



Soil and Land Conservation Council

Native Vegetation Strategy Branch
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25 October 2021

Dear Native Vegetation Strategy Branch

Submission to the consultation draft *Native Vegetation Policy for WA*

The Soil and Land Conservation Council Western Australia (Council) has considered the *Native Vegetation Policy for WA* (draft policy) released on 30 August 2021 and provides its feedback in this letter.

Background

The Council advises the Minister for Agriculture and Food and the Commissioner of Soil and Land Conservation (the Commissioner) on policy, management and conservation of Western Australia's soil and land resources.

The Commissioner's key function is preventing and mitigating land degradation, including erosion, salinity, flooding, eutrophication and loss of vegetation. This function includes responding to situations where management threatens or causes land degradation, as well as compliance with the *Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945* (SLC Act) and Regulations.

Feedback

The Council is pleased that draft policy sets out clear goals and promotes strong collaboration with the aim of improving the extent, diversity and condition of native vegetation. The Council notes the broad public consultation process undertaken on the *Native Vegetation in WA issues paper* and the draft policy. We appreciate the time that the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (DWER)'s Native Vegetation Strategy Branch took to provide an outline of the draft policy and roadmap and answer our questions.

Council supports that the policy applies to all State Government agencies with responsibilities that influence native vegetation. As a State Government board, the Soil and Land Conservation Council will consider the policy's proposed values and practice guiding principles when advising on native vegetation matters in the context of our legislative role set out in the SLC Act.

The Council notes the strong synergies with the proposed draft policy roadmap and our current focus areas of the implementation for the draft *Western Australian Soil Health Strategy; Framework for Sustainable Pastoral Management* and the WA Government's *Government Response to Impacts of Salinity*.

Council considers the following points as the priority matters to invest in the proposed policy roadmap for implementation and provides its in principle support for the draft policy strategies. Resourcing and partnerships will be key to achieving a net gain in native vegetation.

Strategy 1: Planning, collaboration and coordination

- Council considers the proposed strategic collaborations and planning in Strategy 1.1 as priority deliverables. Council notes the Commissioner is leading the review of soil and land conservation policies and practices, including promotion and education, to support effective compliance under the SLC Act and to achieve sustainable land management outcomes. Some of these initiatives will contribute to improved native vegetation outcomes.
- Council considers that Strategies 1.6 and 3.4 are priority deliverables for the WA Government. Dryland salinity is a significant contributor to the ongoing loss of native vegetation in the Wheatbelt. Council supports the whole-of-government strategy for a net improvement in the extent of Wheatbelt native vegetation. Council notes DPIRD and CSIRO's work to map the extent and risk of dryland salinity. As well as identifying changes to productive land it will assist in identifying hazard and risk areas to remaining native vegetation. The WA government also supports soil conservation through salinity management options for landholders.

Strategy 2: Contemporary systems and practice

Council is keen to see improved contemporary systems and practice for native vegetation management.

- Council supports the need to improve operational systems, policy and processes for clearing permits (Strategy 2.5).
- Council notes the SLC Act Conservation Covenants and Soil Conservation Notices are regulatory tools that contribute to native vegetation protection and should be considered as important tools in clear and accountable regulatory processes. Better coordination between covenant mechanisms and auditing of their condition overtime, could be improved. Landowners who wish to protect and manage native vegetation on their property may enter into an agreement (covenant) with the Commissioner of Soil and Land Conservation under section 30 of the SLC Act. The measure and auditing of the success of these systems and practices should be reflected in a single, publicly accessible digital system for native vegetation data capture.
- Council supports the priority action for initiatives that improve rangelands' ecological condition (Strategy 2.6). The WA Government's Pastoral Lands Reform work includes pastoral diversification and implementation of best management practice guidelines including management of the indigenous vegetation quality and density. Council also notes that activities to protect soil health of these grazing landscapes are also integral to maintaining productivity and the density of cover of the perennial forbs and grasses.
- Council notes that the initiatives developed under the draft policy will need to complement the WA Government's contemporary risk-based *Framework for Sustainable Pastoral Management*. The framework sets out the underpinning standards to assess vegetation condition and to address land condition and degradation issues.
- DPIRD oversees the management of NRInfo (natural resource information) of native vegetation (type, pre-European extent, current extent, interim biogeographic regions of Australia). This is part of DPIRD's role in providing information for all sectors of agriculture to promote sustainable resource use. Equally, the multi-agency LandMonitor program has had significant impact and delivers specific salinity and vegetation products derived from satellite imagery for the South-West Western Australia.

Strategy 3: Build and share knowledge

Council supports the proposed actions to build, share and use knowledge to improve native vegetation extent, biodiversity and condition.

- Council believes that DPIRD's work to develop a monitoring system to track rangeland condition across WA's pastoral region using remote sensing will contribute to better understanding of the condition of native vegetation. This work is essential to understand changes in the condition of pastoral land native vegetation.
- Further, as referred to above, Council supports 3.4 as a priority project, in that improving native vegetation mapping in the Wheatbelt is also an important response to dryland salinity management.

Strategy 4: All sectors enabled

Another priority is to support and reward good stewardship of native vegetation.

- The draft *Western Australian Soil Health Strategy* sets the strategic direction to guide policy, research, investment, and on-ground actions that support the management, protection, and improvement of soil functions and associated ecosystem services for the next 10 years. Council would like to see coordination between DPIRD and DWER, particularly in identifying initiatives to support fit for purpose soil health practices, including integration of native vegetation with other productive agricultural land uses or through ecologically sustainable use in pastoralism. As referred to in Strategy 3, there are synergies in data collection and reporting on soil health to monitor land condition.
- The Council suggests that the WA Government undertake further exploration of how offsets for private landowners could drive a net improvement to native vegetation in the Wheatbelt. Policy mechanisms to reward good stewardship and 'gained' vegetation for private land managers, particularly in the Wheatbelt, should be examined.
- Council considers that supporting land managers in having access to the latest scientific information so that they can adapt their production systems to remain productive and resilient, is a key part of land management. Currently there are several programs supporting land managers' innovation networks including the Grower Group Alliance, which is leading the South-West WA Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub in developing farmer-centred drought innovation and adoption practices in South-West Western Australia. Another synergy is the DPIRD facilitated \$15 million Climate Resilience Fund to develop new agricultural management techniques that support soil health and help farmers manage the impacts of climate change. This work is a deliverable for the *Western Australian Soil Health Strategy*.
- Council notes that in reference to native revegetation, there is complexity in the definition of what is locally indigenous and the associated risk of genetic pollution of local populations. There may be a need for species-specific recommendations based on sound scientific knowledge. The native seed and shrub industry, and volunteer organisations must have clear guidelines for the collection and the reporting of the provenance of seed and seed/seedling quality. A vibrant and professional nursery industry is critical to service multiple revegetation and carbon planting programmes. The often-cyclic nature of government policies can lead to significant disruption and boom/bust cycles for nurseries. Greater demand, longer project lead times and willingness to pay for appropriately sourced species may support more business opportunities and better outcomes.

Council approves this submission be made public.

uncil looks forward to encouraging strong partnerships
ies to deliver the Native Vegetation Policy.

