



Native Vegetation in Western Australia Issues paper for public consultation November 2019

Thank you for the giving the South West Environment Centre Inc. (SWEC) the opportunity to provide feedback on the Native vegetation issue paper.

The South West of Western Australia is one of the world's major biodiversity hotspots, which must be protected. A biodiversity hotspot is both a significant reservoir of biodiversity and is threatened with destruction.

In 2014, Professor Kingsley Dixon, the former director of science at Kings Park and Botanic Garden in Perth, said understanding the biodiversity of the region is important for conserving it. "Unless you understand the processes you may disadvantage the species by not supporting the processes that brought it into being in the first place" he told *Australian Geographic*.

In order to create a State native vegetation policy, we first need to understand the processes that support and disadvantage these areas.

In the Minister's forward for this native vegetation issue paper, Hon Stephen Dawson MLC stated that the WA Government are responding with plans for four initiatives:

1. A State native vegetation policy
2. Investing in better information including mapping and monitoring
3. Improving our regulatory processes
4. Exploring a bioregional approach to managing native vegetation

A State native vegetation policy

Desired outcome

"Set an enabling framework for consistent, transparent objectives for consideration of native vegetation across all government processes."

The proposed policy objectives:

- a. The management of native vegetation is consistent, transparent and strategic and strikes a balance between environmental, economic, social and cultural outcomes to Western Australians.
- b. Western Australia's native vegetation is strategically conserved and restored to maintain and improve ecological function and biodiversity at a landscape scale.
- c. Higher priority and strategic protection for unique and at- risk native vegetation, tailored to the regional setting.

SWEC agrees that Western Australia needs comprehensive systems in place to track approved and illegal native vegetation clearing. It is vital that the WA Government has accurate and up to date data sets available to show accumulative clearing, as opposed to approving or rejecting individual applications. This is vital in bioregions like the Wheatbelt and the Swan Coastal Plain which are the most heavily cleared bioregions in the state. We cannot afford to keep chipping away at these areas, in the name of 'developmental progress.'

We also saw recently that satellite imagery was used to prove that illegal clearing north of Perth. This type of technology is paramount, as are high monetary penalties, designed to deter proponents from clearing in the first instance.

Key likes of the Native vegetation policy:

- Clarity among processes and procedures amongst a wide range of / Agencies
- Consistency and overarching Policy involving Bioregional
- Cover everyone who wants to clear native vegetation
- One native vegetation Policy for Western Australia
- Opportunity to better assess the impact of the Bushfires Act which has significant powers to clear native vegetation
- Opportunity to improve protection of flora including wildlife habitat

Key concerns:

- Defining Bioregional zones, by transparency via consultancy on the ground level
- How the planning will integrate - balancing needs of competing objectives (mining, roads, preservation)
- Lack of focus within this Policy on weeds and other pests including dieback and their impact on native vegetation
- Logging and timber harvesting in general need to be addressed in this Policy
- Need for better monitoring of existing native vegetation including sites subjected to clearing and those subject to revegetation
- Need to consider the impacts of rabbits on existing native vegetation as well as revegetation areas and the need to assist / educate / inform landowners on rabbit control methods
- Need to monitor and better understand impact of frequent fires within native vegetation
- No comment in the Policy on the need to have community groups working together and with government Agencies to improve health of native vegetation;

Better information

Desired outcome

"Government decisions are evidence-based, underpinned by a common platform of reliable data."

SWEC agrees with the WA Government that their decisions need to be evidence-based, underpinned by a common platform of reliable data. Hopefully this approach will provide a balanced platform.

The WA Government expects that decisions will be deliberate and well- informed – whether the decision is to protect, to restore, or to accept impacts. SWEC believes that species and habitat

protection need to be at the forefront of the decision-making process. We simply cannot keep approving land clearing applications based on the perceived 'economic value.' Our list of threatened species is ever increasing, and the only way we can stop the number of threatened species is by protecting their habitat – above all costs.

The WA Labor Government has just announced a WA Tourism and Regional Aviation Package, so it makes good economic sense to place a higher value on native vegetation, threatened species and habitat protection.

SWEC also believes that comprehensive and updated and publicly available vegetation mapping is vital.

Key likes of Better information:

- Better informed and evidence-based decisions will make community feel more confident
- Incentives for management of vegetation on farm and private land - framework required for incentives
- Opportunity for improvement
- Policy change initiative is very positive
- Transparent decision making is critical, and community needs to be educated as to how to access the data that sits behind the decisions and how the processes work

Key concerns:

- Clearer guidelines required for land clearing exemptions. Increased transparency needed for land clearing exemption, need to look at all clearing applications and exemptions under all State Acts, not just EPA Act to determine impacts
- Critical need for native vegetation condition and data sets - inadequate system for identifying vegetation differences from native vegetation
- Data certainty is an issue
- Database and mapping information needed for both public and private land
- Farmers and stakeholders inadequately informed about the impact of clearing - additional education and information dissemination required
- How do we provide continuity of priorities through the change of government cycle?
- Increased focus on ground assessments and compliance by regional offices
- Investment in Policy is fine, however the data collection process needs to be invested in and maintained.
- Issue of restricted data on private land
- Knowledge sharing - vested interests, withholding information. Processes to be developed and followed
- Lack of contemporary data for large parts of the State
- Lack of mapping and data on State offsets
- Need for improvement of data reporting systems
- Need to capture native vegetation as well as revegetation
- Need to map threatened flora and fauna on private land
- Offices in DWER do not have enough information to assess land clearing applications from a desktop assessment. Ground truthing should be implemented for land clearing assessments. Information is not up to date
- Policy changes are only relevant and of value if the baseline data is sufficiently invested in by government.
- Potentially out of date information and systems in local governments

- Public transparency about 'process' of decision making, emphasis not necessarily on speed but on quality
- Review of vegetation areas
- Slow data flow between Agencies and LGAs

Better Regulation

Desired outcome

“Clear objectives and consistent standards applied across all regulatory processes affecting native vegetation condition and extent.”

SWEC agrees with the desired outcome and would just like to ensure that loopholes are closed so that proponents do not have the ability to have assessments and approvals quickened for their gain.

There should also be an expectation that proponents provide clear and concise supporting information and if they do not, then there is either a stop the clock on the application or the application is rejected.

The WA Labor Government identified a possible approach for offsets *“Innovative exploration of how offsets could drive a net improvement to native vegetation extent or condition where vegetation must be impacted to enable essential development.”*

Currently offsets are inadequate and often the offset location is not even in the same bioregion. Offsets should be an absolute last resort, not a possible loophole for proponents. Considering that the Wheatbelt and the Swan Coastal Plains are the most heavily cleared bioregions in the state, there should be no more clearing of native vegetation in these bioregions.

Threatened species and communities

We have seen banksia, tuart and Wheatbelt woodlands listed as nationally threatened and protected ecological communities (DoEE 2019c). SWEC would very much welcome a bioregional approach, to prevent other widespread ecological communities becoming threatened in future by planning sensible, evidence- based protection for areas with unique or at-risk values.

Managing unlawful clearing

It is noted that there are more than 40 exemptions allow native vegetation to be cleared without assessment under the clearing provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1986. SWEC would like to see these exemptions reviewed and exemptions tightened up. Two such exemptions requiring immediate review relate to clearing undertaken by DBCA and the FPC.

Considering the number of forest dependent faunal species which are now threatened, DBCA and the FPC should no longer be given outright exemptions for their clearing. We need a targeted approach to habitat protection and for the health of our forests.

Key likes of Better regulation:

- Better alignment between decision-makers
- Better consistency on guidelines
- Better monitoring of actual clearing vs approved clearing
- Better monitoring of clearing statewide
- Better regional environmental outcomes long-term
- Clearer guidelines for clearing

- Improved approval times
- Improved transparency
- Potential cost-saving through streamlining processes
- Provides better information for future clearing permits
- Streamlining approvals through different pathways

Key concerns:

- Approved clearing applications: all clearing applications (IF approved) should have an offset applied - mandatory.
- Better collaboration and communication between Federal, State and LGA to ensure all regulations are transparent and adhered to.
- There needs to be more collaboration between various West Australian Government Departments, for example DBCA and DWER
- Better communication and a central mapping system / data system for all stakeholders and Departments
- Better education of the community regarding clearing permits and the objectives of the clearing
- Clearing applications - advice: more transparency - each clearing application sent out on email should have the location, purpose and hectare quantity in the subject line instead of them being grouped together.
- Discourage clearing of native vegetation ought to be a priority. Encourage businesses or landholders to find better alternatives.
- Endangered Fauna - needs increased consideration
- Enforcement: If regulations are not enforced, they are useless. There needs to be fines etc when there has been illegal activity.
- Funding and employment opportunity: There need to be substantial and continuous funding assigned for weed management of National Parks and areas in the State affected by weeds.
- Increased transparency of what is going to be cleared in an assessment, has it all been monitored for flora and fauna or just 60% of selected land
- Is the current vegetation mapping accurate enough to provide the information required for approvals?
- Offsets - how do they determine if offsets are just as good or better quality than what is cleared. There is lack of supervision of the offsets. Offsets cannot possibly offer a net improvement - only a shifting of resources.
- Reserve Protection: TEC and EEC and Class A nature reserves need to be protected from all degradation and clearing, urban development in Banksia woodland. Future urban development should be considered on cleared poor farmland
- Should there be levels of regulations dependant on scale of clearing?
- This regulation needs to have outcomes which are measured
- Will clearing regulations on Private land and State land be the same?

A bioregional approach

Desired outcome

“Regionally tailored objectives balance benefits to the environment, community and economy.”

SWEC agrees with the bioregional approach and would welcome an end to the clearing of native vegetation in the Swan Coastal Plain Bioregion, particularly in the South West.

A Bioregional approach would protect this biodiversity hotspot and would also allow input from local community groups and experts. We can no longer afford to clear threatened ecological communities and further impact on our threatened faunal species, like the critically endangered Western Ringtail Possum.

Key likes of the Bioregional approach:

- Better consideration of cumulative impacts will improve decision making and transparency
- Different rules in different areas to account for variation in values and threats
- Essential for protecting remaining vegetation especially TEC, fauna's habitat
- Exemptions could be tailored to Bioregions
- May allow better consideration of impacts of climate change including resilience and linkages
- May allow better tailoring or consideration of how to value existing vegetation on private land
- Opportunities for partnerships with industry groups, not for profits, to develop policies, share information. Also, partnerships for strategic revegetation on large scales
- Opportunities for Bioregional offices
- Resourcing via Bioregions to identify threats / values and assess impacts
- This approach allows for people in a region / local area who know what things are locally significant to flag them for protection, as opposed to a central decision-making body making decisions from the city without that same understanding
- This approach gives the local community more opportunity to give input into areas that are special and that should be preserved.

Key concerns:

- Concern that some community groups / organisations, eg: mining and / or pastoral groups don't necessarily have the best interests of native vegetation protection as their primary objective, and therefore might try to exert undue influence
- How are they going to decipher and implement?
- How to deal with proposals that cover multiple Bioregions
- How will it be resourced
- Offsets must be used to protect the most unique, diverse and special environments - not allocating an unwanted / unremarkable block just to meet the area
- Where is the information going to come from?
- Will there be a high cost approach?

Yours Sincerely

Phil Harbour/Convenor, South West Environment Centre Inc.

Email: swecwa@gmail.com