

Opening statement from Professor Helene Marsh (Chair, Threatened Species Scientific Community (TSSC))

Thank you for inviting me today. I would like to update you on three key areas of the TSSC's work. My key messages are:

1. The expanded TSSC is now fully functional with 12 members including five new members participating enthusiastically and knowledgeably in all aspects of our work. The Committee is ably supported by an expert bureaucracy including contractors employed to support the delivery of the Bushfire Response package, including species assessments.
2. The TSSC is making good progress with the 10-point Bushfire Response Plan developed by the TSSC in February 2020, and
3. The TSSC is working hard to ensure that efficient, flexible and fit-for-purpose conservation plans continue to be in place for all listed species to guide recovery and restoration actions in this time of rapid environmental change.

Highlights of the TSSC's progress with the 10-point bushfire response plan

- The TSSC has engaged with the Bushfire Recovery Expert Panel, scientific experts, state and territory governments and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, to identify, prioritise and analyse fire-affected species and ecological communities for listing assessment.
- As of February 2021, 48 species and 5 ecological communities affected by the bushfires had been included on the Committee's formal work plan, the Finalised Priority Assessment List. These species include the koala and the greater glider, which are being assessed for potential transfer to a higher listing category.
- There are considerably more species and ecological communities which require consideration. The TSSC is continuing to evaluate emerging analysis of the impacts on fires on plant and animal species and ecological communities and make recommendations to the Minister on further priorities. The Committee recently identified a tranche of fire-affected plant species and additional fire-affected ecological communities which we will propose to the Minister should be prioritised for assessment.
- The impacts of the fires have been incorporated into assessments, which were already underway for fire-affected species and ecological communities. The Minister for the Environment has made listing decisions for 11 fire-affected species since April 2020 including three mammal species, which were showing earlier signs of recovery but were retained in the Endangered category of the list because of the impacts of the fires, and two plant species, which were listed as Critically Endangered due to the impacts of Myrtle Rust and the fires.
- With the agreement of the Minister, the Committee has continued to accept public nominations of fire-affected species and ecological communities. To date, nominations for two species and one ecological community have been prioritised for assessment based on public nominations. The species are two spiders that were severely impacted by the intense fires on Kangaroo Island in South Australia.
- The Committee will continue to undertake preliminary evaluations of other fire-affected animals (including the platypus), plants and ecological communities.
- The Committee is working closely with the Department to identify a priority list of fire-affected species whose conservation advice and recovery plans require updating to

include the impacts of, and management response to, the 2019-20 fires. The first tranche of such conservation advices have been prioritised based on level of fire impact.

- A priority tranche of conservation advices, based on level of fire impact, are under review. Approximately 70 of these had been drafted as at mid-February 2021.
- The updated draft assessment of the 'Fire regimes that cause biodiversity decline Key Threatening Process' was considered at the TSSC's February 2021 meeting and this assessment is continuing out-of-session.
- The Committee continues to work closely with the Threatened Species Commissioner and the Minister for the Environment on a coordinated response to bushfire recovery through:
 - my meetings with the Minister,
 - the Minister attending the February 2021 meeting of the TSSC,
 - the Threatened Species Commissioner attending TSSC meetings as a standing item to discuss bushfire recovery efforts, and
 - departmental officers providing ongoing active liaison between the TSSC, Threatened Species Commissioner's Office and the Minister's Office.
- a full account of these activities will be placed on the DAWE website

Conservation Planning

The EPBC Act enables a conservation planning toolbox containing statutory tools for guiding the recovery of species and ecological communities, such as conservation advices, recovery plans for a single listed entity or a group of listed entities, regional plans including strategic assessments and regional recovery plans and threat abatement plans.

Many stakeholders emphasise only one tool - a single species recovery plan. In this time of rapid environmental change, the TSSC supports increasing use of all the tools in the toolbox.

For example, the TSSC considers that conservation advices have several advantages.

Conservation advices can:

- be prepared quickly and updated easily and responsively as new information on species status, threats and management scenarios come to hand. This enables a rapid response to environmental catastrophes such as the 2019-20 fires.
- act as foundation documents for more complex planning instruments such as recovery plans, bioregional plans and multi-entity recovery plans as required,
- be supported by recovery teams or other governance to coordinate implementation,
- inform Australian Government investment in threatened species conservation.

The TSSC will continue to recommend a recovery plan where it is likely to be the best tool for achieving improved outcomes for the species or ecological communities involved, which might be when:

- there are significant complexities in conservation planning, for example
 - the listed entity is subject to multiple, significant threats;
 - the range of the entity occurs across multiple state, territory or Commonwealth borders; across multiple tenures; and/or across a high proportion of private land;
 - there are large numbers, and diversity of stakeholders; and/or
- the entity is primarily located in Commonwealth land or sea; and/or

- the entity has a relatively high number of referrals for assessment under the EPBC Act.

Reforming conservation planning under the EPBC Act

The TSSC is working with the Department to reform conservation planning under the EPBC Act by:

- developing an Action Plan for Conservation Planning that is being considered by the Minister.
- ensuring that efficient, flexible and fit-for-purpose conservation plans continue to be in place for all listed species to guide recovery and restoration actions. We have reviewed the recovery plan decisions for 811 species and ecological communities that predate contemporary recovery plan decision making (i.e., recovery plan decisions made before 2013).
- where no conservation advice is in place for a listed entity with a sunseting or out-of-date recovery plan, the TSSC will consider and recommend conservation advices for approval by the Minister to guide the recovery of the listed entities. This will require us to consider 200 conservation advices completed for entities by the time that their relevant recovery plans sunset.
- in providing conservation advices to the Minister, the TSSC will include advice on whether: (1) a recovery team or similar is needed to guide implementation; (2) a conservation advice should subsequently inform other planning instruments such as a regional plan or a multi-entity conservation plan; and/or (3) a suggested date for the review of a conservation advice, if such advice is appropriate.
- Recovery plans are continuing to be developed for those species and ecological communities that the Minister: (1) has agreed still require a recovery plan or (2) decides require a recovery plan.
- The TSSC is working with the Department to complete new or revised recovery plans for priority listed entities in the next twelve months including the Koala, Swift Parrot, Australian Fairy Tern, Mahogany Glider, Australasian Bittern and Greater Bilby.