



## **Australian Government**

Australian Government response to the  
Environment and Communications Inquiry report:  
National Landcare Program 2014 to 2023

FEBRUARY 2022

## Introduction

On 26 June 2014 the Senate referred the matter of the National Landcare Program's performance, effectiveness and future to the Environment and Communications References Committee (the committee) for inquiry and report.

*The history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program, including:*

- a. the establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;*
- b. the establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program;*
- c. the outcomes to date and for the forward estimates period of Caring for Our Country;*
- d. the implications of the 2014–15 budget for land care programs, in particular, on contracts, scope, structure, outcomes of programs and long-term impact on natural resource management;*
- e. the Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs;*
- f. analysis of national, state and regional funding priorities for land care programs;*
- g. how the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture have, and can, work together to deliver a seamless land care program;*
- h. the role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes; and*
- i. any other related matters.*

The National Landcare Program is a key part of the Australian Government's long-standing commitment to natural resource management. With an initial investment of \$1 billion over 4 years (2014-15 to 2017-18), the National Landcare Program Phase One delivered on-ground biodiversity and sustainable agriculture outcomes to benefit the Australian community and environment.

The Australian Government invested a further \$1.1 billion to deliver the National Landcare Program Phase Two (2018-19 to 2022-23), creating opportunities for greater efficiencies across the natural resource management sector by working in partnership with governments, industry, Indigenous and local communities and individuals to protect and conserve Australia's water, soil, plants, animals and ecosystems, as well as support the productive and sustainable use of these valuable resources.

The Australian Government has considered the fifteen recommendations in the committee's report tabled 25 March 2015 and has provided the responses below, taking account of the National Landcare Program delivery since 2014.

## Response

### *Landcare and the 2014-15 Budget*

#### **Recommendation 1**

The committee recommends that the Government provide funding to the National Landcare Program to the same level as provided under Caring for our Country.

#### **Response**

Noted.

From 2014-15, the government invested \$1 billion over four years through the National Landcare Program Phase One to deliver long-term benefits to the community, environment, economy and country.

The 2017-18 Budget confirmed the government's continued funding of about \$1.1 billion over 5 years for the National Landcare Program Phase Two. This included an additional \$100 million agreed in the 2016-17 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook and minor agreed annual budgetary adjustments through to the 2019-2020 financial year.

The National Landcare Program Phase Two is comprised of new and continuing programs that fund a range of measures continuing support for natural resource management and sustainable agriculture, and to protect Australia's biodiversity, including:

- \$450 million for the Regional Land Partnerships Program to deliver natural resource management at a regional scale
- \$136 million for the Smart Farms Program, which will support the development and uptake of best practice, tools and technologies that help farmers, fishers, foresters and regional communities improve the protection, resilience and productive capacity of our soils, water and vegetation, in turn supporting successful primary industries and regional communities
- \$5 million in Environment Small Grants provided to community, environment and other natural resource management groups to deliver natural resource management activities that improve the quality of the local environment
- \$47.4 million for the management of our treasured World Heritage sites

- \$43 million towards delivering the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan from 2018-19 to 2021-22
- \$93 million for the support of existing Indigenous Protected Areas and an additional \$15 million to establish new Indigenous Protected Areas
- \$16 million for the establishment of the Centre for Invasive Species Solutions
- a further \$9 million for Yellow Crazy Ant Control announced in the 2019 Budget
- the continuation of the 20 Million Trees, Bush Blitz, Threatened Species Recovery Fund and Reef 2050 programs.

Since 2014-15, the Government has delivered other complementary initiatives that also contribute to natural resource management. These include the Reef Trust, Environmental Stewardship Program, funding Indigenous Rangers under the Jobs, Land and Economy program through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, the Carbon Farming Futures and the Improving Your Local Parks and Environment programs, as well as measures to support eradication of the Red Imported Fire Ant, the Green Army Program (now closed) and the Land Sector Package investments.

During 2019-20 the Government announced further commitments including:

- the \$22 million Communities' Environment Program supporting small scale, community-led local environment projects during 2020
- the \$100 million Environment Restoration Fund supporting one-off grants and multi-year projects to protect and restore Australia's environment from 2019-20 to 2022-23
- an initial \$50 million Bushfire Wildlife and Habitat Recovery package responding to the devastating bushfires in 2019, supporting emergency wildlife and habitat recovery over two years from 2019-20 to 2020-21
- an additional \$149.7 million Bushfire Recovery for Species and Landscapes package supporting efforts that go beyond the immediate devastation on species and natural assets
- more than \$740 million over seven years to extend the Indigenous Rangers program from 2021 to 2028
- the \$30.3 million Established Pest Animal and Weed Management Pipeline Program to combat established pest animals and weeds from 2019-20 to 2022-23
- an initial investment of \$3 billion toward the Future Drought Fund 2020-2024 Drought Resilience Funding Plan, supporting eight targeted programs including a \$15 million

Natural Resource Management Drought Resilience program to build drought resilience of natural resources on agricultural landscapes.

**Recommendation 2**

The committee recommends that the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Program be maintained as a continuing small grants program over the forward estimates.

**Response**

Noted.

The 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Program 2014-15 was a one-off grant round under the national stream of the National Landcare Program Phase One. 288 projects were contracted and undertaken to conserve and protect local environments and manage the natural resource base, contributing to outcomes in the national interest.

Through the National Landcare Program Phase Two, the Government is providing \$50 million in small grants over 6 years through the Smart Farms Small Grants program. Additionally, the Environment Small Grants program provided \$5 million in small grants to community, environment and other natural resource management groups who delivered natural resource management activities to improve the quality of the local environment.

These programs, together with the more recent Communities' Environment Program, all provide opportunities for accessing small grants, building on the 25th Anniversary Landcare Grants Program investment model. The Government recognises there remains strong community support to maintain small grants that target issues of local importance.

*The Green Army and 20 Million Trees Programs*

**Recommendation 3**

The committee recommends that further information about Green Army projects be made publicly available. This information should include project timeframes, project status, and an assessment of the environmental outcomes both immediately following completion of the project and after a suitable monitoring period.

**Recommendation 4**

The committee recommends that a comprehensive review of the Green Army Program and the 20 Million Trees Program be undertaken by June 2016 to ensure that the programs are meeting their stated goals and that the Commonwealth Government is receiving good value for money from its investment.

## Response

Noted.

### Green Army

The Green Army Program ran over four years from 2014-15, as a stand-alone environment action program that delivered over 1255 projects and engaged with 11,206 young Australians as participants. The Program closed on 30 June 2018. The Green Army Evaluation Report, published in December 2017, found that the Program was successful in delivering against each of its strategic objectives, and identified learnings and opportunities that will help inform the design of future environment action programs. The total of 1255 Green Army projects delivered over 3086 targeted activities across Australia, of which 93% successfully contributed to environmental outcomes.

The report is available on the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's webpage at [awe.gov.au/agriculture-land/land/green-army/publications/green-army-evaluation-report](http://awe.gov.au/agriculture-land/land/green-army/publications/green-army-evaluation-report).

### 20 Million Trees

The final program review of the 20 Million Trees Program was released on 3 December 2021, finding that it met its four strategic objectives of establishing 20 million trees by 2020, improving native vegetation supporting native species, working cooperatively with the community and contributing to Australia's carbon sequestration.

The review is available on the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's webpage at [awe.gov.au/agriculture-land/land/publications/20-million-trees-program-review](http://awe.gov.au/agriculture-land/land/publications/20-million-trees-program-review).

### *National Landcare Program*

#### **Recommendation 5**

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government consider avenues to ensure the continuation of landscape scale projects and to foster further collaboration between stakeholders on long-term landscape scale strategic planning and action.

## Response

Noted.

The government's investment under National Landcare Program Phase One was consistent with the Program's strategic objectives and outcome, including Outcome One to 'maintain and improve ecosystem services through sustainable management of local and regional landscapes'.

Natural resource management organisations used regional natural resource management plans to inform their priorities for delivering on-ground activities funded under the Regional Stream of this initial phase of the Program. Organisations were expected to demonstrate that these plans provided the strategic basis for investment and were:

- based on appropriate and best available scientific, economic and social information
- developed through comprehensive engagement with the community, including landcare, Indigenous and industry groups, farmers and land managers
- robust and deliverable, and strategically aligned with relevant Australian Government and state/territory natural resource management plans, policies, priorities and strategies and priority natural resource management issues identified by agricultural industries.

Regional Land Partnerships is a vital component of the government's investment under Phase Two and builds upon strengths of the National Landcare Program Phase One, with funding to 2023.

The government is working with Service Providers to deliver targeted environment and sustainable agricultural projects delivering national priority action at the regional and local levels. Many projects are being coordinated at the landscape-scale and across jurisdictions, to deliver complementary best practice and value for money. Service Providers were selected based on their proven capability and capacity to drive improvements in regional delivery performance, and in leveraging investments and collaborations with Indigenous, agriculture, industry, community and Landcare groups across the landscape.

#### **Recommendation 6**

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government review the funding model for the National Landcare Program with a view to reinstating funding for facilitators and community support staff.

#### **Response**

Noted.

Regional Land Partnerships, under the National Landcare Program Phase Two, continues to invest in Regional Agriculture Landcare Facilitators (previously Regional Landcare Facilitators) who, as individuals and as part of a national network, play a critical role in supporting farmers and industries achieve sustainable agricultural outcomes (\$36 million over five years). They also contribute in fostering partnerships, engaging communities, seeking new funding and assisting project managers in delivering projects. The Program

funds project personnel to support community engagement and participation activities including engagement with Indigenous communities.

**Recommendation 7**

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government conducts a review of factors contributing to disengagement of landholders in NRM activities with a view to addressing those factors and increasing landholder engagement.

**Response**

Noted.

The government conducted a Review of the National Landcare Program in 2016 to inform the design of future investments, inviting input from individuals, community and industry groups, government agencies and expert advisory groups. This included more than 900 responses to a stakeholder survey which sought views on the approaches to, and effectiveness of, engagement with the community as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of regional natural resource management organisations in delivering the National Landcare Program Phase One's intended outcomes.

The review found that the Program has been effective in meeting its strategic objectives, and identified that one of the Program's key strengths included its strong connection and engagement with community.

The Report on the Review of the National Landcare Program Phase One and key inputs to the review are available at [nrm.gov.au/publications/national-landcare-program-review-report](http://nrm.gov.au/publications/national-landcare-program-review-report).

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, is reviewing Phase 2 by examining the effectiveness of the program against its intended outcomes. The department will also consider design options for the next phase of the program which are consistent with the government's long-term strategic policy priorities. The review's findings are expected to be released in early 2022.

**Recommendation 8**

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government works to further foster linkages between regional NRM bodies and industry groups.

**Response**

Noted.

The National Landcare Program Phase Two, through Regional Land Partnerships, reflects a new focus on partnerships between organisations that come together to provide on-ground delivery of environmental and agricultural outcomes at the local and regional level. It is



expected that service providers have the involvement and support of their communities, and work with Indigenous, agriculture, industry, community and landcare groups to achieve the outcomes under Regional Land Partnerships.

The requirement that regional natural resource management organisations maintain a Regional Landcare Facilitator to support their National Landcare Program Phase One funded activities was a key element in fostering linkages between these organisations and industry to support farmers, fishers and foresters. The National Landcare Program Phase Two continues this support through the network of the Regional Agriculture Landcare Facilitators.

Smart Farming Partnerships (\$57.5 million over 6 years) offer grants ranging between \$250,000 and \$4 million (GST exclusive). These larger, innovative projects are delivered through effective partnerships, and include projects that foster linkages between regional NRM bodies, industry groups and research organisations. Smart Farming Partnerships:

- develop, trial and implement new and innovative tools that lead to practice change and more sustainable, productive and profitable agricultural industries and systems
- protect Australia's biodiversity
- protect and improve the condition of natural resources.

Further details of Smart Farming Partnerships are available at [agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/natural-resources/landcare/national-landcare-program/australian-government-investment-in-landcare](https://agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/natural-resources/landcare/national-landcare-program/australian-government-investment-in-landcare).

The Building Landcare Community and Capacity (BLCC) Program (\$34.9 million over 6 years) is a targeted, non-competitive program providing ad-hoc grants for initiatives that directly support farmer organisations and the Landcare community with the aim to:

- support the sharing of knowledge and achievements
- promote community leadership and resilience development
- engage with youth, women and Indigenous people in Landcare
- recognise the achievements of land carers
- support the adoption of sustainable agriculture practices that will deliver a more productive and profitable agriculture industry.

The BLCC program funded Natural Resource Management Regions Australia (NRMRA) to undertake a project, valued at \$418,182 (GST Excl.) over 2.5 years, that aims to increase partnerships between NRM regional bodies and agricultural industries to increase involvement in recognised and certified practices to maintain, and increase, their market access. Grant funding went towards employing a National Partnership Broker with oversight

by a steering committee consisting of representatives from core partners and key industry experts. This activity ended 3 November 2021.

On 29 November 2021, funding for a second NRMRA project was approved, building on the first, for \$378,400 (GST Excl.) over 1.5 years to assist NRMRA to build more successful Agriculture Industry – Natural Resource Management Partnerships for market access. This project will build upon the outcomes of the first project and will focus on building the knowledge, capability and leadership across both sectors as well as increasing the number of partnerships to support the management of natural resources and the increased adoption of sustainable agriculture practices. The end date for this project will coincide with the end of Phase 2 of the National Landcare Program; June 2023.

Further details of BLCC funded projects are available at [awe.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/natural-resources/landcare/national-landcare-program/australian-government-investment-in-landcare](http://awe.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/natural-resources/landcare/national-landcare-program/australian-government-investment-in-landcare).

#### **Recommendation 9**

The committee recommends that reporting be proportionate to the size of a project or grant. Notwithstanding that accountability and good governance is expected at all levels, there should be flexibility in reporting so that the requirements for small-scale projects are commensurate with the size of the project.

#### **Response**

Noted.

The department has implemented risk-based grant management across the National Landcare Program. Grant funding agreements, reporting and acquittal requirements are differentiated on the basis of risk. This has reduced the reporting and acquittal requirements for low-risk grants.

The second phase of the program's Regional Land Partnerships investment adopted a procurement approach to deliver greater efficiencies, improve reporting and shift towards more strategic investments targeting national priorities.

### **Recommendation 10**

The committee recommends that investigation be undertaken to further decrease the focus of reporting on outputs and increase reporting of outcomes.

### **Response**

Noted.

The National Landcare Program Phase Two has continued to build upon and improve the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool, which now provides project management and reporting functionality to over 3,600 projects funded through Australian Government investments in natural resource management. The tool has significantly improved our capacity to monitor and report on project and program outcomes.

In addition to regular project activity reporting through this Tool, Regional Land Partnerships' Service Providers are also required to undertake targeted outcomes reporting in years 3 and 5 of their projects. This will involve reporting on changes in the status of investment targets against baseline monitoring data captured at the beginning of each project. These outcomes reports will improve the government's understanding of what has been achieved through natural resource management investment.

The department is also developing an integrated long-term monitoring program. Once fully implemented, the monitoring program will improve the government's ability to determine the success of Regional Land Partnerships and guide any future natural resource management investments. The monitoring program will help demonstrate the impacts of interventions, help with outcomes reporting and better enable adaptive management. This work will also deliver the tools required for best practice monitoring, and advanced data storage and management capacity.

The ANAO audit of Regional Land Partnerships program, released in November 2021, concluded that progress has been made since previous NRM programs in establishing frameworks and processes to measure and report on the achievement of outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

The ANAO report is linked here [anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/regional-land-partnerships](https://anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/regional-land-partnerships).

Hadron Consulting were also engaged to review the Regional Land Partnerships program and found that 93% of projects recorded 'significant' or 'satisfactory' progress toward their medium-term outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> ANAO 2021, [Regional Land Partnerships Performance Audit Report](#), Australian National Audit Office, Canberra, ISSN 2203-0352, accessed December 2021

The Regional Land Partnerships Achievement Snapshot is linked here  
[awe.gov.au/agriculture-land/land/publications/regional-land-partnerships](http://awe.gov.au/agriculture-land/land/publications/regional-land-partnerships).

**Recommendation 11**

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government examine the outcomes of the trial of the national environmental accounting system developed by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, with a view to investigating the feasibility of implementing that system, or a similar system, and incorporating it in the MERIT reporting process.

**Response**

Noted.

A *National Environmental-Economic Accounting Strategy and Action Plan* was endorsed by all Australian governments in 2018 to deliver a common national approach to environmental-economic accounting for Australia.

The Australian Government is engaged with state and territory governments and key stakeholders, including natural resource management interests, to implement the strategy and action plan. This work is guided by a Scientific Advisory Panel, which includes members of the Wentworth Group.

The application of accounts developed under the National Strategy and Action Plan to the Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool and implementation of the Long Term Monitoring Program Framework will be assessed for future programs.

**Recommendation 12**

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government establish a system of reporting the social outcomes of investment in natural resource management so that the full benefits of that investment are identified.

**Response**

Noted.

The government has developed a systems model to identify and better understand the economic, social and environmental impacts of National Landcare Program activities. The outputs of this work informed the National Landcare Advisory Committee's advice to the Natural Heritage Ministerial Board regarding the economic value of National Landcare Program activities. This work may also inform future indicators for Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool on the economic outcomes of natural resource management-related programs.

The report *Evidence for the economic impacts of investment in National Landcare Programme activities* is available at [nrm.gov.au/publications/economic-impacts-nlp-activities](http://nrm.gov.au/publications/economic-impacts-nlp-activities).

The government, in consultation with the National Landcare Advisory Committee, has assessed the value of landcare's role in building adaptive capacity and resilience of communities across Australia, and how landcare can further support other government policies and programs such as drought preparedness, natural disaster response or agricultural competitiveness.

The report *Landcare's role in building adaptive capacity and resilience* is available here [nrm.gov.au/publications/national-landcare-program-review-nlac-capacity-report](http://nrm.gov.au/publications/national-landcare-program-review-nlac-capacity-report).

#### *Interaction of national, state and regional arrangements*

##### **Recommendation 13**

The committee recommends that a review be undertaken to investigate any potential efficiencies of NRM bodies. The investigation may consider adopting a shared services model using existing resources and ways for NRM bodies to reflect effective boundaries. This should be undertaken on a state-by-state basis with due consideration of the importance of community engagement.

##### **Response**

Noted.

The 2016 Review of the National Landcare Program identified the continuing strong support for regional scale natural resource management that acknowledges local conditions and addresses community needs, with scope for improvements to deliver greater efficiencies.

The National Landcare Program Phase Two has strengthened opportunity for collaboration and partnerships across all sectors, particularly through Regional Land Partnerships. The already established natural resource management regional geographic boundaries have been retained but are referred to as Management Units. The competitive tendering model adopted for Regional Land Partnerships was designed to increase efficiency. Some substantial reforms were implemented as a result, including:

- a single NRM body - Southern Queensland Landscapes - for three management units across the Condamine, Maranoa Balonne and Border Rivers, and South West Queensland regions;
- a single service provider – NQ NRM Alliance – for three management units across Cape York, Northern Gulf and the Wet Tropics Queensland regions. The NQ NRM Alliance comprises three regional NRM bodies utilising a shared services model.

**Recommendation 14**

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government ensures that the National Landcare Program incorporate sufficient flexibility and investment mechanisms to maintain Indigenous engagement in natural resource management.

**Response**

Noted.

Increasing Indigenous engagement is a key element of the National Landcare Program.

The government expects proponents to involve Indigenous people in both the planning and delivery of National Landcare Program. This ensures that Indigenous engagement and participation features strongly as an investment, project and employment outcome for the National Landcare Program, maximising achievement of broader social and economic benefits to Indigenous communities.

For example, the first phase set a strategic outcome to “increase engagement and participation of the community, including landcare, farmers and Indigenous people, in sustainable natural resource management.”

More than \$45 million of the National Landcare Program Phase One was directed to Indigenous natural resource management activities, employing more than 50 Indigenous people in land and sea management, drawing their significant and unique knowledge, skills and responsibilities into their role.

Indigenous engagement continues as a priority under the National Landcare Program Phase Two. Through Regional Land Partnerships, Indigenous people are actively contributing to the planning and delivery of regionally-appropriate natural resource management, ensuring their aspirations for land and sea management are reflected across the range of funded activities. Each service provider must meet minimum standards for Indigenous procurement, contracting, and support Indigenous employment to deliver the services against set targets, consistent with the intent of the Australian Government’s Indigenous Procurement Policy.

The Indigenous Protected Areas program supports Indigenous organisations to undertake flexible, community-based consultation and planning to establish new Indigenous Protected Areas. This program provides initial funding to support consultations with Traditional Owners to develop a plan to manage the proposed Indigenous Protected Area, with the intent to be dedicated to the National Reserve System. Indigenous Protected Areas allow land and sea to be managed according to the wishes of Traditional Owners, incorporating conservation and cultural considerations.

The government also continues to support the employment of Indigenous Rangers through the Jobs, Land and Economy program of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. Indigenous Protected Area projects provide meaningful employment for Indigenous Rangers and supports a range of activities such as managing threatened species, fire risks and invasive weed, controlling feral animals, and providing visitor information management and community education.

**Recommendation 15**

The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment undertake consultation with Indigenous groups active in natural resource management to ensure that Indigenous views are incorporated in any modifications of the National Landcare Program.

**Response**

Noted.

The National Landcare Program delivers on the Australian Governments' commitment to Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage by providing for stronger Indigenous participation in the planning and delivery of National Landcare Program investment and outcomes.

The department works closely with the relevant program funding recipients to ensure that Indigenous people have the opportunity to fully participate in land and sea management, drawing on their significant and unique knowledge, skills and responsibilities.

For example, the National Landcare Program Phase One supported strong working relationships with local Indigenous organisations, including board representation. Indigenous people were involved in the planning and decision making of projects, and were trained and employed to deliver on ground activities. The department worked with grantees to provide continuing support, and in some cases, the development of Indigenous facilitator networks in each state and territory.

The department has sought the views of Indigenous people and communities in all its consultation processes that have contributed to the design and delivery of the National Landcare Program. The 2016 Review of the National Landcare Program also invited Indigenous people and communities contributions via a stakeholder survey.

The Minister for the Environment's Indigenous Advisory Committee provides advice to the Minister and the department on the design and delivery of natural resource management investments.