NATURE RESERVES PRESERVATION GROUP

KALAMUNDA WA 6926
www.nrpg.org.au
[redacted]

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Subject: Submission on draft Native vegetation Policy for Western Australia.

This submission is made on behalf of the NRPG, a long-established conservation umbrella group based in the City of Kalamunda. At present, native vegetation is not effectively protected, therefore losses continue at an increasing rate. It is hoped that, as a result of public comment on this draft, combined with State Government action, better protection and enhancement of this valuable resource will be achieved. The final policy should reflect the rapidly-changing community priorities, and the increasing recognition of the physical and spiritual benefits of retaining and improving the health and extent of native vegetation.

As is customary with NRPG submissions, sections of major interest in the issues paper will be quoted in italics, followed by 'boxed' NRPG comments.

Minister's foreword.

The general tenor of this section is encouraging, the Extensive community consultation has revealed the widespread community concern that the values of native vegetation are under threat. These values should be acknowledged, the threat countered and protection increased.

"This policy will lay the foundations for enduring reforms to ensure native vegetation is managed strategically, transparently and with a clear view to the future."

The sentence would be more comforting if more specific language had been used. Without the use of more specific language, it becomes yet another noncommittal and rather woolly statement.

"A more strategic, flexible approach to offsets will improve certainty…"

The current use of offsets will be addressed later in the submission.

Have your say.

"Calls for State of the Environment reporting."

"How is it addressed in the draft policy?
The policy drives the data collection and sharing across government (roadmap action 2.2), and investment in a new tool to map and monitor native vegetation coverage roadmap (action 3.1), which will enable reporting on status and trends."

This will be addressed by comments on Roadmap section 3.1.

Purpose

"To protect and enhance Western Australia's native vegetation … The State Government recognises the need to:

- *prevent the extinction of threatened species*
- *protect areas of high conservation value; and*
- *achieve a nett gain in native vegetation extent"*

At **all** stages of the implementation of the final policy, the Minister and her Departments must refer to this section. Despite the complexity and voluminous nature of the policy itself, its progress **must** be measured against these three needs. Three questions must regularly be asked. With this policy:

- is it preventing the extinction of threatened species?
- are areas of high conservation value being protected?
- has it achieved a nett gain in native vegetation extent?

Policy Statement

"policy settings which:

- *achieve conservation and restoration of native vegetation while also delivering other state priorities like regional prosperity, Aboriginal wellbeing and a strong economy."*

Such wide-ranging desired outcomes, perhaps an attempt to be all things to all sections of society, fail to acknowledge the fact that any **genuine** concerted effort to *"achieve conservation and restoration of native vegetation…"* may prove unable to deliver the other outcomes. In such a situation, if this policy is to have meaning, native vegetation must take precedence.

- *"include targets and thresholds where they are warranted and achievable"*

For this policy to have the desired effect, targets must always be set, whether or not they are, at the time deemed to be *"achievable"*.

- *"apply the **mitigation hierarchy** steps to any planned impacts on native vegetation at both strategic and project scale – avoid, minimise then rehabilitate, before offsets are considered"*

Given the considerable damage to and loss of native vegetation since the offsets policies and guidelines were launched, the above statement should be stressed. The major failing of the policies is that the end result is always a net loss of a vegetation complex and biodiversity values. Unfortunately, all too often the offset dictum, *'Avoid, Minimise, Rehabilitate and Offset'* is "more honoured in the breach". See later comments at section 4.2 Environmental offsets

Context

"Western Australia's native vegetation is internationally renowned for its biodiversity and gives character to the state's unique and iconic landscapes."

This sentence and the ensuing paragraphs fail to describe adequately the uniqueness of our native vegetation and its intrinsic values. This is a missed opportunity to highlight the world ranking of our native vegetation. To do justice to the values of our native vegetation, this section should include the following:

The biodiversity of the native vegetation of the South West of Western Australia is one of 36 globally-recognised biodiversity hotspots. These hotspots must meet two basic criteria – they must contain at least 1500 species of vascular plants found nowhere else on earth (endemic species) and, have lost at least 70% of their primary native vegetation. These hotspots may therefore be considered **irreplaceable** and **threatened**. This South West region contains a wealth of native species of flora and fauna, together with ecological communities occurring nowhere else.

"Western Australia's native vegetation…provides timber and bush products."

Whilst at present, the statement is correct, without a qualification that the current system used to extract these values, results in unacceptable loss of native vegetation and must therefore cease, this phrase should be deleted from the document.

"Western Australia's vegetation … is culturally and spiritually significant to Aboriginal people and underpins community wellbeing…"

Despite this welcome acknowledgement, within this State, Commonwealth Government environmental legislation has failed to protect significant areas of native vegetation. The destruction of these significant environmental values on the Perth Airport estate is a prime example. The leased Commonwealth-owned estate is effectively 'protected' from State environmental regulations. This emphasises the need for this Native Vegetation Policy to have the capacity to protect native vegetation wherever in the State it exists.

This significance and 'sense of place' is strong within the Perth Metropolitan area. The area contains many mini biodiversity hotspots, worthy of recognition and of tremendous benefit to the population at large. This fact should be included in the 'Context' section, given its direct relevance to all within the Metropolitan Region, whose 'wellbeing' is enhanced by easy access to such physically and mentally restorative areas.

"The policy … will foster protection and enhancement of the state's native vegetation together with ***ecologically sustainable development****."*

Given the 'elastic' definitions used for *'sustainable'*, *'sustainability'*, *'sustainable development'*, *'sustainable use'* and the above *'ecologically sustainable development'*, without detailed expansion of the term, this statement promises little. See also comments below at '***Guiding Principles***'# 11.

Table 1

Areas of State Government responsibility

"The policy will support agencies to contribute to international and national ecological sustainability goals, through native vegetation management."

This sentence lacks clarity. *'Management'* must include the protection of that native vegetation and should be the main purpose of the management regime. Redrafting to read – *"through native vegetation* ***protection*** *and management…*" would improve this statement.

Guiding Principles

Given that this section is the stated underpinning for the policy, it is essential it is carefully drafted. Whilst the majority of the principles are welcomed and supported, some are supported **only** with changes made, as below:

2. "Western Australia's unique flora and iconic ecosystems are nationally and globally significant for biodiversity conservation. Ensuring their protection and sustainable use is an obligation of all levels of government."

"and sustainable use" is a phrase which should be deleted, given the wide- ranging interpretations used, which frequently allow significant damage to ecosystems.

3. 'Native vegetation is of cultural value to aboriginal people…"

Given the strength of cultural links to native vegetation, the added significance to aboriginal people of this vegetation should be stressed. Inserting *"****significant"****,* before *"cultural value"* would achieve this.

5.

The text of principle *1* renders this 'principle' redundant. It should therefore be deleted from the draft.

6. "Conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity should be fundamental considerations in managing native vegetation."

As written, this is an inherently weak 'principle'. Replacing *"should be"* with *"are"* and inserting *"protecting and"* after *"in"* will correct this.

7. "A comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) reserve system is an important mechanism for conserving native vegetation, species and communities."

CAR is more than an important mechanism. It is an ***"essential mechanism"*** for effective conservation. To strengthen this weak statement - request the text be amended to read either *"is an essential mechanism…"* or *"is essential for…"*.

8. "Stewardship of native vegetation by all land managers is vital to ensure landscape health"…"

This principle will be strengthened by ending the text at *"health"*, deleting the rest of the principle which has no place in a policy *"underpinning"*, but which may be addressed later within the policy.

10. "…where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation."

The term '***precautionary principle'*** is in common use in environmental science, the term should therefore be included here. Since its component parts include placing the burden of proof on proponents of an action and increasing public participation in decision making, its importance should be emphasised. Add, following *"environmental degradation." "The precautionary principle should be rigorously applied in all such decisions".*

11. "Ecologically sustainable development is essential to the wellbeing and prosperity of Western Australians … and requires balancing environmental, economic and social considerations in decision making."

The distinctly 'elastic' definition of *"sustainable development"* frequently results in significant loss of native vegetation. All too often, the *"balancing"* of conflicting *"considerations"* results in further loss and degradation of native vegetation. It should be acknowledged that, in some situations, these *"considerations"* and the survival of native vegetation may be mutually exclusive. In such cases, if the *"cumulative loss of important native vegetation"* is to be arrested, the native vegetation (a rapidly diminishing asset) should prevail.

14. "The condition and extent of Australia's native vegetation is declining. Addressing the decline requires coordinated management across all land tenures, supporting connectivity and maintenance of ecosystem function."

Add, *"together with the maintenance of all existing native vegetation."*

15. "In the ***intensive land use zone****, in particular the* ***Swan Coastal Plain*** *and the* ***Wheatbelt****, … historic clearing has been extensive. A nett improvement in the condition and extent of native vegetation can be achieved through strategic coordination and stewardship across sectors, and will restore landscape and ecosystem functions."*

This principle must be improved by replacing *"can be achieved"* by the more imperative *"**must** be achieved"*. Any *"nett improvement"* will be achieved **only** if **all** remaining native vegetation is retained and protected. This should be a clearly stated element of this principle.

*16. "**In the extensive land use zone** … native vegetation is subject to a range of degrading processes…".*

It is in this zone that drastic changes to leaseholder arrangements may be needed. Legislation must be able to accommodate and encourage those owners and leaseholders who wish to improve the native vegetation on their holdings. There are remarkable examples of landscape transformations. De-stocking, revegetation and diversification have restored leases to a vegetation state approaching their 'natural' state. The will is there and should be utilised.

Strategies and outcomes

Strategy 1. Planning, collaboration and coordination

Whilst the *Goals* and *Approaches* appear comprehensive, their somewhat vague and open-to-interpretation nature gives cause for concern.

v. "Acquire and effectively manage a comprehensive adequate and representative reserve system [CAR] *for terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems."*

There should be national requirements for this system in each region. For example, there should be a **full** implementation of Bush Forever, to guarantee a CAR reserve system for the Swan Coastal Plain in the Perth Metropolitan Area.

viii. "Improve the condition of native vegetation by identifying and addressing threats and threatening processes (e.g. climate change, inappropriate fire regimes, inappropriate water regimes and quality, pests and unsustainable use."

It is heartening to see these examples of threats and threatening processes listed. Many threats to the native vegetation are well known and acknowledged. Establishing a comprehensive list of all such threats should be given high priority. If threats are to be successfully countered, close cooperation and coordination between relevant state bodies will be essential. Once identified, such threats must be urgently addressed, given the rate at which the changing climate is driving many of these threats.

Strategy 2. Contemporary systems and practice

vi. "Promote transparency through publishing data and decisions which account for the values of native vegetation."

Whilst all the *'Approaches'* are supported, it is considered the above will be of most relevance to those making submissions on this policy. Relevant data and decisions must be made widely available on a regular basis. **All** data relevant to native vegetation values should be freely available, particularly in cases where the data suggest the policy settings are not working.

Strategy 3. Build and share knowledge

All the approaches are supported and welcomed.

Goal b.

"Statewide mapping and monitoring is developed, enabling a whole-of-state view of issues and trends."

This overall view is frequently ignored or fails to gain significance in many local situations. Cumulative losses of vegetation and biodiversity values are frequently glossed over or, occasionally, blithely dismissed when environmental implications of projects are assessed.

Strategy 4. All sectors enabled

"Build public understanding of the critical contribution of native vegetation to community wellbeing."

In the wake of the COVID pandemic, this contribution is increasing recognised by more and more sectors of the community. Every opportunity should now be taken to increase and utilise this growing understanding, for the long-term benefit of the native vegetation.

ii. "Manage native vegetation in ways that deliver economic, social and employment opportunities for traditional owners, other aboriginal people and regional Western Australians."

See earlier comments on Guiding Principle *11*.

iv. "explore mechanisms for appropriate pricing and markets, potentially broader than existing offset schemes. To reward good stewardship and provide economic opportunities."

Whilst strong reservations exist on the effectiveness of the WA environmental Offsets Framework, the concept of rewarding *good stewardship* and providing *economic opportunities* with mutual benefits for landholders/leaseholders, is supported. Excellent examples of such initiatives already exist, demonstrating a willingness to engage in such stewardship. This willing resource should be encouraged and given all possible support. Together with *approach* v., such support will improve the native vegetation within all land zones depicted in Fig. 1 (p.5).

Roadmap: Priorities and Opportunities

"To achieve the intended outcomes, this policy identifies a roadmap of priorities and opportunities to be implemented primarily through State Government actions."

If the rate of destruction of native vegetation is to be arrested, there is an urgent need for prompt action. The current Roadmap staging does not reflect this urgency and should be changed. Having stage 3 extend to 10 years implies there is little or no urgency for actions to be completed. Stages should have a **completion**, rather than a commencement target. For the stages to reflect the real urgency, the term *"commence in…"* should be replaced with ***"be completed within…"***. Stage 1 actions should be completed within 2 years, Stage 2 actions in 2 to 4 years and Stage 3 actions completed in 4 to 6 years.

"Achievement of the roadmap actions will be monitored through a steering committee of Directors general, with annual public reporting on progress."

This welcome initiative must ensure that measures failing to produce results will be changed and planned 'staging' altered to suit emerging difficulties. Will the public have access to this steering committee and its deliberations and if so, through what mechanism? This question should be answered in the final draft.

Strategy 1. Planning, collaboration and coordination

1.4 "Establish monitoring and evaluation against regionally tailored objectives and priorities, leveraging native vegetation extent, condition and type data, and biodiversity audit data supported by strategy 3 actions."

Given that *"regionally tailored objectives and priorities"* start being implemented within one to three years, as stage 1 actions (Ref. *1.2* and *1.3*) , having this action commence in six to ten years, is not appropriate. See also initial comments (above) on staging.

1.6 "Address ongoing loss of native vegetation in the Wheatbelt…"

Sections *a, b, c*, of this action are strongly supported, as is its stage 1 listing. See also earlier comments at **Strategy 4**, *iv*.

1.7 "Establish a new roadside vegetation advisory group under s.25 of the Environmental Protection Act 1986."

Under past applications of the EP Act, roadside native vegetation clearing increased. In many cases such clearing was justified on dubious or specious safety grounds. The **Environmental Protection Amendment Act 2020** should be at the stage 2 proclamation and, it is hoped its implementation will result in a reduction of such clearing. A new advisory group is

welcomed, if it proves willing to reflect changing community views on roadside vegetation values. Retention of biodiversity and serving as ecological linkages and wildlife corridors, are but three of those values.

1.8 "Improved coordination of the State Government's mechanisms for managing ***silviculture activities (****including* ***thinning)*** *in* ***south-west forests and woodlands –*** *"*

DWER must ensure that, as lead agency, native vegetation retention and health remain at the forefront of its desired outcomes. Particular consideration should be given to input from DFES and FPC. In the case of DFES - of necessity, the 'environment' (including native vegetation) **must** be subordinate to, human life and property. Whilst steps are being undertaken to improve outcomes for native vegetation, more research is needed. The Forest Products Commission likewise, will inevitably have priorities employing actions resulting in loss of native vegetation. The lead agency must therefore be careful to 'balance' these conflicting priorities whilst achieving a nett gain in native vegetation.

Strategy 2. Contemporary systems and practice

Priority projects

2.6 "Support initiatives to improve rangelands' ecological condition, leveraging pastoral diversification and implementation of the Good Pastoral Land Management Guidelines*."*

Given the complexity of the guidelines, implementation of them should dictate this be listed as a stage 1 action. Given the wide interpretations of *'ecological sustainability'* currently in use, (see earlier comments at **'Context'** and **'Guiding Principles'** # 11), the Pastoral Lands Board definition should be considered, given the final reference to *"future generations"*, viz.

"The management, development and use of natural resources relevant to pastoral operations being undertaken on the land, with an aim to meet the needs of today ***while conserving ecosystems for the benefit of future generations****."*

Strategy 3. Build, share and use knowledge to improve

*3.1 "****Native vegetation extent****: Leverage satellite imagery and machine learning to develop a semi-automated, regularly updated, statewide terrestrial native vegetation extent product. An improved extent product would:*
a) track clearing over time
b) improve statistics on proportion of vegetation type remaining
c) enhance compliance and enforcement capacity."

In **"Have your say"**, section 3.1 was cited in response to calls for State of the Environment reporting. The above section does **not** specifically answer that call from the community. Whilst we fully support all the listed initiatives, all sections of this 'opportunity' should be assigned stage 1. The commitment to regular State of the Environment reporting should be stated here in detail.

Priority projects

3.4 "Improve native vegetation mapping in the Wheatbelt, prioritising mapping to support strategy development…"

See earlier comments on the importance of retaining native vegetation in the Wheatbelt and on the Swan Coastal Plain.

Strategy 4. All sectors enabled

4.2 Environmental offsets

a) "Improve the environmental offsets framework in line with recommendations of the WA environmental offsets framework review."

Given the reservations outlined in the review and the failure of offsets policies to provide anything other than a nett **loss** of native vegetation, the stage 1 rating appears unjustified.

4.3 "Enhance the effectiveness of fuel-mitigation programs across the state to reduce the risk of bushfire to the community and the environment."

In the wake of last fire season's devastating wildfires, this 'opportunity', should be expanded. The current fuel mitigation programs are in many cases, ineffective and result in significant loss of native vegetation and its biodiversity values. To improve outcomes, the failure of current mitigation strategies to protect either the environment or the community, should be highlighted. The need for more research into fire behaviour, vegetation complex survival and building standards should be stressed. Without closer cooperation between the lead agency and the partners, the future for native vegetation looks grim. See also comments at **Strategy 1** *1.8* above.

4.4 "Plan for aboriginal engagement in parks and bushfire management through existing and future initiatives."

The stage 1 rating for this is welcomed and planning is certainly well advanced within DFES and DBCA. Such planning however can bring only minor improvements in current initiatives in the short to medium term. Officers within these organisations do not see their involvement as a 'silver bullet'. Widespread application of indigenous burning practices is not practicable.

4.7 "Build on existing strategies to protect and enhance urban forests."

This should be a stage 1 classification. The extent of clearing of native vegetation on the Swan Coastal Plain and foothills has been dramatic. The rate of clearing has increased with the pressures on local governments for 'infill' development. Consequently, the importance of all remaining native vegetation has increased. DPLH must coordinate closely with local governments if this opportunity is to be effective, since it is at this local level that effective change can be guaranteed.

Conclusion.

The '**Minister's foreword'** and the **'Purpose'** section of this draft provide a degree of encouragement for those concerned for the future of our rapidly-disappearing native vegetation. The complex structure of the document however, with its repetitive nature, proves confusing. It is difficult to determine whether the body of the draft will deliver the desired and promised outcomes.

Implementation of such a wide-ranging and complex policy will require significantly increased funding. Cabinet must increase future budget allocations significantly if the final policy is to successfully carry out its declared purpose. Within DBCA alone, on-ground staff are stretched to the limit, in some measure as a result of welcome initiatives expanding the National and Regional Parks.

Whilst elements of the draft continue to project a more optimistic view of the future of the State's native vegetation, in many sections there is room for declaring more ambitious goals

and stressing the acknowledged urgency of the required actions. Far more emphasis must be placed on describing the biodiversity hotspot that is our state's South West region, together with the reasons for it being declared as such. Without such changes, this welcome initiative will fail to deliver on its early promise.

The attention paid to **"management of vegetation"**, must be balanced by added emphasis on the need for greatly increased **protection of native vegetation**. We consider that, unless this happens, our biodiverse native vegetation and the endangered species dependant upon it, will be driven beyond the rapidly-approaching 'tipping point' for survival. Despite the recent and welcome ban on native forest logging from 2024, the cumulative effect of current clearing continues to be a major threat. There is drastic need for a ban on continued clearing in sensitive areas of the state. Failure to implement such a ban will destroy all hope of a nett gain in the native vegetation extent.

In the NRPG submission (Feb. 2020) on the **Native Vegetation Issues Paper**, at section **4. A bioregional approach**, the introduction of more Environmental Protection Policies (EPPs) was called for, citing an extract from an earlier submission on the Environmental Protection Act. In that extract, the following changes to the *"Key Environmental Protection Policies (EPPs)"* were also requested:

- Any review of this section should be expedited. In light of the perceived *"mixed effectiveness"* of such policies and of the calls for changes to the section, consideration should be given to **expanding the range of EPPs** to include the following:
- All Regional Parks, existing and proposed.
- Banksia Woodlands of the Swan Coastal Plain TEC.
- Tuart forests of the Swan Coastal Plain (critically endangered).
- Reintroduction of the former Wetlands EPP.
- Revocation of any existing EPP should trigger public comment on the EPA's advice to the Minister and, parliamentary approval of the Minister's decision should also be required.

The current draft fails to address this request and no reference to EPPs can be found, despite the direct relevance of such policies to the future of native vegetation. This is considered a serious oversight which should be corrected.

It is encouraging to see climate change acknowledged as a threat to native vegetation. The magnitude of this threat however, lacks prominence within the body of the policy, perhaps becoming lost in efforts to make the policy all things to all people. This defect should be addressed.

NRPG appreciates the opportunity to have input into such a promising and essential piece of legislation. We urge those involved in creating the final draft, to keep key phrases of the **Minister's foreword** and the needs, listed under **'Purpose'** (below), at the forefront of their deliberations. They should then ensure those pledges are honoured.

"…Government's commitment to improve the management and protection of native vegetation."

"Western Australia's native vegetation and iconic landscapes … are worth protecting now and for future generations. This policy will lay the foundations for enduring reforms to

ensure native vegetation is managed strategically, transparently and with a clear view to the future."

"The State Government recognises the need to:

- *Prevent the extinction of threatened species*
- *Protect areas of high conservation value; and*
- *Achieve a nett gain in native vegetation extent"*

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