

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCE COMMITTEE

Effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

Public Hearing – Friday, 15 February 2013

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 001

Senator Cameron asked:

Senator CAMERON: I cannot let this opportunity go past without raising an issue that has been raised this week in estimates—flying foxes and the relationship with some protected flying foxes in north Queensland, I think. One senator said the flying foxes were protected and the public were at risk of children being killed because of infection from flying foxes. How do you deal with that issue? There was a view that people should be allowed to protect their children before you protect wildlife. This is a huge issue and I am not sure that it has been discussed.

Prof. Marsh: It is a huge issue and an issue of values.

CHAIR: Can I tempt Senator Cameron and those before us by saying that for the scientific committee it is not an issue, because your assessment role is essentially to ask whether the flying foxes are endangered.

Prof. Marsh: Exactly.

Mr Flanigan: I was going to make a similar comment. The scientific committee is charged with only considering the scientific facts around threat and, under the act, is very specifically not asked—

Senator CAMERON: What should be in it then?

Mr Flanigan: That is an opinion, bowing to my colleague who was here a little while ago.

Senator CAMERON: Would you like to get it on notice?

Mr Flanigan: I think we already have.

CHAIR: If you could take on notice at least how the consideration of human impacts of such decisions needs to be weighed. I guess that falls within a slightly different category to the normal debate about economic impacts, but I do not want to get us bogged down here.

Answer:

The grey-headed flying-fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) and spectacled flying fox (*Pteropus conspicillatus subsp. conspicillatus*) are both listed as vulnerable under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and as a result are considered Matters of National Environmental Significance. Activities likely to have a significant impact on matters of national environmental significance must be referred to the Australian Government for assessment.

Once a project has been assessed by the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, the department makes a recommendation to the Australian Government environment minister or delegate about whether or not the project should be approved to proceed. The minister assesses all the information provided by the department before making a decision about whether or not the project should proceed, and if so, whether any specific conditions need to be attached to that approval. In addition to considering potential impacts on matters of national environmental significance, in making a decision the minister also considers the social and economic impact of the project.

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Question Number: 002

Senator Cameron asked:

Senator WATERS: How many species get culled from assessment during that FPAL/PPAL process. Perhaps you could just give us a potted explanation of what those two prioritisation processes are.

Ms Callister: I can answer that. Perhaps I should also go back to your previous question about the committee being consulted on prioritisation of research. They are consulted on prioritisation of any research that goes into recovery plans. I thought it was worthwhile clarifying that.

It is difficult to give an overarching figure, because it will vary from year to year. It depends on how many nominations we get each year, but I think we—

Senator WATERS: Perhaps as a proportion.

Ms Callister: It really does vary. Some years it most of them will go through and be listed on the priority assessment list, and some years it may be half to two-thirds. It really does vary depending on the lists and the quality of the nominations that we get. There is a bit of a filtering process, so, in the first instance, the regulations outline what those nominations need to have in them, and some of them do not need those regulation checks. We also get frivolous ones and so on, and some those will get culled out through the process.

Senator WATERS: Would you mind taking on notice the precise figures of which nominations have been rejected on the basis of those FPAL/PPAL—

Ms Callister: I will check. I think we may have provided some previous figures to the committee before as part of the estimates process. I will see what we have.

Answer:

We have received 116 nominations for species since the amendments to the act in 2007. Twenty-six of these nominations have been rejected. Of these 26: seven failed the regulations under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and were considered ineligible; 13 were not considered a priority by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee; and six were rejected due to insufficient data.

Each year, there is a call for nominations for listing of threatened species, threatened ecological communities and key threatening processes under the EPBC Act. Not all nominations received are assessed. Nominations must meet requirements in the EPBC Act regulations and are then prioritised based on estimated conservation benefit and resources available to undertake assessments.

Those that are prioritised by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee are provided to the minister on the Proposed Priority Assessment List (PPAL). The minister may make changes to the list before approving it to become the Finalised Priority Assessment List (FPAL).

Once the list is finalised assessments begin with a process of public and expert consultation on the nomination, collection of additional information (for example, scientific papers on the species) and preparation of a draft listing advice. Once the Threatened Species Scientific Committee finalises its advice, it provides its advice and recommendations to the minister, who makes the final decision whether to list the species or ecological community as threatened under national environment law.

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Question Number: 003

The Committee asked:

Many submissions have complained that the listing process for threatened species and communities under the EPBC Act is too slow. How do you respond to this claim?

Answer:

In order to determine if a species or ecological community is eligible for listing as threatened under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), the Threatened Species Scientific Committee undertakes a rigorous scientific assessment of the species or ecological community's threat status against criteria set out under the EPBC Act. Timeframes for the completion of assessments are recommended by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee and determined by the Minister. Timeframes vary depending on the complexity of each nomination. When comprehensive information is available, the assessment may be completed as quickly as within four months. The most complex nominations tend to be those relating to ecological communities. Assessment timeframes for these nominations can take up to two years depending on the quality of information and data available.

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee can request that the Minister extend the assessment period for it to complete an assessment. Extension requests can be due to a number of reasons, for example if the Threatened Species Scientific Committee is waiting on additional studies or data to better inform its assessment. Section 194P of the EPBC Act requires that the total length of all extensions of the assessment completion time must not be longer than five years. The Minister can also extend the decision time after receiving the advice from the Threatened Species Scientific Committee, to enable further information to be considered.

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Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 004

The Committee asked:

Many submissions¹ have suggested that the threatened species and communities lists under the EPBC Act are incomplete, inaccurate and are not reviewed regularly.

- What is your response?
- How often are existing listings under the EPBC Act reviewed?
- Is there any system of regular reviews of the EPBC lists?

Answer:

Listings or reviews of threatened species and communities are driven by receipt of nominations as per *Subdivision AA – The nomination and listing process* under s194A of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). Any person may submit a nomination.

Dependent upon available resources existing threatened species and ecological communities listings under the EPBC Act are reviewed if new information, such as significant changes in threat status, distribution, abundance or taxonomic changes is received about a particular item in a nomination or from states and territories.

Reviews are triggered if new information is provided on significant change.

¹ see eg WWF, *Submission 81*, p. 7; Professor John Woinarski, *Submission 48*, p. 6.

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Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 005

The Committee asked:

What measures are being taken to reduce duplication and inconsistency with State and Territory threatened species lists?

Answer:

Species Information Partnerships between the Australian Government and states and territories were established in 2004. Under these partnerships, listing information was provided on state and territory endemic species that led to alignment of listings.

These were then superseded in 2010 by Memorandums of Understanding between the Commonwealth and several states and territories regarding the alignment of threatened species lists. These Memorandums specifically addressed:

- Reducing duplication of effort with species assessments;
- Strengthening intergovernmental cooperation between scientific committees; and
- More efficient sharing of information, with a partnership approach to protecting the environment and species conservation.

The government agreed with the findings of the Hawke Review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), that found there are inconsistencies and inefficiencies between jurisdictions in the listing of threatened species. In its response, the government also noted the need to make the lists of all Australian jurisdictions centrally available, and is committed to addressing these issues.

The government is consulting with state and territory governments regarding the introduction of a harmonised national list and ways to tackle existing misalignment of threatened species lists. It is anticipated that this work will also develop national standards that may eliminate differences, but not all, in species profiles and listing advices.

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Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 006

The Committee asked:

What is the process where there is not enough information or data about a potentially threatened species or community to meet the criteria for listing under the EPBC Act?

Answer:

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee (the Committee) is aware of the issues around data deficiency when considering the eligibility of species or ecological communities as threatened. The Committee's current approach is that, when advising the minister that a species or ecological community is not eligible for listing because of a lack of information or data, the Committee takes a risk assessment approach. It advises the minister as to whether or not it thinks there are concerns, such as the existence of a threat that is still operating on a species. If there are concerns, the Committee may make suggestions on how the data gaps that prevent it meeting listing criteria can potentially be filled.

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Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 007

The Committee asked:

Several submissions have noted that the IUCN¹ Red List of Endangered Species is a more up-to-date list of Australian threatened species. Does the Threatened Species Scientific Committee consider the IUCN Red List when assessing species for listing under the EPBC Act?

Answer:

The Threatened Species Scientific Committee is made aware of the conservation status of species already on the IUCN Red List that are nominated for assessment under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). However, although the threatened categories and criteria under the EPBC Act are similar to those used by the IUCN, the scope of both assessments is very different: the EPBC Act prioritises species at risk in the Australian environment, whereas the IUCN prioritises species that are globally at risk.

¹ International Union for Conservation of Nature.

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Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 008

The Committee asked:

Several submissions¹ have pointed to the fact that to date 'no species listed under the EPBC Act has been downlisted as a result of genuine population recovery'. Is this correct? What is your response?

Answer:

Recovery programs are long-term activities. Many species are threatened due to the legacy of land-use changes and threatening processes and require the long term coordinated efforts of many stakeholders at a range of scales - from site specific and ecosystem level to social and cultural changes. Initial recovery efforts are often directed to improving baseline knowledge of the species, and implementing critical actions to respond to rapid and uncontrollable declines or intervening to slow an existing decline to stabilise the species.

Australia has a relatively short history in recovery planning – most programs are in the relatively early stages of implementation – compared to the United States where after 40 years of experience a systematic review has only recently been able to document the effectiveness of recovery planning².

Australia's experience to date in the implementation of recovery planning is that it is likely to have slowed the decline and averted the extinction of many species, but necessarily needs to be supported by ecosystem-scale approaches to maximise effectiveness. It is expected that the continued application of a combination of species-specific and landscape scale approaches will result in positive long-term outcomes for many species.

Further elaboration on this question is also provided in the answer to Question Number 009.

¹ eg WWF, *Submission 81*, p. 2; The Wilderness Society, *Submission 129*, p. 1.

² Suckling, K., Greenwald, N. and Curry, T. 2012. On time, on target. How the Endangered Species Act is saving America's wildlife. Center for Biological Diversity.

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Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 009

The Committee asked:

Several submissions have been highly critical of the recovery planning process - what is your response to research which suggests that 'recovery planning has no discernible impact on recovery of threatened species'?¹

Answer:

There is little evidence to support the view that 'recovery planning has no discernible impact on the recovery of threatened species', noting the timescale issues referred to in the answer to Question Number 008. Analysis of progress based on listing category changes during the early stages of implementing long-term recovery programs can be uninformative and result in misinformation.

Recovery plan implementation is a long-term process and it may be many years before any significant and long-lasting improvements are observed. However, there is substantial evidence that many recovery programs have made significant advances in the conservation of threatened species, particularly where collaboration and resource availability services the nature and extent of recovery actions required.

In highlighting the success stories in bird conservation in Australia, Birdlife Australia in their submission² noted that Australia has been remarkably effective at conserving threatened bird species and 'would have lost many more species had it not been for the concerted efforts of organisations and individuals to save birds and the funding provided for threatened species recovery, mostly from the Commonwealth.'

Other examples across Australia where investment in and participation by government and the community in recovery programs is leading to conservation success include programs as diverse as those for the northern hairy nosed wombat, *Lasiornhinus krefftii*, western swamp tortoise, *Pseudemydura umbrina*, McCutcheon's grevillea, *Grevillea maccutcheonii* and the larger multispecies recovery program for threatened plants on Kangaroo Island.

¹ eg Professor Hugh Possingham, *Submission 127*, p. 3.

² Birdlife Australia, *Submission XXX*.

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Question Number: 010

The Committee asked:

SEWPAC's submission states that 'all threatened species and ecological communities' not covered by a recovery plan now have a conservation advice (p. 5). Can you explain the key differences between a conservation advice compared to a recovery plan?

Answer:

Approved conservation advice is required to be in place for each listed threatened species (except for extinct or conservation dependent) and ecological community¹. At the time of amending the EPBC Act schedules to list or change the category of a species or ecological community entity, the Minister also decides whether a recovery plan is necessary, or whether a conservation advice alone is sufficient to protect the species or ecological community. This decision is based on what is the most effective and efficient means of providing for that protection.

Recovery plans are only prepared where the listed species or ecological community has complex management needs due to its ecology, the nature of threats affecting it, or the number of stakeholders affected by or involved in implementing the necessary actions. Conservation advices are relied upon where the protection needs are well understood and relatively simple.

A conservation advice contains the suggested actions necessary to protect the listed entity that are known at the time of listing.

A recovery plan sets out the systematic framework for the management and research actions necessary to protect and promote the recovery of the listed species or ecological community. A recovery plan identifies objectives, performance measures and monitoring necessary to adaptively manage the protection of the listed entity. The preparation of a recovery plan involves the collation of further information, the input of specialist expertise and collaboration with stakeholders affected or responsible for plan implementation.

¹ Note that when this requirement was introduced, it only applied retrospectively to those listed species and ecological communities that did not have a recovery plan in place or in preparation at August 2007. Hence many entities that were already listed at that time and had recovery plans in place or preparation do not have approved conservation advice.

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Question Number: 011

The Committee asked:

The Christmas Island pipistrelle is still listed as 'critically endangered' under the EPBC Act, but the consensus seems to be that it became extinct in 2009. Has the Department or the Director of National Parks reviewed this? What lessons have been learned from this recent extinction?

Answer:

Not changing the formal listing status to 'extinct' at this time is a precautionary approach so that the species is afforded the same legislative protection under national environment law, in the unlikely event that it is rediscovered.

Throughout Australia's history of managing for threatened species protection, there have been a number of lessons learned—many of which are reinforced by the possible extinction of the Christmas Island pipistrelle. These lessons include, *inter alia*:

- A combination of site-specific and ecosystem-scale approaches is often required to adequately address past impacts, current threats, and the state of the species involved.
- It is important to understand the biological and ecological requirements for viable populations of individual species; and this information is often unavailable; subject to scientific debate; or can change with new information and research.
- Governance arrangements need to ensure effective collaboration between stakeholders, and an adaptive management system that responds to new information including species monitoring and an assessment of the efficacy of management actions.
- An adequate knowledge base is required of the biological and ecological requirements for viable populations.

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Question Number: 012

The Committee asked:

Several submissions¹ have lamented slow development and lack of implementation of threat abatement plans. How do you respond to this claim?

Answer:

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) (section 273(4)) specifies that a threat abatement plan for a key threatening process must be made and in force within 3 years of the decision under section 270A to have the plan.

When developing a draft plan, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the department) analyses new data, research and recent publications, and consults at length with experts from state agencies and research institutions in order that the draft plan reflects the most recent scientific knowledge and best practice management techniques. Having developed a draft plan, there are significant statutory prerequisites to finalising it. The Minister must:

- consult with the appropriate Minister of each state and territory in which the key threatening process occurs and take their views into account;
- obtain and consider the advice of the Threatened Species Scientific Committee; and
- consider comments received during a three month public consultation period and revise the plan to take account of those comments as necessary.

The Hawke review of the EPBC Act recommended that the Act be amended to require the development of a 'threat abatement advice' at the time of listing a key threatening process (Hawke, 2009)² to inform decision making and provide important and timely advice to affected parties. The government has agreed with this recommendation.

Although the EPBC Act has not yet been amended, threat abatement guidelines are being prepared for some key threatening processes. For example, the listing advice for 'Novel biota and its impact on biodiversity', and threat abatement advice which provides general guidance for the management of this key threatening process, are available on the department's website at: www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened.

Threat abatement plans are not funding programs. A threat abatement plan establishes a framework to guide and coordinate Australia's response to the impact of a key threatening process. It enables all stakeholders to make informed investment in agreed national priorities for research, management and on-ground actions. The funding available to the department for threat abatement action is strategically applied to the highest priority areas across all threat abatement plans. Additional funds are available to stakeholders via the government programs Caring for our Country and the Biodiversity Fund, both of which have identified invasive species as a key element.

¹ Seg Dr Burbidge, *Submission 46*, p. 1; HSI, *Submission 88*, p. 2; Invasive Species Council, *Submission 140*, p. 9.

² Hawke 2009 Independent review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

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Question Number: 013

The Committee asked:

Are the possible impacts of climate change on threatened species and communities being incorporated into decision-making under the EPBC Act? If so, how?

Answer:

The possible impacts of climate change are considered during the assessment of threatened ecological communities and threatened species. If considered a threat, the impact of climate change is specifically covered in individual listing and/or conservation advices, including in the outline of threats, analysis against listing criteria and recommended priority research actions. As an example, the threat of rising sea temperatures was covered as a specific threat that contributed to the listing of 'Giant Kelp Marine Forests of South East Australia' in August 2012.

Where climate change has been identified as a threat or potential threat to a species or ecological community in a recovery plan, appropriate response actions are identified.

Threat abatement plans may also provide guidance on the possible impacts of climate change, and how this may change the impact of a key threatening process. For example, the draft threat abatement plan for disease in natural ecosystems caused by *Phytophthora cinnamomi*¹ has a section in the plan and more detail in the accompanying background document about the potential effect of climate change on the distribution and expression of the pathogen.

The Hawke review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) recommended that the Act be amended to provide for greater flexibility in the development and implementation of threat abatement plans and allow transition to regional planning approaches and strategic threat management (Hawke, 2009²).

The government supports the development and implementation of threat abatement plans in the context of regional environment planning approaches and strategic threat management. The government has agreed to amend the EPBC Act to provide for greater flexibility in developing and implementing threat abatement plans. It is expected that a regional or landscape approach to threat abatement may assist in addressing climate change adaptation issues.

¹ <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/tap/draft-phytophthora-2013.html>

² Hawke 2009 Independent review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

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Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 014

The Committee asked:

Please comment on the impact of feral animals, particularly wild dogs, brumbies, camels and feral cats, on threatened species. What oversight does the Commonwealth have of state management plans for these feral animals?

Answer:

The Australian Government works closely with state and territory governments on policies designed to reduce the impact of feral animals. There are representatives from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the department) on the inter-governmental committee for vertebrate pests. The Vertebrate Pests Committee, which is a subcommittee of the National Biosecurity Committee, is responsible for overseeing implementation of the Australian Pest Animal Strategy and for developing nationally relevant policy and advice to minimise the impacts and risks from established, emerging and potential vertebrate pest animals in Australia.

The department recognises the impact of feral animals on threatened species by predation, habitat degradation, competition and disease transmission. These impacts are examined in conservation advices and/or recovery plans for specific threatened species, and in threat abatement plans and their associated background documents.

For example, the Threat abatement plan for predation by feral cats and its background document describe the significant impact that feral cats have on biodiversity, particularly small mammals in the 0.5 – 3 kg 'critical' weight range. Cats have probably contributed to the extinction of many small to medium-sized mammals and ground-nesting birds in the arid zone, and seriously affect bilby, mala and numbat populations. In some instances, feral cats have directly threatened the success of recovery programs for threatened species. The department is putting significant investment into the development of a broad scale toxic bait for feral cats to provide an effective control tool for conservation managers.

The government also participates in the development of national plans to help manage feral animals. In particular, the government assisted in the development of the National Feral Camel Action Plan, and approved Caring for our Country funding of \$19 million over four years commencing in 2009-10, in response to the urgent need to significantly reduce feral camel densities to lessen their impacts in remote Australia on biodiversity, wetlands, waterholes and sites of cultural value to Aboriginal people, infrastructure (fences, houses, cars) and personal safety. The government is also assisting in the development of a national action plan to reduce the impact of wild dogs.

The government is aware of state and territory plans for managing the impact of feral animals, and the linkages to national action plans or threat abatement plans. The government provides policy and technical advice to state governments through appropriate consultation processes.

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Question Number: 015

The Committee asked:

Some submissions¹ have expressed concern about the discontinuation of the register of critical habitat under the proposed EPBC Act reforms.² What is your response? What alternative arrangements will be made to ensure that critical habitat is identified and protected?

Answer:

In its response to recommendation 12 of the Independent Review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act) the government agreed to discontinue the Register of Critical Habitat and noted that it only has a small number of listings. This is principally because offences relating to critical habitat only apply in Commonwealth areas under the EPBC Act, and because the listing of areas outside of Commonwealth areas on the register does not offer legal protection. It was also noted that there is already appropriate protection for critical habitat through controls on activities that may have a significant impact on a protected matter. In addition, critical habitat on Commonwealth land will continue to be protected through the approval requirements on all activities involving Commonwealth land that are likely to have a significant impact.

The government agreed to amend the EPBC Act so that a description and location of critical habitat known at the time of the listing of a threatened species to be included in each conservation advice prepared in the listing process for threatened species. This advice could then be updated as new information becomes available.

The government also agreed to amend the definition of critical habitat so that all elements of a species' habitat that are important to its ongoing persistence and resilience in a landscape and/or marine environments is captured. For a threatened species, this includes habitat required for the species to recover to levels that are viable in the long term considering current and known emerging threats.

The government also agreed that transitional arrangements would be made to ensure that information contained in the Register of Critical Habitat is incorporated into conservation advice and recovery plans.

¹ eg WWF, *Submission 81*, pp 6-7; HSI, *Submission 88*, pp 3-5.

² as recommended in the Hawke Review – recommendation 12, and agreed to in the government response.

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Question Number: 016

The Committee asked:

The submission from the NFF expresses concern about moves towards cost recovery for EPBC referrals and approvals.¹ Can you provide further information about these proposals? Please also comment on the NFF claims of the costs and impacts, including that cost recovery would be barrier to compliance; and the knowledge base of farmers.

Answer:

Cost recovery under the EPBC Act is proposed as part of the broader EPBC Act reform package. Timing for the introduction of cost recovery for environmental impact assessments and some strategic assessments is dependent on the passage of legislation and making of regulations.

The draft Cost Recovery Impact Statement was open for a six week consultation period between 10 May and 21 June 2012. The NFF was one of the organisations consulted through this process and their feedback was considered in developing the draft statement. This was in addition to consultation in September and October 2011 on the EPBC Act Cost Recovery Consultation Paper.

The draft Cost Recovery Impact Statement is available on the department's website and provides extensive detail about the cost recovery proposals. The statement can be found at <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/consultation-draft-cost-recovery.html>

Exemption and waiver criteria for environmental impact assessments are proposed in the draft Cost Recovery Impact Statement, and include fee exemptions for individuals and small businesses with less than \$2 million annual turnover. This definition is consistent with that of the Income Tax Assessment Act (ITAA) for a small business.

One of the drivers for exempting small business from EPBC cost recovery was feedback from stakeholders such as the NFF regarding impacts on the agriculture industry. The agriculture industry currently makes up 0.8 per cent of the 430 referrals the department receives under the EPBC Act per year (approximately 3 agriculture referrals p/a).

¹ NFF, *Submission 167*, p. 2.

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Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 017

The Committee asked:

What is your response to suggestions that Commonwealth funding – eg the Caring for Our Country program and Biodiversity Fund – is not well focussed on the long-term protection and recovery of threatened species and communities?

Answer:

The Australian Government is committed to biodiversity conservation, including the protection and recovery of threatened species, through a mix of species specific and landscape scale approaches. These approaches include national policies and frameworks; implementation of legislation particularly through the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act); funding programs, such as Caring for Our Country and the Biodiversity Fund; and direct management in marine and terrestrial environments.

Under Caring for Our Country, funding is available for landscape-scale projects which aim to abate key threats to biodiversity and protect various habitat types. For example, under the first phase of Caring for our Country a \$19 million investment was made in a Feral Camel Management project to alleviate pressure on threatened species habitat. Caring for our Country also has projects aimed specifically at particular threatened species, for example, the \$10 million committed to combat the sudden large decline in Tasmanian devils.

The Environmental Stewardship Program component of Caring for Our Country supports private land managers for up to 15 years to manage matters of national environmental significance listed under the EPBC Act. To date, \$149.1 million (with payments out to 2026-27) has been committed under this program.

The Reef Rescue component of Caring for Country has invested \$200 million dollars since 2008 to help restore the health of the Great Barrier Reef and reduce the impacts of stressors, such as sediments, nutrients and pesticides from agricultural runoff that impact on the health and resilience of inshore reefs and seagrasses. Improvements to water quality achieved through Reef Rescue have the potential to benefit the threatened species found within the Great Barrier Reef.

A more recent initiative promoting environmental resilience is the Biodiversity Fund. This is an ongoing program which supports protection and enhancement of biodiverse ecosystems across the country. Under Round One, 313 projects are underway valued at \$270 million over six years, for example, approximately \$10 million to help restore koala habitat. As a result of these projects, many threatened species and ecological communities will be better protected.

The assessment of grant applications under the Biodiversity Fund and Caring for Our Country, take into account their consistency with any plans related to the environmental assets they address. The extent to which Threat Abatement Plans, Recovery Plans, conservation advices or other strategic frameworks have been considered in applicants' proposals is a key consideration in the assessment of those projects. It is a requirement that all projects with a focus on species recovery be consistent or link with, these plans where they are in place.

Further information on these and other initiatives are detailed in the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Reference Committee regarding the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities protection in Australia.

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Question Number: 018

The Committee asked:

Several submissions¹ have lamented the lack of funding for surveys and monitoring of threatened species. Can you outline for us what funds are available in this area?

Answer:

Through the Caring for Our Country initiative and the Biodiversity Fund, the Australian Government is investing in a range of projects that help protect and conserve threatened species. As set out in the Monitoring Evaluation Reporting and Improvement (MERI) Strategy, Caring for Our Country funding recipients are able to allocate up to 10 per cent of their project budget to support monitoring, evaluation and reporting activities to help gauge progress and delivery of project and program level objectives. A similar approach has been adopted for Round One Biodiversity Fund projects.

This available allocation has been used by some funding recipients to support threatened species related monitoring activities, for example: monitoring of the vulnerable black-footed rock wallaby in South Australia's Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankuytjatjara (APY) Lands; wildlife surveys and monitoring of the vulnerable greater bilby in the Southern Tanami Indigenous Protected Area in the Northern Territory; and monitoring of the endangered mahogany glider in far-north Queensland following Cyclone Yasi.

Through Caring for our Country, the Australian Government is investing in a number of specific monitoring projects which have identified threatened species as part of their monitoring activities. For example, a long term monitoring project to gauge the effectiveness of the Environmental Stewardship Program has helped identify threatened species within project sites. Another example is BushBlitz, a multi-million dollar partnership which documents plants and animals, including threatened species, in properties across Australia's National Reserve System. Since the program began in 2010, Bush Blitz has discovered about 600 new and undescribed species and has added thousands of species to what is already known - providing baseline scientific data that will help us protect our biodiversity for generations to come.

Adaptive management is a key principle used in the \$10 million Save the Tasmanian Devil Program. Adaptive management allows for timely assimilation of monitoring and research data into management planning and decision making processes. The Program resources an integrated monitoring and management program to monitor devil populations and the ecological impact of population decline, surveillance of the disease spread as well as effectiveness of management responses such as disease suppression. Over \$12 million is being invested in monitoring, under the National Environmental Research Program (NERP), relating to threatened species and ecosystems (from 2010-2014). This includes a range of projects covering terrestrial and marine species. Projects range from remote sensing and mapping of koala habitat, undertaking a flying fox census, turtle and dugong monitoring in the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait, and monitoring threatened plants and animals in Indigenous protected areas. Researchers in the NERP are also exploring cost effective approaches to monitoring including calculating how much monitoring is required to determine the presence or absence of species in a particular area.

¹ eg Save the Bilby Fund, *Submission 16*, p. 3; Professor John Woinarski, *Submission 48*, pp 8-9.

Over \$10.5 million will have been invested in the Reef Rescue Marine Monitoring Program from 2008-2013, to provide evidence of the trends in Reef water quality and ecosystem health. Although it does not directly monitor the status of individual threatened marine species, the monitoring program monitors the status of major ecosystem types which are recognised as being at risk to land based pollutants (coral reefs and seagrass meadows) and which are also critical habitats and food sources for threatened marine species.

The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the department) has, through other programs, funded monitoring activities related to the management of threatened species. Examples of these are provided in the departments and the Director of National Parks submissions to the Senate Environment and Communications Reference Committee regarding the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia.

As part of the revision of the MERI Strategy, which will apply to the next phase of Caring for our Country and the Biodiversity Fund, the department is currently scoping an approach to support project and program level monitoring over the next 5 years, including threatened species management.

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCE COMMITTEE

Effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

Public Hearing – Friday, 15 February 2013

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 019

The Committee asked:

Some submissions have expressed concerns about funding for the National Reserve System under the latest 'Conservation Investment Prospectus'.¹ What is your response? Has funding for the National Reserve System been reduced in any way?

Answer:

The strong progress towards achieving a comprehensive terrestrial National Reserve System under the first phase of Caring for our Country means that the priorities for investment through the second phase of Caring for our Country can now shift, from 2013–14, to place a greater emphasis on establishing and managing the marine component of the National Reserve System. In particular, initial funding has been committed to the implementation of management arrangements for the recently declared national network of Commonwealth marine reserves. A significant component of funding has also been committed to the Fisheries Adjustment Assistance Package to support the commercial fishing industry adjust to the new marine reserve network.

At the same time, the government has committed to continuing investment in the Indigenous Protected Areas program. This will build on the 36 million hectares currently protected in Indigenous Protected Areas, 15 million hectares of which has been achieved under the first phase of Caring for our Country.

Limited funding may also be available for expanding the terrestrial component of the National Reserve System for projects which strongly meet the objectives and priorities set out within the One Land - Many Stories: Prospectus of Investment, although there will not be a specific allocation of program funding for this component.

¹ eg WWF, *Submission 81*, p. 7.

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCE COMMITTEE

Effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

Public Hearing – Friday, 15 February 2013

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 020

The Committee asked:

Several submissions have suggested 'triage'¹ or 'prioritisation' approaches to funding for threatened species conservation and recovery. Has any consideration been given to these approaches by the department?

Answer:

Prioritisation and decision-making tools may assist in achieving systematic and defensible biodiversity investment decisions. Consistent with the Australian government's response to the independent review of the EPBC Act, the department is committed to developing better prioritisation processes and decision-making tools that increase transparency, accountability and efficiency in prioritising resource allocation to threatened species conservation effort.

A review of systems currently available for biodiversity investment prioritisation has shown there is a wide array of tools, resources, and decision frameworks available to managers and decision makers. Various tools and approaches are promoted by sectors of the scientific community and have engendered some level of interest and debate within the scientific, conservation management and government spheres. These need to be carefully examined to assess which are the most appropriate for resolving threatened species prioritisation issues.

The department is engaged in exploring these approaches with state and territory jurisdictions and is working collaboratively with the Australian government's National Environmental Research Program Environmental Decisions Hub on a project to examine the potential of a national approach.

¹ Triage – ie where funding is targeted at species for which management success is most likely.

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCE COMMITTEE

Effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

Public Hearing – Friday, 15 February 2013

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 021

The Committee asked:

Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy sets a number of targets – for example, to reduce the impacts of invasive species on threatened species and communities by 10% by 2015 (target 7) and to establish a national long-term biodiversity monitoring and reporting system (target 10). Can you outline progress towards meeting these targets? How is that progress being measured?

Answer:

Progress towards *Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy* targets is being made through a targeted investment approach to reduce the impacts of invasive species under funding programs such as Caring for Our Country, the Environmental Stewardship Program and the Biodiversity Fund.

These programs provide targeted funding for invasive species management in order to lessen the impacts upon threatened species and communities. Under Caring for our Country and the Environmental Stewardship Program, this has included more than \$107 million in investments to eradicate weeds and pests and protect threatened and endangered species. Under the Biodiversity Fund, actions to control invasive species should form part of every project.

The effectiveness of this targeted investment is measured through monitoring and reporting activities. Funding program grantees are required to provide full reports on the implementation of funded activities, including activities directed at invasive species management.

The Australian Government is working towards a national long-term biodiversity monitoring and reporting system through the National Plan for Environmental Information and the system of national environmental accounts. In addition, work is being carried out within the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (the department) to develop consistent monitoring protocols and standards. The department has well-developed systems to integrate ecological data from the states and territories to support evidence-based environmental decision making. In addition, the Australian Government funded Terrestrial Ecosystem Research Network and the Australian Collaborative Rangelands Information System, are working to integrate state and territory data within its research information infrastructure. This will enhance understanding of the environment's response to threats.

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCE COMMITTEE

Effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia

Public Hearing – Friday, 15 February 2013

Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities portfolio

Question Number: 022

The Committee asked:

Where the Commonwealth grants and / or supports private land to be set aside for conservation purposes, are conditions imposed on the land / landholder with respect to that land being used for Commonwealth research and data collection?

- If so, can you please outline these conditions?
- And can you provide examples where this has occurred?

Answer:

The funding conditions imposed for research and data collection purposes by Australian Government programs that support conservation vary across programs.

Under the Environmental Stewardship Program for example, a funding deed clause requires the land holder to provide access to Australian Government and authorised representatives to inspect the project area and conduct monitoring and evaluation activities. In agreement with funding recipients, this has facilitated long-term monitoring of the effectiveness of the program by the Australian National University.

Caring for our Country investments in the National Reserve System and Indigenous Protected Areas require implementation and reporting of management activities detailed in approved Interim Management Guidelines and Plans of Management.

Actions identified in plans prepared under the National Reserve System and Indigenous Protected Area programs may support the protection of matters of National Environmental Significance such as threatened species and threatened ecological communities. Reports against the planning documents contain data that is used to gauge progress and delivery of project and program level objectives.

As an example:

Tiliqua Conservation Reserve is an 83 hectare private protected area in the North Mount Lofty Ranges, South Australia. With Australian Government assistance, Tiliqua was acquired in 2010 by the Nature Foundation South Australia. It is now managed as part of the National Reserve System for its biodiversity conservation values, which includes improving and protecting endangered species habitat.

A Steering Committee with Australian Government and independent representatives was established to guide and oversee ongoing management activities. Progress reports submitted to the Australian Government have identified and documented nationally listed threatened species. This has informed ongoing management and monitoring activities which have contributed to conserving the habitat and viability of the endangered pygmy blue-tongue lizard and other nationally listed species.