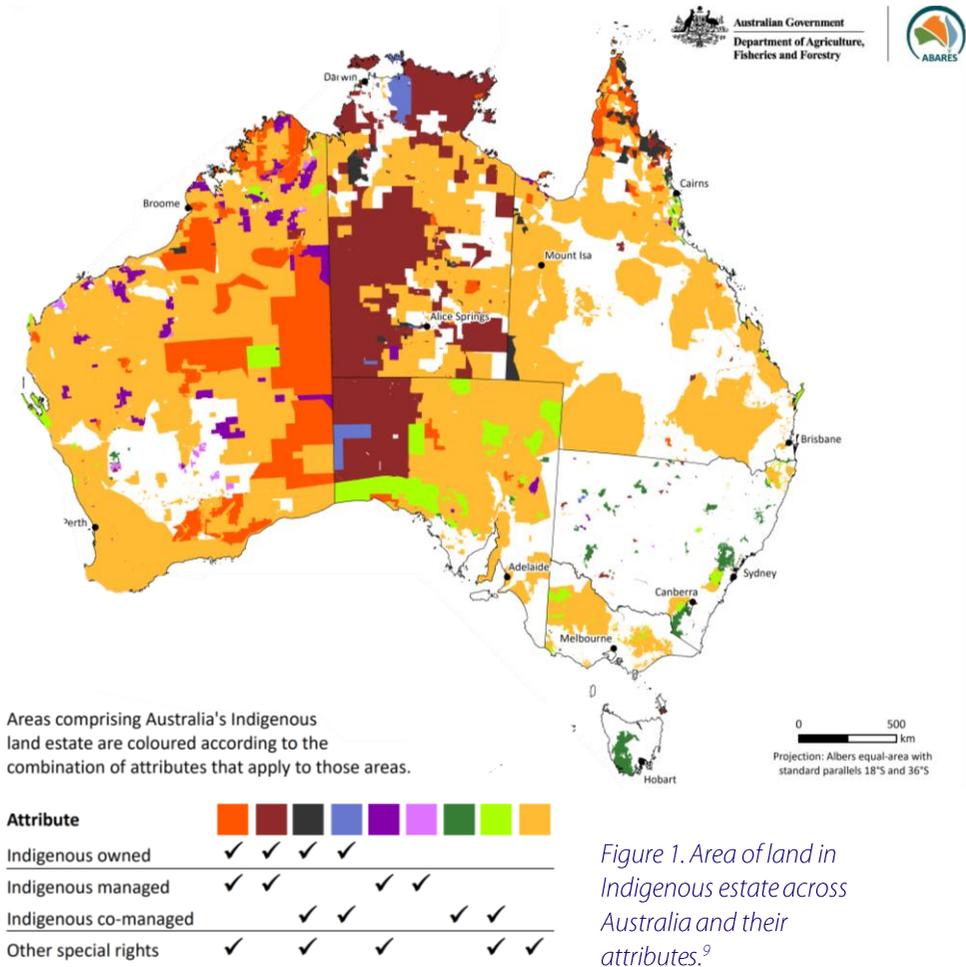


Figure 1. Area of land in Indigenous estate across Australia and their attributes.<sup>9</sup>

## Pressures on our natural environment are increasing

Australians are increasingly recognising the inherent vulnerability of our landscapes to the challenges of meeting the needs of agricultural production, urban sprawl, population growth and climate change.

NSW's natural systems are steadily declining, as are the services they provide, such as preventing erosion and maintaining water quality.

The NSW state of the Environment Report 2024, paints a stark picture of the current status of our natural assets:

- The extent and condition of native vegetation is getting worse, as is clearing, with the ability of native vegetation to support animals and ecosystems now less than 30% of its pre-industrial carrying capacity;
- The number of threatened animal species is increasing, as is the impact of invasive species, while native bird, mammal and fish population sizes and distribution are all decreasing;
- River and wetland health is declining, as is the biodiversity of the plants and animals that depend on these ecosystems;
- Soil organic carbon (known to contribute to climate resilience) is decreasing and soil health is threatened by intensive land use, population growth and an increasingly extreme climate; and
- While growth in both public and private protected areas remains stable, the total area under protection falls well short of the 30% target set under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and coverage of regional ecosystems is poor.<sup>10</sup>

In NSW, best available data shows that while some ecosystems are intact and have increased in extent, other ecosystems are extensively impacted (Figure 2). Broadscale clearing is evident for several vegetation

formations in NSW, including some grasslands and woodlands that have lost three-quarters or more of their extent since European settlement,<sup>11</sup> primarily for agriculture. Only 63% of native vegetation extent remains in NSW according to the Native Vegetation Information System (NVIS), and a considerable portion of the remainder is moderately or heavily degraded.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the impacts of climate change are intensifying. NSW has experienced increases in average land and sea surface temperatures and rising sea levels, with all projected to increase further under every emissions scenario.<sup>13</sup> This, in turn, is expected to precipitate more extreme climate and weather events, including more hot days, severe fire weather days and extreme rainfall events.<sup>14</sup>

Climate change is now viewed by many land managers as the single greatest threat to the future of farming in Australia.<sup>15</sup> Australia's soils are becoming more vulnerable as a result of climate change, causing soil loss and damage and constraining the capacity of the land to support productive agricultural and ecological systems.<sup>16</sup>

Farmers are experiencing the impacts in significant food producing regions, including damage to crops, increased feed, fuel and insurance costs and reduced food security.<sup>17</sup> ABARES estimates that changes in seasonal conditions from 2001 to 2020 have reduced annual average farm profits by 23% or around \$29,200 per farm.<sup>18</sup>

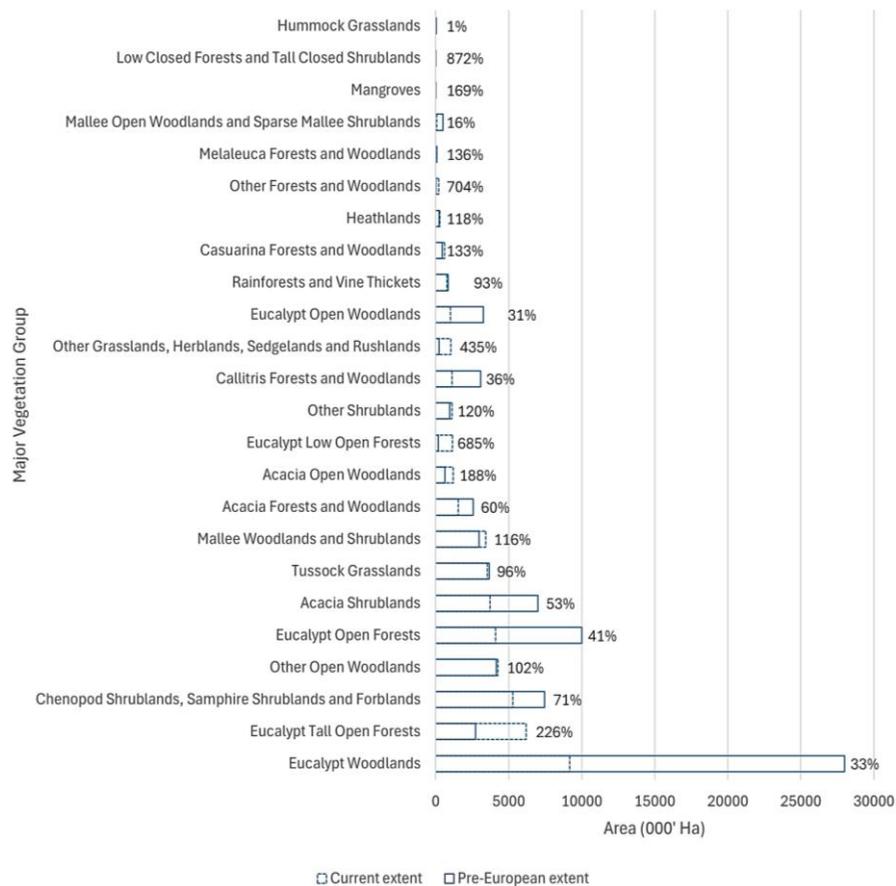


Figure 2. Comparison of pre-European extent and current extent of native vegetation in NSW by major vegetation group.<sup>19</sup>

A recent survey of just under 700 farmers by Rural Aid found more than two thirds felt unsure or unprepared to navigate the challenges ahead, such as drought, financial pressures and market conditions. Fifty-eight percent rated their mental health as average or below.<sup>20</sup>

If we fail to protect and restore our natural capital, the consequences will be severe. Climate impacts will increase, as will health risks, access to clean air and fresh water will reduce, food scarcity will increase, and the ecosystems and species we treasure will slip away. We will experience increased cost of living pressures as food prices, insurance and other costs continue to rise.

If we continue on a business-as-usual path, we will contribute to the ongoing disempowerment of Aboriginal people and the continued loss of connection to Country and culture.

Global studies estimate that failure to act on environmental degradation could result in losses of US\$479 billion per year.<sup>21</sup> In Australia, half of our economy is moderately to strongly dependent on nature. While we cannot put an exact figure on it, we know the cost of inaction will be orders of magnitude greater than the cost of acting now to restore nature and rebuild resilience.

If we are to grow agricultural productivity and support healthy communities in a warming and uncertain future, we need to protect and enhance the natural resource base upon which our future depends.

# Creating wealth through restoring nature

## Unlocking new opportunities to value natural capital in productive landscapes

As stewards of more than three quarters of NSW's land mass, across which most natural assets in NSW lie, land managers, local communities and Aboriginal people have a critical role in protecting and restoring nature and biodiversity for the benefit of all. They are motivated to participate in landscape and nature conservation for a myriad of reasons.<sup>22</sup>

The importance of nature is an increasing factor in domestic agricultural markets with environmental responsibility now the strongest driver of community trust in Australia's rural industries.<sup>23</sup> As community confidence that rural industries are managing their environmental impacts increases, so does trust. Responsible water use, impact management, sustainability commitments and placing environmental outcomes ahead of profit, all contribute to the social license that underpins agriculture's right to farm and consumers' ongoing demand for Australian food and fibre.

Internationally, perceptions alone no longer guide customer decisions, robust standards and regulations are now embedded in market supply chains. Farmers, directly or indirectly, are reporting against frameworks such as the international deforestation standards, the Taskforce on Nature-Related Financial Disclosure (TNFD) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Diversity Framework. Farmers will increasingly be needing to measure and be accountable for their impact on nature.

Actions to protect and restore native vegetation provide substantial carbon sequestration potential and as existing and emerging carbon

and nature markets develop, there will be increasing opportunities to generate revenue through these actions. Modelling has shown that with a significant contribution from NSW, Australia could restore 13 million ha of degraded land and abate almost 1 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent without affecting intensive agriculture.<sup>24</sup>

High integrity is an essential component for land manager trust and participation in markets.<sup>25</sup> Due diligence when engaging with markets will enable the identification of high integrity methods that can help ensure that investments deliver genuine and additional carbon and biodiversity co-benefits.

## A healthy environment supports agricultural productivity

Many farmers have examples of how careful management of their local environment can mean healthier crops and livestock, and resilience in times of extreme weather. Scientific evidence is also mounting to demonstrate the direct and positive link between conservation and agricultural production.

Research is showing different benefit pathways through which natural capital can support farm businesses, including via improving productivity and/or by reducing input costs.<sup>26</sup> Meat and Livestock Australia's Farming for the Future program demonstrated a positive correlation on livestock farms between natural capital and measures such as production efficiency, gross margin and resilience to both climate and market shocks.<sup>27</sup> Research undertaken by the Australian National University's Sustainable Farms program showed that the benefits gained from fencing and establishing farm dams, such as

improved water quality and livestock production, could outweigh the costs even with only modest weight gains in cattle.<sup>28</sup>

The research also suggests that a desire to improve farm production will drive natural capital improvements rather than access to payments via carbon credit markets or other financial incentives. But while the

evidence is compelling, it is neither widely understood nor well socialised. A paradigm shift is required at the policy level as well as through education and extension on the ground, to embed agricultural practices that place a productivity value on improving natural capital and incentivise those who are not yet ready to make the shift.

# Setting up NSW nature reforms for long term success

## The current land management framework and the case for change

Since the introduction of the current land management and biodiversity laws in 2016, biodiversity in NSW has continued to decline. Over 182,500 ha of woody native vegetation and habitat were cleared in the five years between 2016 and 2020, almost doubling the clearing that occurred in the previous five years to 2015.<sup>29</sup> Of all woody clearing that has occurred since 2016, 60% occurred for agriculture.<sup>30</sup>

Legislation governing land management in NSW is complex and fragmented across institutions and legal instruments. Currently, native vegetation management on agricultural land is managed under the *Local Land Services Act 2013* (LLS Act), while biodiversity protection or restoration is administered under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (BC Act).

A range of other development activities are overseen by NSW Planning, while some activities are managed directly by local government. Further, the federal *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* provides some protections for what it considers Matters of National Environmental Significance (including threatened species and ecological communities also listed in NSW).

In 2023, an independent review chaired by former Treasury Secretary Dr Ken Henry (the Henry Review), found that the BC Act “is not meeting its primary purpose of maintaining a healthy, productive and resilient environment, and is never likely to do so.”<sup>31</sup>

A 2023 statutory review of the native vegetation provisions in the LLS Act recommended measures to improve the effectiveness of the provisions, including better managing environmental risks, reducing unallocated clearing, and supporting and incentivising land managers to value and protect native vegetation.<sup>32</sup>

## NSW’s Plan for Nature

In July 2024, the NSW Government released a whole-of-government Plan for Nature (the Plan) in response to the review of the BC Act and the native vegetation provisions in the LLS Act. The Plan recognised that “biodiversity in NSW is in crisis” and urgent action is needed to put nature on a path to recovery. The Plan proposed a number of legislative, regulatory and policy reforms in relation to three election commitments by the Minns Labor Government: to reform the biodiversity offsets scheme, to stop excess land clearing and to strengthen environmental protections. Importantly, the Plan established the goal to “leave nature better off than we found it.”<sup>33</sup>

The Wentworth Group welcomes the Plan for Nature as an important step towards healthy Country and resilient landscapes. This paper details how this Plan can be enhanced, better integrated across portfolios, and implemented to put nature on a path to recovery while supporting regional communities, including Aboriginal communities, and our productive industries to take advantage of new economic opportunities and prepare for a changing climate. This Blueprint builds on the intent of the NSW Plan for Nature. We have provided a table outlining where our model aligns with, builds on and diverges from, the Plan (see Appendix A).

## Reforms to Australia's environment laws

The Australian Government's Nature Positive Plan sets the direction for major reforms to the EPBC Act, proposing a more outcomes-focused, nationally consistent approach to protect, restore and manage Matters of National Environmental Significance (MNES).<sup>34</sup>

Key elements of the Nature Positive Plan interacting with the NSW Plan for Nature includes the federal accreditation of state-based planning systems under robust national environmental standards, regional planning, reforming the environmental offsets regime and centralising environmental data.

The Commonwealth's Nature Positive reforms are an opportunity to enhance the important role of NSW's regional bodies to identify priority areas and guide investment for protection, conservation and sustainable use in line with state and national objectives.

## A model to set NSW up for long-term success

The Wentworth Group has a long-standing interest and expertise in land sector reforms, having helped catalyse reforms to native vegetation management in NSW (in place from 2004 – 2016) (see our 2003 report, "[A new model for landscape conservation in NSW](#)"). This Blueprint for Healthy Country and Thriving Regions seeks to catalyse the next phase for NSW landscape management. It can be read in conjunction with the Wentworth Group's [Blueprint to Repair Australia's Landscapes](#), which lays out a 30-year roadmap for repairing our degraded soils, native vegetation, inland waters, coasts and threatened species.

Our evolved model for enhancing and implementing the Plan for Nature in NSW builds on the successes of past and current policies,

while embracing and scaling new opportunities for whole-of-landscape restoration and enhancing agricultural productivity.

Our model seeks to achieve the greatest benefits with minimal changes, including by taking into account federal environmental law reforms and where synergies with state approaches could be made. It was informed by an expert workshop that brought together subject matter experts from a broad range of disciplines, research in conjunction with Macquarie University, advice from experts within and outside of government, and desktop analyses.

Our model is designed to:

- Create a future where farmers and Aboriginal communities are empowered and backed with first class science and adequate public funds to deliver whole-of-landscape solutions;
- Give land managers greater upfront guidance about where different land uses would be best situated in the landscape and what support and incentives may be available;
- Reinforce the critical role of government in connecting land managers to new opportunities, demonstrating whole-of-farm value, and minimising barriers to leverage goodwill at scale;<sup>35</sup>
- Embed Aboriginal participation in land management decisions;
- Contribute to the goals and targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework<sup>36</sup> and NSW's NET Zero Plan;<sup>37</sup> and
- Put nature in NSW on a path to recovery towards a future where nature, people and the economy thrive.

# Outcomes for people and nature

## NATURE POSITIVE

Reforms are contributing to ambitions for recovery of nature.

## IRREPLACEABLE BIODIVERSITY IS BEING PROTECTED AND ACTIVELY MANAGED

Protection and active management is preventing further loss and sustaining ecosystem services.

## CLIMATE CHANGE RESILIENCE

Strategic landscape management is enhancing the resilience of nature and people.

## COMMUNITY WELLBEING, PRODUCTIVITY AND ECONOMIC PROSPERTY

Enhanced landscape productivity, flexible and diversified income streams available, improved wellbeing and livelihoods.

## SUCCESSES ARE BEING MEASURED AND CELEBRATED, REFORMS ARE CONTINUALLY IMPROVING

Monitoring and evaluation is contributing to improvement and efficiencies.

## 30% OF DEGRADED ECOSYSTEMS ARE BEING ACTIVELY RESTORED

Reforms are delivering on Australia's national and international commitments including the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

## INTEGRATED REGIONAL PLANNING

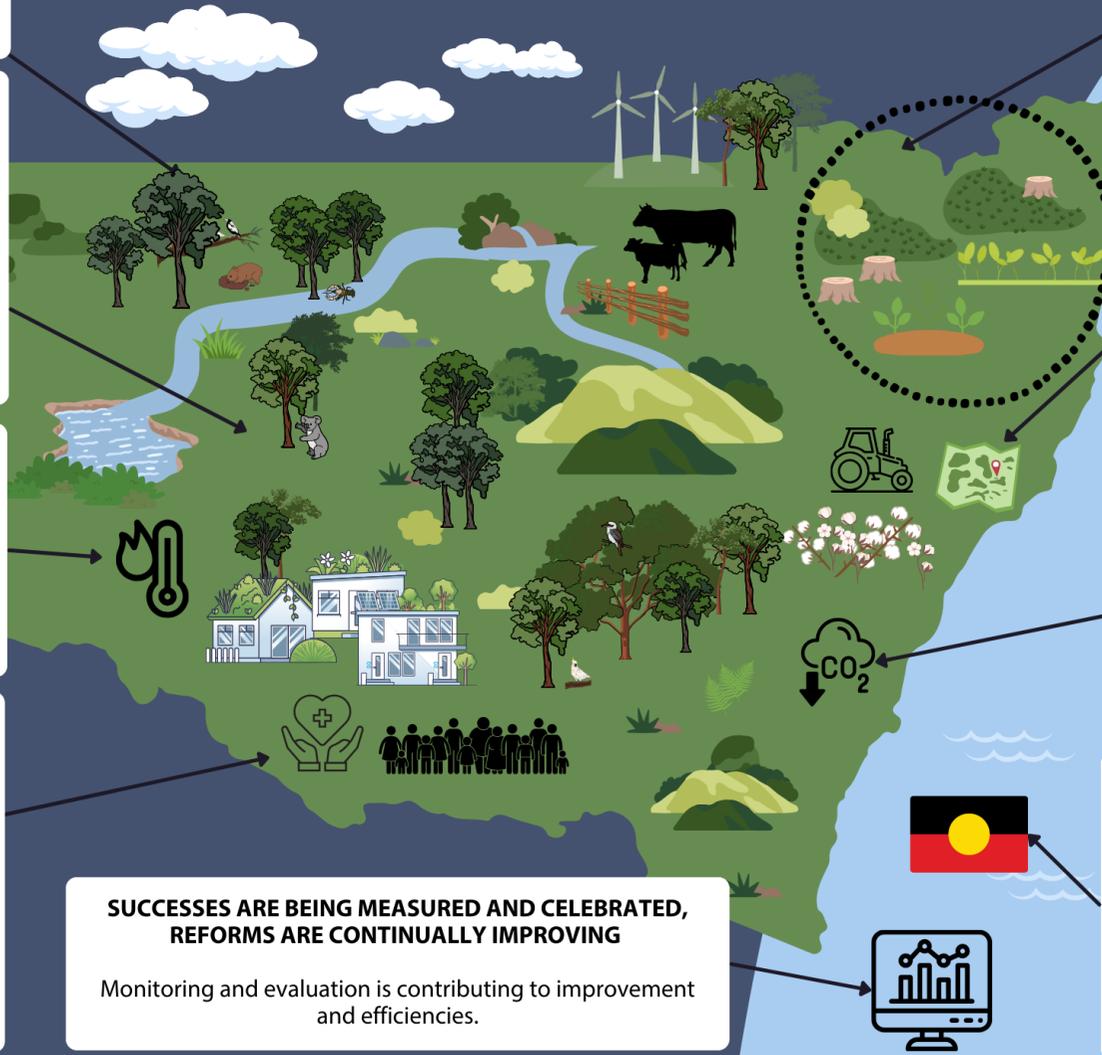
Regional communities are shaping solutions that are integrated, coordinated, and appropriate at the regional scale.

## INCREASED CARBON SEQUESTRATION

High-integrity carbon projects are contributing to long-term sequestration and helping Australia reach its emissions targets.

## CARING FOR COUNTRY ASPIRATIONS ARE BEING REALISED

Increased self-determination, ownership and participation are delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal communities and their Country.



# Outcomes for people and nature

Through effective and holistic implementation of the Blueprint for Healthy Country and Thriving Regions, we could deliver measurable outcomes for NSW and create a future where:

**1. Land management reforms are contributing to nature positive<sup>38</sup> ambitions as biodiversity is increasing and landscape condition and function is improving**, using a whole-of-landscape model that is evidence-based, provides more certainty for business, is practical to implement and properly resourced.

**2. All areas of irreplaceable biodiversity value are being protected and actively managed** to prevent further losses and sustain biodiversity and the services it provides to people and communities in a changing future.<sup>39</sup>

**3. Climate change resilience of nature and people is increasing** due to the adaptation benefits provided by strategic landscape management, such as the creation of microclimates that are refuges for animal species and natural buffers that lesson the impacts of extreme events.

**4. Reforms are contributing to increased economic prosperity and enhanced community wellbeing**, providing new market opportunities, as well as flexibility and certainty for businesses, and improved public health and wellbeing outcomes.

**5. At least 30% of all degraded terrestrial, inland water, marine and coastal ecosystems across NSW are being actively restored**

to improve ecosystem function and integrity, safeguard and recover biodiversity and promote connectivity.<sup>40</sup>

**6. Integrated regional landscape planning and management is being implemented across NSW** to ensure solutions are coordinated, appropriate and effective at the regional scale, and facilitating participation and ownership by local communities.

**7. Long-term carbon sequestration rates are increasing** in response to increased vegetation protection and restoration, and enhanced soil management, contributing to reductions in net emissions.

**8. Aboriginal obligations and aspirations for caring for Country are being realised** through the implementation of mechanisms to allow for greater participation and ownership by local Aboriginal communities. Self-determined outcomes for communities and the environment are being achieved.<sup>41</sup>

**9. Successes are being measured and celebrated**, as improved data and information, coupled with a transparent and robust framework for monitoring, evaluation and realignment, allows us to track and report outcomes and make continual improvement.

# Guiding principles for delivering reforms

**Principle 1:** Reforms should recognise and build upon the existing land management system, rather than implementing sweeping changes that may be costly, uncertain and disruptive.

**Principle 2:** The model should be designed to assist land managers to engage in landscape stewardship activities that will also benefit local communities and provide broader socio-economic benefits for NSW.

**Principle 3:** Reforms should support an integrated landscape management approach, based on equitable partnerships with Aboriginal groups and regional communities and utilising co-governance models.

**Principle 4:** Given the tight fiscal environment, reforms should be designed to maximise the effectiveness of expenditure by better aligning programs, laws and policies. Where available, reforms should build on existing initiatives and structures rather than create new ones.

**Principle 5:** Genuine and meaningful consultation with, and participation of, the community, business/industry and Aboriginal people should inform the development of all regulations, policies and programs.

**Principle 6:** Reforms should be evidence-based and transparent, with solutions that are practical and effective. They should be regularly reviewed.

**Principle 7:** Reforms should provide stakeholders with certainty around their regulatory responsibilities, including clear, upfront guidance as to where particular activities are and are not permitted.

**Principle 8:** Reforms should provide flexibility for those engaging with the Land Stewardship Package to allow different stakeholders to identify and recommend the mechanisms most suited to their situation and needs.

**Principle 9:** Reforms should be forward looking, taking a proactive rather than reactive approach to delivering outcomes whilst employing adaptive management to enable continual improvement.

**Principle 10:** Decision-making affecting Aboriginal people and communities should be based on a principle of free, prior and informed consent.

# 1. Support the essential role of Aboriginal people in caring for Country

Aboriginal people are experts and stewards who hold knowledge of Country passed down over 60,000 years. Colonisation has denied Aboriginal people the authority to speak for Country and fully participate in decision-making, limiting their ability to fulfill aspirations and obligations to care for Country.

A top priority of reforms should be to establish an Aboriginal Land and Sea Commissioner charged with embedding Aboriginal knowledge and aspirations for Country into reforms, giving Aboriginal people a leading role in decision-making and making recommendations to increase Aboriginal ownership of land and water. These initiatives will have many benefits including getting people back onto Country, sustaining culture, and helping to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. Conservation outcomes also improve when legislation and policy is designed to empower environmental stewardship of Indigenous people.<sup>42</sup>

The Commissioner should hold decision-making powers over funding allocation and assist Government to set targets and indicators for Aboriginal inclusion in decision-making.

To deliver the Commissioner's responsibilities, there should be long-term funding for Aboriginal land and sea management programs and organisations, funding to increase Aboriginal ownership of land and water in NSW, and resources and support for Aboriginal people to generate commercially sustainable employment and business on Country.

Traditional knowledge should be harnessed by building trust and ensuring self-determination and data sovereignty.<sup>43</sup> Local, landscape-specific knowledge should be sought and applied. Where local specific knowledge has been lost because of colonisation or the extent of landscape modification, advice on the approach should be sort from the Commissioner.

## Recommendations

- a) **Establish an ongoing, statutory Aboriginal Land and Sea Commissioner to inform legislative amendments, provide advice on decisions under NSW legislation that affect Aboriginal people and their ability to care for Country, and facilitate economic and cultural opportunities.**
- b) **Increase Aboriginal ownership and management of land and water.**
- c) **Develop and implement a long-term program to support Aboriginal-owned and -governed land and sea management agencies across NSW.**
- d) **Establish a mechanism for ongoing funding of the Commissioner and the land and sea management agencies, with an aim of steadily increasing funding over time.**

**Guide for policy-makers to implement Recommendations 1a - d to support the essential role of Aboriginal people in caring for Country.**

- a) Establish an ongoing, statutory Aboriginal Land and Sea Commissioner (and supporting staff) to:
  - a. Develop legislative amendments to:
    - i. enable shared governance models;
    - ii. establish mandatory requirements for Aboriginal participation in decision making;
    - iii. embed protections for culturally significant species and places; and
    - iv. incorporate Aboriginal traditional ecological knowledge into planning and program development.
  - b. Provide advice on decisions under NSW legislation that affect Aboriginal people or their ability to care for Country;
  - c. Facilitate economic and cultural opportunities by:
    - i. Developing Aboriginal (goods and services) procurement policies;
    - ii. Identifying new Aboriginal private land conservation or stewardship opportunities;
    - iii. Tailoring the Land Stewardship Package to facilitate meaningful and beneficial participation for Aboriginal communities; and
    - iv. Including cultural and social outcomes in success metrics for Aboriginal investments.
- b) Increase Aboriginal ownership and management of land and water, for example through progressing opportunities to return or transfer management of Crown land and water to Aboriginal people.
- c) Develop and implement a long-term program to support Aboriginal owned and governed land and sea management agencies across NSW, by:
  - a. Mapping Aboriginal organisations currently involved in land and sea management in NSW, and identifying and addressing gaps in spatial coverage and formal recognition;
  - b. Funding existing land and sea management agencies to:
    - i. Manage returned lands and waters, and Crown lands and waters (including jointly managed parks), for environmental outcomes;
    - ii. Deliver repairing Country projects on behalf of LLS and others Government agencies; and
    - iii. Be strong voices across regional NSW for sustainable management of Country, as well as fostering Aboriginal culture.
- d) Establish a mechanism for ongoing funding of the Commissioner and the land and sea management agencies, with an aim of steadily increasing funding over time, to:
  - a. Resource the role of the Aboriginal Land and Sea Commissioner and an appropriate level of supporting staff;
  - b. Build the capacity and increase the number of skilled Aboriginal land and sea managers across NSW;
  - c. Support existing and establish new Aboriginal land and sea management agencies across NSW;
  - d. Facilitate the participation of Aboriginal communities in the Land Stewardship Package; and
  - e. Increase funding to support and expand Aboriginal ranger programs.

## 2. Create an online spatial tool which identifies natural and cultural values and tracks changes in their condition

A comprehensive, accessible and transparent online spatial tool is needed to identify and track changes in biodiversity and cultural values across the state and streamlines access to environmental, regulatory, and natural capital information for stakeholders.

While some of this information currently exists, there are known information gaps and data systems are not always easily accessible, interoperable or user-friendly. Importantly, the spatial tool would function as an information asset, not a compliance tool, that brings together and fills critical gaps in currently disparate datasets.

The tool would enable the setting and tracking of targets, identify whether values are 'irreplaceable' and support proactive management of biodiversity, including for conservation and restoration planning. It will allow for targeted investments, better policy and regulation design and baselines from which to measure progress. It could be linked to planning processes and unlock incentives or market access for land managers with mapped values.

In developing the spatial tool, a concerted effort should be made to ground-truth key datasets and engage with land managers and local communities who may hold additional relevant information. This will improve map accuracy, facilitate knowledge exchange and support greater appreciation of values, such as local endangered species.

The tool should be regularly updated with new evidence, through a robust and transparent process. The public should be provided with

opportunities to input and update data, and to propose a review of data if they can provide supporting evidence. Opportunities should be sought to find synergies and maximise interoperability between the NSW spatial tool and the national environmental data repository being considered by the Commonwealth's Environment Information Australia.

### Recommendations

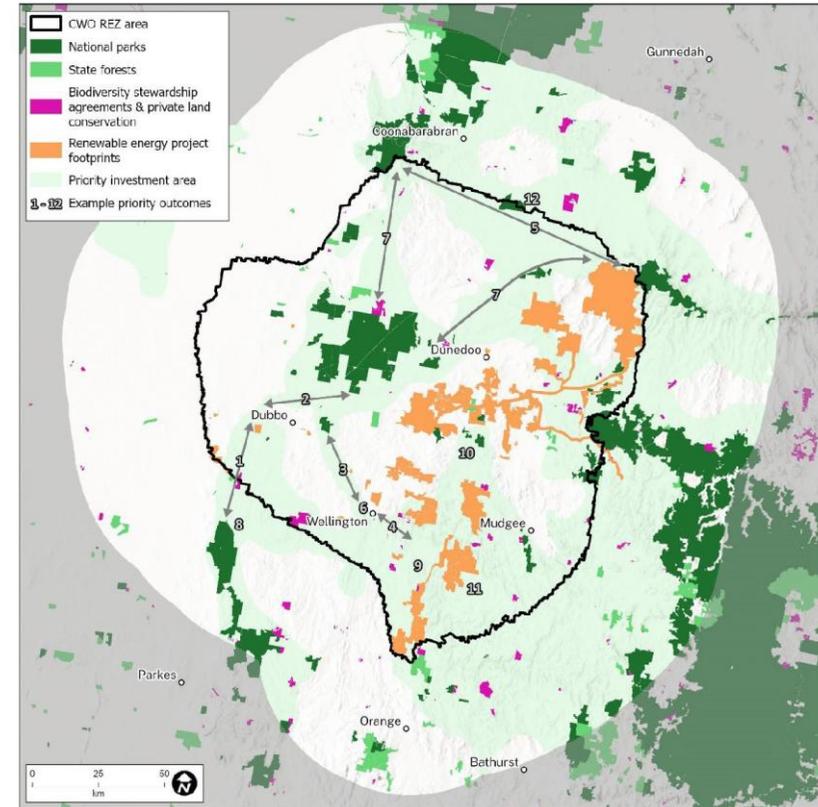
- a) Engage experts to undertake a comprehensive review of mapped biodiversity and cultural values across NSW and (a) classify those as irreplaceable or potentially replaceable and (b) provide advice to Government on areas that could be prioritised for protection, restoration or sustainable use (see Box 1), to inform the Healthy Landscape Strategy, community engagement and regional delivery.
- b) Develop a spatial tool that provides intuitive and user-friendly access to up-to-date biodiversity and cultural data (with permission from the relevant nation/s) cross NSW.
- c) Establish processes for ensuring the currency and robustness of the spatial tool, including through opportunities for public review.
- d) Work with the Commonwealth to streamline processes, avoid duplication and ensure interoperability with data compiled by Environment Information Australia.

**Box 1. Matching landscape use to the characteristics of the landscape: Prioritising NSW landscapes for the future.**

**1. Sustainable use areas:** are areas most suited to land uses such as agriculture, urban or industrial development and where there are likely to be minimal impacts on the landscape. These are likely to be areas that are already heavily modified and subject to human use and, wherever appropriate, should include prime agricultural land. Investment in these areas should focus on boosting productivity, to enable us to feed and clothe more people on more appropriate, smaller areas of land with lowered constraints to agricultural productivity.

**2. Restoration incentive areas:** are areas where ecosystem condition may be low to moderate, or where values may be potentially replaceable, but where there is significant opportunity for landscape restoration. The aim in these areas would be to incentivise better land management practices and scale up restoration efforts.

**3. Priority protection areas:** are areas of high environmental or cultural value, including but not limited to irreplaceable values, which should be protected and actively managed in perpetuity (ideally through formal protection mechanisms where necessary). The aim in these areas would be to prioritise the health of the identified values and through protections from threats and via funding to enable active management (e.g., through pest and weed control, fencing etc.). Where these areas fall on private land, additional incentives should be made available to the affected land managers (e.g., access to productivity enhancements for their productive land or payments for the retirement of land; see our Blueprint for Repairing Australia's Landscapes<sup>44</sup> for more information).



*Figure 3. Priority investment areas and examples of priority outcomes in the Central West Orana region. This map highlights areas where conservation investment should be focused, based on an assessment of values. Priority zones are identified to help achieve the region's conservation goals by protecting, restoring, and linking important natural assets. Priority areas are a guide, they are not legally binding. Any decisions about funding or actions within specific conservation programs will still follow the appropriate decision-making processes that govern those programs.<sup>44</sup>*

**Guide for policy-makers to implement Recommendations 2a – d, an online spatial tool which identifies natural and cultural values and tracks changes in their condition.**

- a) Engage independent scientific experts with relevant subject matter expertise, including at least one Aboriginal-identified position, to:
  - a. Undertake a comprehensive review of mapped biodiversity and cultural values (with permission from relevant nation/s), including:
    - ii. Quality checking and consolidating information currently spread across disparate databases;
    - iii. Identifying and addressing any gaps in existing mapping datasets (such as threatened species and ecological communities, plant community types and other biodiversity values mapping); and
    - iv. Identifying and mapping new categories that may warrant inclusion in the spatial tool (such as climate refugia, culturally significant species and places, critical wildlife corridors, global ecosystem typologies and values supporting ecosystem services).
  - b. Classify all values identified in step a) above as either:
    - i. Irreplaceable: where the loss of values could not be compensated for in a like-for-like manner, in an ecologically meaningful timeframe; or
    - ii. Potentially replaceable: where there are reasonable grounds to assume that the loss of the value could be fully compensated for, in a like-for-like manner in an ecologically meaningful timeframe.
  - c. Provide advice to Government on areas across NSW that could be prioritised for protection, restoration or sustainable use (see Box 1), to inform development of the Healthy Landscape Strategy, community engagement and regional delivery.
- b) Develop a spatial tool that provides intuitive and user-friendly access to up-to-date biodiversity and cultural data from across NSW, using a graphic user interface that:
  - a. Aggregates data from a range of databases and systems to show where identified values are known or likely to occur;
  - b. Establishes a baseline condition for each value and tracks trends in the status and condition of that value over time;
  - c. Includes spatial layers that can be switched on and off to suit the needs of the end-user (such as irreplaceability, priority use and vegetation clearing data layers);
  - d. Includes statements on data accuracy and/or suitability for different uses;
  - e. Enables users to link to information on the incentives available for protection and restoration in a given area or for a specific value;
  - f. Facilitates easy access to information on any regulations that may apply in a given area in for a specific value; and
  - g. Connects to a dashboard that tracks progress against targets in the state-wide Healthy Landscape Strategy (see Component 3).
- c) Establish processes for ensuring the currency and robustness of the spatial tool, such as:
  - a. Pathways for community data (such as data collected by land conservancies, researchers, citizen scientists and land managers) to be integrated into the spatial tool following quality assurance and verification;
  - b. Transparent protocols for data to be verified or rapidly amended through a robust, evidence-based public review process, accessible to all parties with knowledge of the identified values in a given area; and
  - c. Statutory commitments to undertake regular comprehensive reviews of data and rapidly integrate new information.
- d) Work with the Commonwealth to identify opportunities to streamline processes, avoid duplication and ensure interoperability between the NSW spatial tool and data being compiled by Environment Information Australia.

### 3. Develop a NSW healthy landscape strategy that takes an ecosystem-approach to restoring nature

A state-wide, cross-portfolio, Healthy Landscape Strategy is needed to set an ambitious and achievable agenda for enhancing landscape protection and restoration and restoring healthy ecosystem functions.

The strategy should define clear objectives linked to regional, state, national and international goals, specific measurable targets and a credible pathway for achieving them. It should outline roles and responsibilities, funding required and ways to deliver outcomes in an integrated, regionally appropriate way. It should develop program and policy success metrics to monitor and drive improvement in biodiversity and community outcomes, and to inform active management.

The strategy should be a statutory document, and processes should be established to require any relevant policies, plans and laws across all NSW government portfolios to be updated to align with and give effect to the strategy. It needs to be informed by regional communities including Aboriginal people who have an important role as landscape stewards and bring important local and regional knowledge.

The strategy should also account for the climate change impacts on natural values, including modelling and mapping of current and future climate refugia and the setting of corresponding targets. The strategy should define thresholds that would trigger changes in management approach or a review of associated policies and programs, enabling management to be adaptive to future conditions while providing greater certainty to communities.

The strategy should provide a mechanism for better coordination across existing and new programs and maximise the effectiveness of public and private investment. For example, consideration should be given to better integrating or coordinating complementary investments made by the Biodiversity Conservation Trust, the NSW Environmental Trust, National Parks and Wildlife Service and others to enhance the effectiveness of desired outcomes.

#### Recommendations

- a) **Develop and implement a statutory whole-of-government Healthy Landscape Strategy that gives effect to NSW's contributions to national and international commitments, recognises the importance of ecosystems, identifies actions and investment needed, supports cross-portfolio investment,<sup>46</sup> and provides guidance on harnessing carbon and emerging nature markets.**
- b) **Make legislative changes to require Local Land Services (LLS) strategic NRM Plans to be updated to reflect each region's contribution to state-wide targets and linked to regional implementation plans; and ensure decisions made across Government are consistent and contributing to the strategy.**
- c) **Work with the Commonwealth to identify opportunities for synergies and common approaches to achieving targets, to avoid duplication and maximise impact.**

Guide for policy-makers to implement Recommendations 3a – c, a NSW healthy landscape strategy that takes an ecosystem-approach to restoring nature.

- a) Develop and implement a statutory whole-of-government Healthy Landscape Strategy that:
  - a. Gives effect to NSW's contributions to national and international biodiversity commitments, including targets 2 and 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework;
  - b. Identifies outcomes-focussed targets, the actions needed to deliver them and key performance indicators against which to measure progress, including specific and measurable targets for:
    - i. Threatened species and ecological community recovery;
    - ii. Recovery and maintenance of key ecosystem functions and processes, such as soil and water quality;
    - iii. Protection and restoration of culturally significant species and places;
    - iv. Threat abatement; and
    - v. Climate adaptation, drought and disaster resilience.
  - c. Recognises the importance of ecosystems and addresses the functional drivers of ecosystem condition, using an ecosystem-scale approach such as the Global Ecosystem Typology;
  - d. Identifies investment needed and supports cross-portfolio investment strategies;<sup>47</sup> and
  - e. Identifies opportunities and provides guidance on harnessing carbon and emerging nature markets (e.g., under the *Carbon Credits (Carbon Farming Initiative) Act 2011*, *Nature Repair Act 2023* or any other relevant legislation) to achieve outcomes in line with the strategy, including by identifying high integrity methodologies that are ecologically appropriate for specific regions across NSW.<sup>48</sup>
- b) Make any required legislative changes to:
  - a. Ensure that appropriate community consultation is undertaken prior to the development of the strategy, to provide regional groups and Aboriginal people the opportunity to propose local and cultural priorities;
  - b. Provide a mechanism to require Local Land Services (LLS) Local Strategic Plans to be updated to reflect each region's contribution to state-wide targets, and to enable the development of regional implementation plans for the 11 LLS regions across NSW:
    - i. This mechanism should allow flexibility for each region's contribution to be determined in the context of the values identified in that region, the size of the region and other competing land uses/pressures on the region (e.g., housing and renewable energy); and
    - ii. Setting of regional targets should be informed by deep and genuine community consultation and engagement (see component 4).
  - c. Create a statutory requirement for decisions made under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*, and other intersecting legislation (e.g., Part 5 of the *Local Land Services Act 2013* and the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*) to be consistent with the Healthy Landscape Strategy.
- c) Work with the Commonwealth to identify opportunities for synergies in protection and restoration targets, and approaches to achieving targets, to avoid duplication and maximise impact.

## 4. Rebuild trust by designing and delivering reforms with communities using an integrated regional approach

Successive reforms to NSW's environment laws and the failure to provide consistent funding to support on-ground programs has contributed to the limited progress on improving environmental outcomes at scale and has eroded the trust of many land managers.

Research conducted by Macquarie University in conjunction with the Wentworth Group in 2024 showed that if reforms to the land management framework are to be effective, they need to provide greater certainty and confidence in the future of industries and communities, and overcome the trust deficit and divisiveness that has challenged land management reforms in the past.<sup>49</sup>

Regional communities therefore need to have an integral role in the design and delivery of reforms to ensure solutions are broadly supported, well-integrated and locally appropriate. We recommend building the capacity and expanding the mandate of LLS, and better leveraging other trusted advisers in the community, to deliver the reforms with communities in an integrated and place-based way.

### Genuine engagement to ensure reforms are informed by regional communities

Regional communities need to be given genuine opportunities to inform the design and implementation of reforms, as part of a two-way exchange of knowledge and information that can drive effective decision-making. Consultative approaches that prioritise community views and knowledge filtered through a trusted community

representative can be effective.<sup>50</sup> LLS can play an important role in bringing together farmers, Aboriginal people, industry, agronomists, local councils, town planners and non-government organisations to put forward solutions for the region's future and what is needed to enable scaling up of locally appropriate initiatives for landscape protection and restoration.

The community engagement process needs to be genuine, transparent and two-way:

- Engagement should be representative, seeking to capture a cross-section of society demographics;
- Clear expectations should be set from the start, so people understand when and why their engagement is being sought;
- Government representatives must be transparent about the parameters within which they are operating (e.g., financial constraints, decision making constraints);
- Communities must understand the scope of their influence; and
- Feedback should be provided, so participants can see where and how their advice has been reflected in policies and programs.

Genuine attempts should be made to find alignment between bottom-up and top-down priorities, with open and collaborative discussion around how to deliver these in a way that works for the community and achieves the objectives. The spatial tool should be used to inform

discussion on the values present in each region and how these will be affected by climate change and other drivers.

## Regional delivery and extension services

Each LLS should be equipped to undertake integrated land management planning and be a key contact to support land managers in their decision-making. In decades past, NSW invested in regional extension officers across the state to provide land management guidance, and officers were well received by communities. We recommend that extension services are again adequately resourced to:

- encourage and support land managers to adopt sustainable practices;
- share scientific knowledge and evidence pertaining to on-farm and environmental benefits of land management practices;
- help identify and overcome the barriers between research and adoption of sustainable land management practices;
- help land managers navigate their regulatory responsibilities and engage with the Land Stewardship Package; and
- connect land managers through communities of practice.

Extension officers are key to establishing relationships and rebuilding community trust in Government. Extension officers should work with

land managers to identify opportunities and barriers to maximising the health of landscapes. Support should be provided to land managers directly and to their networks (such as agronomists, farm planners, banks and lending agents, community leaders and schools). Accordingly, extension services should be well funded with sufficient density across the regions.

### Recommendations

- a) Use a regional design and delivery approach involving genuine and comprehensive engagement with regional communities to deliver the Healthy Landscapes Strategy.
- b) Establish regional programs to help showcase and promote the benefits that nature can bring to farm businesses.
- c) Bolster extension and adoption services across all regions to exchange information on biodiversity and cultural values, identify opportunities for biodiversity protection and restoration, identify investment/incentives available, provide guidance on monitoring and evaluation, and assist land managers to understand and comply with relevant laws.
- d) Enhance the role of Local Land Services (LLS) in the delivery of the reform objectives including the Healthy Landscapes Strategy, through legislative amendments and resourcing.

**Guide for policy-makers to implement Recommendations 4a – d, to rebuild trust by designing and delivering reforms with communities.**

- a) Implement a regional design and delivery approach involving genuine and comprehensive engagement with regional communities to deliver outcomes in the Healthy Landscapes Strategy, including allowing communities to have a voice in the design of:
  - a. The Land Stewardship Package (see Component 5), by identifying current barriers to landscape protection and restoration and the types of actions and support that would be most likely to lead to increased participation in their region;
  - b. New research initiatives and new or expanded outreach/extension/adoption services; and
  - c. Implementation plans that outline how targets in the state-wide Healthy Landscape Strategy could be delivered in regions.
- b) Establish regional programs to help showcase and promote the benefits that nature can bring to farm businesses, including:
  - a. Raising awareness of the benefits of biodiversity for productivity and other on-farm benefits (e.g., ANU Sustainable Farms Initiative);
  - b. Exploring barriers limiting the adoption of existing research and identifying gaps in research;
  - c. Developing high quality and accessible guidance on market opportunities that may be unlocked through more sustainable practices;
  - d. Distributing information through diverse channels, such as LLS, trusted community leaders, farm advisors, producer groups, Rural Research and Development Corporations (RDCs) and other research hubs (e.g., Charles Sturt University), Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs, agronomists, farm consultants, stock agents, Landcare networks and banks; and
  - e. Providing opportunities for peer to peer, interactive and demonstrative or case-based learning.
- c) Bolster extension and adoption services across all regions to exchange information on biodiversity and cultural values, identify opportunities for biodiversity protection and restoration, identify investment/incentives available, provide guidance on monitoring and evaluation, and assist land managers understand and comply with relevant laws. This requires:
  - a. Ensuring every LLS office has one or more dedicated extension and adoption officer to engage with land managers across the region;
  - b. Considering the establishment of an accreditation process to train additional external providers in the delivery of extension and adoption services;
  - c. Providing adequate training in catchment management, integrated landscape management or other similar skillsets; and
- d) Enhance the capacity and role of Local Land Services (LLS) in the delivery of the reforms, by
  - a. Updating the *Local Land Services Act 2013* to:
    - iii. Include promoting biodiversity restoration and protection as an object of the Act; and
    - iv. establish concurrence powers for the Minister of the Environment, to provide oversight of the delivery of this new object.
  - b. Building the capacity of Local Land Services to embed environmental considerations into all levels of decision-making;
  - c. Building stronger partnerships between LLS, Department of Primary Industries and other agencies engaged in land management (e.g., Department of Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water, the Biodiversity Conservation Trust, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and the Environmental Trust), to enable the coordinated delivery of complementary agricultural and environmental programs; and
  - d. Embedding an Aboriginal liaison officer in each LLS office to facilitate culturally appropriate engagement with Aboriginal land managers and create linkages between Aboriginal Land and Sea Agencies and LLS; and
  - e. Providing long-term funding to deliver these initiatives.

# 5. Implement a Land Stewardship Package to facilitate landscape protection and restoration at scale

Australians care deeply about the environment; the vast majority want more public funding for nature. In 2023, approximately 80% of Australians indicated that they were either already or willing to be involved in protecting nature.<sup>51</sup> In NSW, 489 land managers have signed up to private land conservation agreements with the Biodiversity Conservation Trust since its inception in 2017, protecting over 250,000 hectares of land.<sup>52</sup>

There are still, however, many barriers to broadscale uptake of conservation and restoration action. A survey by Farmers for Climate Action identified the absence of policies and incentives for sustainable practice, high upfront costs, and challenges in measuring changes as three key barriers to change.<sup>53</sup>

To achieve outcomes at the scale required, it is essential to engage the cross-section of the NSW community responsible for looking after land. We recommend the development of a Land Stewardship Package that supports land managers to take actions towards the achievement of targets in the state-wide Healthy Landscapes Strategy. A range of existing and new incentives should be offered, informed through community consultation to ensure they are regionally appropriate, easily adopted and effective (Box 2). This should build on effective, existing incentives available such as offered through the Biodiversity Conservation Trust. Tailored pathways and support should also be provided to enable increased participation by Aboriginal people.

**Box 2.** The Land Stewardship package could include:

- a. Increasing investment in management activities for in-perpetuity stewardship agreements;
- b. Providing additional entry level options to get more land managers actively participating in protection and restoration;
- c. Leveraging high integrity carbon or nature market methodologies;
- d. Providing tax breaks for high-quality landscape stewardship;
- e. Providing support for land managers to transition to more sustainable industries and/or sustainable land management practices under future climate scenarios;
- f. Introducing payments for ecosystem services, whereby land managers that provide watershed protection or forest conservation services are rewarded for their efforts;
- g. Supporting productivity enhancements for land managers that retire a proportion of their land for biodiversity;
- h. Supporting the creation of land manager groups to work together on specific projects (e.g.; wildlife corridors);
- i. Provide opportunities for private-public co-investment;
- j. Support courses in sustainable land management and related disciplines;
- k. Investigating the establishment of environmental labelling and product provenance schemes; and
- l. Contributing to the cost of property-scale natural capital accounting.

Research shows that land managers are more likely to uptake conservation opportunities when they are simple and easy to engage with; when they can see the direct and indirect benefits to their business; and when land managers flexibility and agency are built in (see figure 3).<sup>54</sup> We recommend flexible, entry-level conservation programs that do not require in perpetuity contracts and that readily enable the integration of biodiversity protection and restoration with day-to-day farm management.

Actions to protect and restore native vegetation provide substantial carbon sequestration potential. There will be increasing opportunities to leverage the carbon and nature repair market to deliver strategic objectives and generate revenue, as these markets further develop.

Modelling has shown that with a significant contribution from NSW, Australia could restore 13 million ha of degraded land and abate almost 1 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, outside of prime agricultural land.<sup>55</sup>

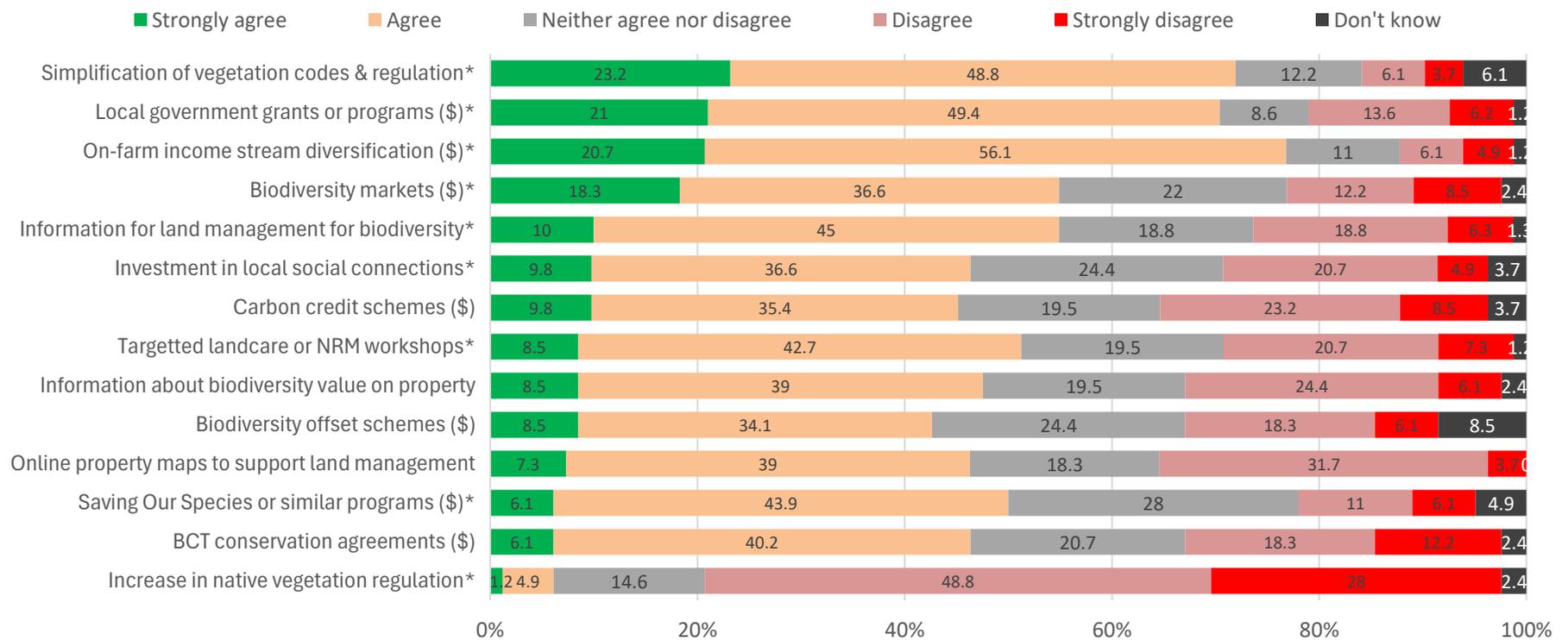


Figure 3. Central-West NSW landholder preference for policy measures to support them to manage native vegetation for biodiversity (\*statistically significant).<sup>56</sup>

High integrity is an essential component for land manager trust and participation in markets.<sup>57</sup> Due diligence when engaging with markets will enable the identification of high integrity methods that can help ensure that investments deliver genuine and additional carbon and biodiversity co-benefits.

The package should stimulate private and philanthropic investment through strong public funding and commitment to high integrity, rigorous monitoring. Partnership incentives should be included where both parties invest in stewardship actions so that there is a greater sense of ownership by the land manager. Where land managers are trusted by government to have genuine input into conservation and restoration actions, program engagement and success is likely to increase.<sup>58</sup>

## Recommendations

- a. Develop a Land Stewardship Package that leverages existing and new opportunities to contribute to the achievement of targets in the Healthy Landscape Strategy, providing flexibility and choice to a diverse range of participants and unlocking increased opportunities for Aboriginal people to care for Country;
- b. Leverage high integrity carbon or nature market methodologies to deliver the Healthy Landscape Strategy.

### Guide for policy-makers to implement Recommendations 5a and b, to implement a Land Stewardship Package to facilitate landscape protection and restoration at scale.

#### a) Develop a Land Stewardship Package that:

- a. Leverages existing and new opportunities to contribute to the achievement of targets in the Healthy Landscape Strategy;
- b. Offers a broad suite of incentives for biodiversity restoration and protection, providing flexibility and choice to a diverse range of participants, including Aboriginal groups, agricultural land managers, Councils, Landcare groups and NGOs;
- c. Unlocks increased opportunities for Aboriginal people to care for Country;
- d. Identifies opportunities for greater integration of programs across diverse agencies and portfolios (e.g., coordinating pest management activities undertaken by LLS, NPWS and others to increase their effectiveness); and
- e. Is informed by and reflects feedback from community engagement (see Component 4).

#### b) Leverage high integrity carbon or nature market methodologies to deliver the Healthy Landscape Strategy, for example by:

- a. providing seed funding for carbon or nature market projects that contribute to achievement of targets in the Healthy Landscape Strategy;
- b. offering outcome-based payments for projects that provide additional biodiversity co-benefits;
- c. purchasing high-performing, high-integrity credits/certificates from projects that deliver on NSW priorities; and
- d. developing new, high integrity, proponent-led methods for the carbon or nature market.

## 6. Safeguard NSW's irreplaceable biodiversity and cultural values through law reforms that work for people and nature

The 2023 review of the BC Act found that its objects were not fit for the purpose of conserving and maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem services now and into the future, and that its operative provisions were limited in scope.<sup>59</sup> The review proposed an ambitious reform agenda. In response, the NSW Government committed to modernising the objects of the BC Act and, accordingly, updating the operative provisions.<sup>60</sup>

The key principle guiding regulatory reforms should be to ensure that protection and restoration efforts are not undermined by further environmental degradation. Legally-binding, outcomes-focused environmental standards should be developed for NSW, and legislation, regulations and incentives should be tailored to promote outcomes in accordance with these standards. Legislative and regulatory amendments including standards should be based on best available information.

Increases in regulatory protections should focus on protecting values in the landscape that are irreplaceable and/or are at the greatest risk of loss. An independent evaluation of existing streamlined 'approvals' processes, such as those available under the NSW Land Management (Native Vegetation) Code 2018, should be undertaken to determine their effectiveness in protecting (or replacing in a like-for-like manner) identified biodiversity and cultural values (see Component 2). If streamlined processes are to be maintained, they should be applicable only to areas where it can be confirmed that activities pose a low risk of impact to biodiversity or cultural values, and should be subject to improved reporting and monitoring requirements.

Over time, planning pathways should be streamlined and, where appropriate, consolidated to provide greater consistency across assessment and approval processes, with rules and regulations reflective of environmental risk rather than development type or activity as is currently the case. The final result would be that all land managers would benefit from greater upfront certainty about where different land uses would be best situated in the landscape.

For legislative reforms to be effective, they must be evidence-based, sustainably resourced, actively implemented and practical. To increase compliance, efforts should be made to ensure that land managers understand the regulations and how they apply in practice. The Government should commit to stable, long-term policy and resourcing pathways that can provide stakeholders with certainty and build trust.

### Recommendations

- a. **Develop and implement legally enforceable, outcomes-focused environmental standards;**
- b. **Implement legislative and governance reforms to improve the effectiveness of the NSW land management framework; and**
- c. **Clarify governance arrangements and streamline assessment and approval.**

**Guide for policy-makers to implement Recommendations 6a – c, to safeguard NSW's irreplaceable biodiversity and cultural values through nuanced law reforms that work for people and nature.**

- a) Develop and implement legally enforceable, outcomes-focused environmental standards that outline:
  - a. The environmental, social, cultural and economic outcomes being sought;
  - b. Clear requirements for stakeholders that may interact with different aspects of the NSW land management framework (e.g., the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*, the Land Management (Native Vegetation) Code 2018 or *the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*); and
  - c. Clear boundaries for decision-makers responsible for administering different components of the land management framework.
- b) Improve the effectiveness of the NSW land management framework in protecting biodiversity and ecosystem services, through measures such as:
  - a. Amendments to the BC Act and interacting legislation to prevent adverse impacts to irreplaceable and at-risk biodiversity and cultural values;
  - b. Strengthening and improving implementation of the mitigation hierarchy to ensure that both the direct and cumulative impacts of actions are assessed and addressed;
  - c. Tightening the scope of the NSW Land Management (Native Vegetation) Code 2018 to ensure it is only applicable to low-risk activities in areas and that pose a low risk of impact to biodiversity or cultural values;
  - d. Making administrative, policy or process improvements to improve reporting and tracking of clearing activities permissible under the NSW Land Management (Native Vegetation) Code 2018;
  - e. Establishing a separate, streamlined approvals pathway for restoration projects; and
  - f. Trialling, and over time, establishing regulatory zones across NSW that would give effect to the designation of the state into areas prioritised for protection, restoration and sustainable use.
- c) Clarify governance arrangements (including the current roles and responsibilities of DCCEEW, LLS and NSW Planning) and consider options for streamlining environmental assessment and approval processes to avoid duplication and place greater emphasis on environmental protection.

# 7. Accountability, integrity and demonstrating progress

Robust monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) frameworks are essential to ensure that programs, policies and investments are delivering on their priorities or, if not, understanding why not and the changes needed. MERI frameworks should be designed to evaluate the achievement of progress towards outcomes, not just outputs.

Frequent, public reporting on program effectiveness improves transparency and accountability. It helps to build much needed trust from the community in government processes.

Government should adopt continual improvement and adaptive management approaches to foster an innovative culture in program design. Further, there should be an upfront, legislative mechanism to trigger actions when indicators suggest objectives are not on track to being achieved. The pre-agreed management actions would seek to bring the program back on track and enable the program to realign with its intended objectives.

We recommend that the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) be responsible for developing and implementing performance audits and ensuring a robust MERI program is in place, given its independence, expertise and experience in undertaking audits and reviews of environmental plans and policies.

We recommend the NSW Natural Resources Access Regulator or other appropriate independent regulator takes responsibility for compliance and enforcement of the new landscape management model in NSW. NRAR is an independent compliance agency at arm's length from the

government, charged with enforcing laws in the public interest. While NRAR is currently focused on water compliance, it was established with a broader mandate including landscape management.

These institutions need to be supported with sufficient resources and expertise to carry out these expanded duties and functions.

## Natural Capital Accounting

Natural capital accounting at state, regional and property scales in NSW would enable tracking of changes in the condition of environmental assets that underpin healthy productive landscapes, such as soil health, water availability, and biodiversity. Regional scale accounts could enable tracking of progress towards targets in the state-wide Healthy Landscape Strategy. Property-scale accounts could support land managers to demonstrate environmental stewardship and enable participation in emerging markets and other programs.

### Recommendations

- a) **Task the NRC with performance audits and oversight of a robust program to integrate monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement activities at multiple scales.**
- b) **Establish a formal role for NRAR or other appropriate independent body in the compliance and enforcement of legislative and regulatory components.**
- c) **Develop a natural capital accounting program that can be delivered across all regions in NSW.**

**Guide for policy-makers to implement Recommendations 7a – c, to ensure accountability and integrity, and demonstrate progress.**

- a) Establish a robust program to integrate monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement activities at multiple scales, including:
  - a. Tasking the NRC with:
    - i. Establishing a framework to govern monitoring, evaluation and reporting from the local to state-wide level;
    - ii. Incorporating metrics into the framework to assess the environmental, social, cultural and economic outcomes of any interventions;
    - iii. Identifying thresholds which would trigger a management response if indicators/metrics were tracking in the wrong direction;
    - iv. Undertaking regular audits (minimum 5 yearly) of the effectiveness of key components of the land management framework in NSW (including the BC Act, Part 5 of the LLS Act and progress on the achievement of targets in the Healthy Landscape Strategy);
    - v. Providing annual reports to Government on the outcomes of MER activities, including recommendations on potential improvements; and
    - vi. Publishing the reports on the NRC website together with any Government response.
  - b. Establishing statutory requirements for other agencies to regularly publish data of relevance to the MER program, including:
    - i. NSW DCCEEW to publish annual Statewide Landcover and Tree Study (SLATS) data, in a timely and accessible manner; and
    - ii. LLS to publish data relating to approvals granted under Part 5 of the LLS Act on an annual basis.
- b) Establish a formal role for NRAR or other appropriate independent body for the compliance and enforcement of legislative and regulatory components of the NSW land management framework, by:
  - a. Making the required legislative amendments to delegate or expand the statutory functions of the chosen independent regulator (i.e., by amending the *Natural Resources Access Regulator Act 2017*, *Protection of the Environment Administration Act 1991* or other legislation as appropriate); and
  - b. Making consequential amendments to the BC Act, LLS Act and *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EP&A Act) to facilitate the transfer of regulatory powers as needed.
- c) Establish specific duties for the independent regulator, including but not limited to:
  - a. Overseeing State agencies involved and conducting inquiries into performance related to obligations under the BC Act, LLS Act and EP&A Act;
  - b. Ensuring land manager compliance with NSW laws, including relevant provisions under the BC Act, LLS Act and EP&A Act;
  - c. Delivering trust and transparency by ensuring the highest standard of accountability for all involved in land management across NSW;
  - d. Providing annual reports to Government on the outcomes of compliance and enforcement, and recommendations for improvements; and
  - e. Publishing the reports on the independent regulator's website together with any Government response.
- d) Develop a natural capital accounting program that can be delivered across all regions in NSW, including:
  - a. Establishing a natural capital account for every region in NSW;
  - b. Rolling regional-level natural capital data up into a statewide natural capital account;
  - c. Establishing a statutory requirement for published regional and state-wide natural capital accounts every 5 years.
  - d. Providing additional resources to scale-up LLS's natural capital program, including expanding the natural capital profile pilot program to enable more land managers across NSW to establish a property level natural capital profile and accounts.

# Appendix A – Alignment with the NSW Plan for Nature

Table 1: This table compares model components with commitments in the Plan for Nature.

Wentworth Group model components	Alignment with the Plan for Nature
<p><b>1. Support the essential role of Aboriginal people in repairing Country</b></p>	<p>Within the NSW Plan for Nature, the NSW Government commits to a number of positive measures to improve engagement with Aboriginal people, in regards to environmental decision making, including: engaging with Aboriginal organisations and communities regarding the Threatened Species Scientific Committee’s assessments and in relation to the design of natural and cultural capital support products; better integrating cultural considerations into planning processes; and prioritising Aboriginal cultural values, practices and connecting to Country in the BC Act reforms.<sup>61</sup></p> <p>While these measures are welcome, they are inadequate in the face of the significant disadvantage faced by many Aboriginal people and communities in NSW. Our model incorporates a stronger framework to support Aboriginal people to fulfil their ambitions and obligations for Country. This includes the establishment of an Aboriginal Land and Sea Commissioner, who would provide advice on environmental decisions that affect Aboriginal people or their ability to care for Country, and help facilitate economic and cultural opportunities. We also propose a significant investment in Aboriginal Land and Sea Management Agencies, to enable increased participation in the repair effort.</p>
<p><b>2. Create an online spatial tool which identifies natural and cultural values and tracks changes in their condition</b></p>	<p>The NSW Plan for Nature commits to mapping areas of current and future high biodiversity value, improving the accuracy of the Biodiversity Values Map, finalising the draft Native Vegetation Regulatory Map and comprehensively mapping threatened ecological communities.<sup>62</sup> These commitments are supported by the Wentworth Group.</p> <p>Within this report we go a step further by proposing the development of an interactive, intuitive and accessible spatial tool that would provide a gateway for users to access comprehensive mapping of biodiversity and cultural values across the state, and regularly updated condition assessments, as well as links to information on the regulations that may apply and incentives that may be available in a given region or for a given value. We articulate how the comprehensive mapping could inform the development of a Healthy Landscape Strategy (Component 3), contribute to improved outcomes for nature, and provide greater certainty for the community and decision makers.</p>
<p><b>3. Develop a NSW healthy landscape strategy that</b></p>	<p>The NSW Plan for Nature commits to preparing and publishing a NSW Nature Strategy that will set goals and targets for conservation and restoration.<sup>63</sup> We strongly support this commitment.</p>

<p><b>takes an ecosystem-approach to managing landscapes</b></p>	<p>Our model also features a state-wide Strategy. This report emphasises the importance of setting specific and measurable targets and performance indicators, and strongly recommends the strategy describe the actions and investments needed to achieve them. We have also outlined legislative changes that could be made to support the achievement of the strategy and ensure an appropriate degree of alignment between regional plans and the state-wide strategy.</p>
<p><b>4. Deliver reforms together with communities using an integrated regional approach</b></p>	<p>The NSW Plan for Nature states that “The NSW Government will prioritise early and regular engagement with key stakeholders in the design and implementation of these reforms” and further commits to “undertake tailored engagement with Aboriginal organisations, communities and people...”. The NSW Plan for Nature also commits to the expanding advisory and extension services, establishing a natural capital accounting framework, and front-loading nature and biodiversity considerations in regional planning.<sup>64</sup> We strongly support these commitments.</p> <p>Our model includes a deep, genuine and comprehensive process to ensure that communities have a strong voice in the design and implementation of key elements of the reform, including the Land Stewardship Package, research initiatives, information sharing campaigns, extension services and the implementation of the state-wide healthy landscape strategy. Regional delivery, including expanded extension services and an Aboriginal liaison officer in every LLS, is a strong feature of our model. We propose reinvigorating extension services, establishing programs to increase awareness of the benefits of sustainable land management practices to farm businesses, and undertaking a process to address outstanding knowledge gaps that may exist for specific commodities and/or management practices.</p>
<p><b>5. Implement a Land Stewardship Package to facilitate landscape protection and restoration at scale</b></p>	<p>The NSW Plan for Nature commits to investigating options for incentives and designing a program that supports a change in current practices to reduce (excess) land clearing.<sup>65</sup> We support this commitment.</p> <p>The establishment of a Land Stewardship Package is a critical feature of our model. To achieve widespread support for landscape management reforms, it will be essential for this package to be well resourced and highly flexible, offering incentives ranging from entry level to in-perpetuity. We provide recommendations for ensuring that an incentives package achieves high participation rates and facilitates biodiversity protection and restoration activities at scale.</p>
<p><b>6. Safeguard NSW’s irreplaceable biodiversity and cultural values through law reforms that work for people and nature</b></p>	<p>The NSW Plan for Nature commits to amending and strengthening the BC Act, strengthening the application of ecologically sustainable development and reviewing other relevant legislation to strengthen biodiversity outcomes. We welcome these commitments.</p> <p>In this report, we outline how reforms could be undertaken in a nuanced manner, by strengthening protections for those biodiversity and cultural values that are identified as irreplaceable, progressing reforms to the biodiversity offsets scheme to</p>

	strengthen the application of the mitigation hierarchy and improving reporting and tracking of activities that pose a lower risk, so cumulative impacts can be better understood and accounted for.
<b>7. Ensure accountability and integrity, and demonstrate progress</b>	<p>The NSW Plan for Nature tasks the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) with the development of a Land Management Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Framework. We acknowledge this as a positive first step.</p> <p>Our model builds upon this, describing how in addition to developing the framework, the NRC should play a central role in implementing the framework. Our model also recognises the critical need to strengthen compliance and enforcement and keep this at arm's length from the Government decision making apparatus. Our model identifies the Natural Resources Access Regulator (NRAR) as a potentially suitable body for overseeing compliance and enforcement.</p>

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- <sup>39</sup> This outcome contributes to Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) targets 1, 3 and 4:  
TARGET 1: Plan and Manage all Areas to Reduce Biodiversity Loss.  
TARGET 3: Conserve 30% of Land, Water and Seas.  
TARGET 4: Halt Species Extinction, Protect Genetic Diversity, and Manage Human-Wildlife Conflicts.
- <sup>40</sup> This outcome contributes to Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) target 2  
TARGET 2: Restore 30% of all Degraded Ecosystems.
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