

Native Vegetation Strategy
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Dear Sir/Madam

**ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AUTHORITY SUBMISSION ON
CONSULTATION DRAFT NATIVE VEGETATION POLICY FOR WESTERN
AUSTRALIA**

Thank you for your invitation to the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) to comment on the *Consultation draft Native Vegetation Policy for Western Australia*.

Background

In February 2020, the EPA provided comment on the *Native Vegetation in Western Australia – Issues Paper for Public Consultation* (Issues Paper). Following the Issues Paper, the EPA recognises the significant consultation process and efforts that underpins the release of the *Consultation Draft Native Vegetation Policy for Western Australia* (draft policy) and explanatory notes. The draft policy sets out a clear roadmap for the Western Australian (WA) State Government initiative to drive better coordination, consistency and transparency in the protection and management of native vegetation. The EPA commends the initiative and continued attention to improve the state of WA's biologically diverse and unique native vegetation.

The EPA maintains a robust policy suite to support delivery of its advice, including environmental impact assessments (EIA) and strategic advice under its functions in the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* (EP Act). The policy suite relevant for consideration of native vegetation is underpinned by the EPA's factors and objectives, particularly the EPA's objective *to protect flora and vegetation so that biological diversity and ecological integrity are maintained*. The EPA policy suite includes an environmental factor guideline and technical guidance on flora and vegetation for EIA, environmental factor guideline for inland waters and guidance for planners and developers for protection of naturally vegetated areas (e.g consistent with section 16(k) of the EP Act). The EPA notes the opportunity for the draft policy to signal existing mechanisms for protection within the EP Act.

It is in this context that we provide the following comments.

Consultation draft Native Vegetation Policy for Western Australia

The draft policy recognises the complex policy and regulatory environment for the protection and management of native vegetation in WA. This includes the broader connectivity of native vegetation with land and water management, Aboriginal values and uses and intrinsic relationship to climate change and mitigation. The EPA notes that evidence-based fire management is an important part of native vegetation policy and should be considered further in the draft policy.

The EPA is particularly supportive of the initiative to establish a Statewide native vegetation extent and type product and emphasises the need to resource this initiative appropriately. This single source of truth on native vegetation will support all decision-making processes that intersect with native vegetation as well as utilising modern techniques, data capture and approaches to support the delivery of information. This approach aligns with existing environmental reforms in streamlining environmental information, data capture and management. The EPA notes this approach is also a complementary mechanism to support no-net loss, which only further enhances native vegetation for its inherent biological values as well as its contributions to climate change mitigation. The EPA emphasises that the draft policy should explicitly address net environmental benefits within native vegetation and clearly signal the opportunities around enhancement and restoration of native vegetation within the associated mechanisms.

The EPA recognises that native vegetation has a range of different values to different stakeholders, and the management and use of vegetation varies across sectors. As a result, the EPA makes the following points for consideration:

- *Aboriginal knowledge and values* – There is a clear opportunity for the draft policy to elevate the knowledge, values and uses of native vegetation to Aboriginal people and communities, including both the tangible and intangible aspects of cultural values. The EPA notes there are opportunities to ensure that Aboriginal knowledge and values are given greater regard in both the policy and the roadmap, particularly around recognising traditional owners as partners in co-design for current and future opportunities to protect and manage native vegetation.
- *Mitigation hierarchy* – The EPA notes the challenges and risks associated with establishing thresholds and targets as referenced in the draft policy. Given the state of native vegetation in WA, signalling potential application of thresholds and targets may further exacerbate vulnerable vegetation types and communities. The EPA emphasises the opportunity to elevate the mitigation hierarchy, consistent with the EPA's approach and apply it more broadly to achieve the most beneficial environmental outcomes possible. The EPA's mitigation hierarchy, which focuses on avoidance of impacts and encourages innovative solutions may be a more robust approach to ensure vegetation quality

and connectivity are emphasised rather than quantity alone as a valuable measure for preserving biological diversity and ecological functioning. Furthermore, there are opportunities in the policy to recognise the value in connectivity and quality of native vegetation and the risks associated with fragmentation. The EPA favours the mitigation hierarchy and emphasises that the policy needs to ensure that WA exceeds any bar standards that are put forward.

- *Environmental offsets* – The EPA notes the broader initiative around the review of the Western Australian Environmental Offsets Framework. The EPA has clearly identified some of the challenges in environmental offsets and opportunities to improve the offsets principles and how they are applied in WA. The EPA encourages the alignment of any application of offsets for native vegetation with internationally accepted offsets principles and coordination with the existing WA offsets reform initiative. The EPA emphasises the need for the draft policy to signal offset opportunities around enhancement and restoration for net benefits for native vegetation.
- *Regionally tailored approach and cumulative impacts* – There are clear opportunities within the draft policy and roadmap of opportunities for greater acknowledgement and emphasis on the risks to native vegetation due to cumulative impacts. The EPA is particularly interested in taking a strategic approach to better understand native vegetation values and associated threats across WA in the context of cumulative impacts and recognises the value of taking a regional approach. The EPA is interested in further clarification on approach and how regionally tailored important information (e.g. environmental values and threats) will be addressed as the draft policy and roadmap develops further.

Conclusions

In summary, the EPA is supportive of the *Consultation draft Native Vegetation policy for Western Australia* as a critical step towards improving the transparency, consistency and robustness of decision-making related to native vegetation in WA. The EPA recognises the effort and coordination in delivering the draft policy and believes there are further opportunities to ensure a robust and rigorous approach for the protection and management of WA's native vegetation, which is recognised globally for its biological richness and diversity.

The EPA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the draft policy and looks forward to continued engagement in the process.

