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Submissions by the WA Landcare Network on:

*Government of WA Department Water and Environment Regulations
Remnant Vegetation in Western Australia issues paper*

Context

The WA Landcare Network Inc (WALN) is the peak landcare body for Western Australia. It was established in 2013 to fill the current gap in representation and support for WA's over 700 landcare groups at the state and national levels. Community Landcare has a 30 year history in WA and WALN has continued this legacy by being owned by its members - grassroots landcarers. WALN is focused on providing improved support, coordination and capacity building to landcare groups and increasing Landcare's input into government and industry decision making. It is a member of and works closely with the National Landcare Network (NLN).

The WA Landcare Network offers membership to incorporated groups and networks as well as producer groups or similar voluntary organisations. Groups may be called Bushcare, Rivercare, Caring for Country, Dunecare or Coastcare or have a local name, but are all a form of Landcare and are part of the Landcare movement. Individuals, local governments and businesses are encouraged to become Associate Members of WA Landcare Network.

The WA Landcare Network commends the State Government for its intention to prepare a Remnant Vegetation Policy. The absence of a Policy to date is symptomatic of the lack of focus that has been paid to the state of remnant vegetation at this critical time. The continuing loss of vegetation cover and condition and the impacts from pressures - including agricultural clearing, grazing and fire, housing development, mining, dieback, salinity, fire, feral plants and animals and logging - exacerbated and accelerated by climate change now and into the future, have reached a critical state.

Based on anecdotal evidence and partial state government collected data on land clearing applications, WA Landcare Network is concerned that we are experiencing a net reduction rather than increase in vegetation cover.



Member group of the

The WA Landcare Network commissioned a State of Landcare Report in 2017. It identified that data about landcare values, remnant vegetation being a prime value, are not publically accessible. More seriously remnant vegetation data is not being recorded, collated or analysed across all land tenures so that the state of remnant vegetation cover and condition is not well understood or transparent. As identified in the Remnant Vegetation in WA discussion paper, more than 93% of original vegetation is lost in some local government areas (p 2). The WA Landcare Network is very concerned that data drawing a clear picture of vegetation cover and condition by each local government is collected and reported in a transparent way to drive protection, management and restoration efforts.

The State of Landcare 2017 Report identified that the community capacity to assist with the objectives of the proposed Native Vegetation in WA Policy have been eroded by a lack of resourcing by the State and Federal Governments. The Report identified for example that the WA Commissioner for Soil and Land Conservation staff had been slashed from around twenty-four to two or less (P17) and funding for Landcare groups has dropped to less than funding provided in 1999 and half the level available in 2006-2009.

Community capacity is needed to work with all levels of government to meet Landcare outcomes including remnant vegetation protection and restoration as well as community resilience outcomes for all. Local facilitation is part of supporting community capacity. A case to illustrate this point is that the Land for Wildlife program was slashed and centralised by the previous state Coalition government. The services provided engaged private landholders in remnant vegetation protection very successfully. While regional NRM bodies took up the banner of these services very little resourcing was provided leading to an inadequate replacement of a very successful program.

Native Vegetation

The extent and condition of native vegetation across Western Australia is a major concern to our member groups and the Landcare community in general.

Landcare is not just about restoring and protecting Western Australia's environment. It is an integral part of achieving sustainable land-use – agricultural, pastoral, coastal and urban – and has particular importance in building stronger and more diverse regional and urban communities and economies.

Native vegetation protection, maintenance, monitoring and restoration relies on engagement of landholders, local governments, local groups, businesses and governments. Such collaborative effort takes facilitation, persistence and resources.



1. A State native vegetation policy

Policy Objectives

The WA Landcare Network recommends removal of objective a. A Remnant Vegetation Policy needs to be directed at the conservation, management, monitoring and regulation and restoration of remnant vegetation without compromise.

~~The management of native vegetation is consistent, transparent and strategic and strikes a balance between environmental, economic, social and cultural outcomes to Western Australians.~~

Recommended Policy Objectives:

a. Western Australia's native vegetation is strategically conserved, managed, monitored, regulated and restored to maintain and improve ecological function and biodiversity at a landscape scale.

b. Higher priority and strategic protection for unique and at risk native vegetation, tailored to the regional setting based on International and National criteria and agreements.

Add

c. Recognise and incorporate Aboriginal cultural science in all aspects of implementing the Remnant Vegetation in WA Policy.

Cross Policy Implications

Retention, management and restoration of native vegetation is an important contribution to the State's response to climate change. It is important that such policies are cross referenced in their intentions and actions. In the WA Landcare Network's response to the WA Government's discussion paper on Climate Change it was identified that climate change impacts are already being experienced by our members. This is in line with the conclusion from that discussion paper that *'the State's South West region [is] impacted by climate change more than almost any other place on the planet'*.

The state of Western Australia produces more Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHGs) per head of population than other states in Australia and has a responsibility to respond to do our fair share of reducing emissions to at least meet the Paris Agreement of keeping temperature rise to well below 2°C. (Climate Analytics, 2019 p 3)

Farm forestry, that is trees planted for multiple purposes on already cleared land, is an important contributor to GHG abatement but has not been well supported over the past two decades. The Carbon Budget Report ((Climate Analytics, 2019) indicates that not only does native vegetation clearing and deforestation need to stop by 2025 but there is opportunity to create a large sink through reforestation to reduce emissions in the atmosphere over the next decades once emissions are brought to zero net new emissions.



This will need to be done well to maximize multiple benefits with carbon sequestration and positive biodiversity and community outcomes. The NFF 2030 Roadmap (2018) quotes CSIRO data that indicates the carbon market could provide \$40 billion to the Australian land sector by 2050 providing opportunities for agriculture. This requires the setting of a carbon market. Western Australia could play a significant role in taking up this opportunity with the right policy settings. State governments are primarily responsible for the state of the environment and state governments are leading in many other parts of Australia. This gives good cause for the WA Government to resume State of the Environment Reporting.

The proviso the WA Landcare Network would place on investment in revegetation for carbon sequestration is that it must not compromise current remnant vegetation and should aim to achieve ecological restoration and sequestration simultaneously.

Climate change is impacting our flora and fauna and the integrity of ecological function across whole landscapes. Fires are occurring at a frequency and intensity that has not been experienced by our current environment and in a timeframe that does not allow for adaptation. Other pressures have already impacted on the ability of our environment to adapt. The feedback loops between the crises of climate change of biodiversity degradation and loss have more recently been recognized.

While recognition that climate change is already having an adverse impact on biodiversity and the ecosystems it underpins is growing, there is much less awareness of the impact of biodiversity loss and damage to ecosystems on climate change. (Young, 2019 p 2)

Young (2019) points out the *'profound implications for fighting climate change in the fact that damaged ecosystems are at higher risk of releasing carbon to the atmosphere and store far less carbon, less securely, than undamaged ecosystems'*. This additionality of risk is not fully understood or reflected in climate models, policy and action. This needs to be addressed in both the Remnant Vegetation and Climate Change Policies being developed by the WA state government.

There are initiatives that are working at scale to give the best chance possible for biodiversity to adapt to climate change. These initiatives provide cross landscape biodiversity connections, seek to undertake significant ecological restoration works, support the retention of current remnant vegetation and communication across land managers and communities to act together. There are landcare champions, individuals and organisations, who should be supporting in this important work across private and public land.

Thus the WA government's Climate Change Policy and Remnant Vegetation in WA Policy should be developed to support each other.

To address the intertwined crises of biodiversity degradation and climate change it is recommended that the WA Government seek meaningful ways to improve the protection, restoration and management of natural ecosystems and in particular high integrity, bio-diverse, carbon rich ecosystems such as forests and woodlands.



Support for carbon farming based on ecological restoration is recommended. This means using local endemic species, making connections across landscapes and involving local communities and in particular First Nation peoples. There are significant employment opportunities in expanding restoration and sequestration efforts.

It is important that targets for no further net loss in remnant vegetation and targets for restoration, farm forestry on already cleared land and carbon sequestration are set for WA to drive investment in change on the ground.

Better information

The WA Landcare Network concurs with the findings of the Remnant Vegetation in WA Discussion Paper that the current mapping and monitoring of remnant vegetation does not provide adequate information about the extent, condition and types of vegetation that currently exist nor how it is managed. It is an indictment on past state governments that the Paper states that:

‘Thus it makes it impossible to track or report accurately on the status of native vegetation’ (p. 16).

The Discussion Paper identified that there is a lack of data available to understand what has been cleared legally and illegally over the past. It is important that estimates are collated at least over the past decade to help set a benchmark for future monitoring.

The WA Landcare Network understands that a Technical Interagency Group already exists to discuss the challenges of developing a common platform of reliable data.

The WA Landcare Network requests a representative to be on that Group and to have regular updates on its deliberations to be able to contribute to them. The WA Landcare Network would undertake to communicate in both directions between members and the committee and vice versa.

The baseline data about the state’s vegetation is not collated onto a single platform where practitioners can add regional information. There is a strong appetite from commitment botanists to provide their detailed information on a single platform that is simple and conducive to collaborative effort with data from government, business, not for profit groups and individuals. Provision of such a single platform would substantially improve the baseline data on vegetation and provide the level of local detail that essential to support bioregional assessments. It would provide the granular information needed to have evidence on the state of remnant vegetation to drive both protection and restoration as well as cultural and nature based tourism. This in turn would help meet state obligations regarding National and International priorities as well as stimulating local job creation.



Better Regulation

It is WA Landcare Network's view that the proposed Remnant Vegetation in WA Policy will require a legislative basis to ensure that it is not overridden by other acts as has occurred in the past. It is our view that the Policy would be best located under the EPA Act.

WA Landcare Network welcomes the fee increases introduced in 2019 to assist in funding the approval process and timeliness of assessments.

With regards to offsets, the WA Landcare Network is concerned that there is a clearer process developed than currently exists so that there is transparency and the ability to monitor and track offsets granted with specific sites restored and monitored over time.

Of the elements for better regulation listed in the Discussion Paper the most critical from WA Landcare Network's perspective are in order:

- ▶▶ Improved protection for native vegetation
- ▶▶ Improved compliance and enforcement of unauthorized clearing
- ▶▶ Confidence in the regulatory system for all stakeholders
- ▶▶ Transparent, evidence-based decisions
- ▶▶ Streamlined Strengthened regulation
- ▶▶ Clearer requirements for business certainty
- ▶▶ Improved assessment timeframes
- ▶▶ Equitable treatment of all proponents

A Bioregional Approach

This is supported with the proviso that:

- Identification of regional priorities is carried out on the basis of International and National criteria such as the IUCN Criteria, the International Convention for Biodiversity Protection, the Society for Ecological Restoration Australasia and the COAG Australia's Native Vegetation Framework (2012).
- Sufficient time and resources are provided for local assessment to be carried out with First Nation, local government and community involvement.

It is clear that the fire impacts significantly on remnant vegetation and it is recommended that fire permits should be treated in the same manner as clearing permits with technical input on the impact of fire on important remnant vegetation ecosystem services. This is being trialed in some areas such as Margaret River Nature Conservation and the local fire brigade and is worth assessing the merits of this approach.

Community Resilience

The connection between ecosystem health and human health is now well recognized. The increase in physical and mental health issues experienced in rural communities accompanies heightened stress. The connection between ecosystem and human health is particularly



apparent in First Nation communities. First Nation peoples benefit enormously by being engaged in caring for coast and country, physically, mentally and economically.

Landcare is at the heart of many communities and has been recognized in the recent NSW and Victorian fires providing early responders with established networks and support mechanisms. To be effective, landcare groups need state government support to continue their roles in communities to protect soil, coasts, water and biodiversity and build landscape and community resilience.

The WA Government needs communities across the state to embrace action for remnant vegetation protection, management, monitoring and restoration.

Community Landcare is a strong and enduring network of groups across Western Australia supporting positive changes for land, water, biodiversity, coastal and marine landscapes and resilience. We recommend that the Government meet with WA Landcare Network to map out, in the first half of 2020, how we can help with practical delivery of the State Framework for NRM and in particular how the Remnant Vegetation in WA Policy can be implemented with community support on the ground.

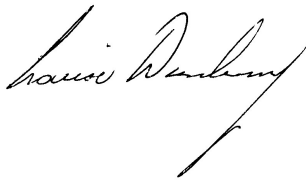
The WA Landcare Network fully supports:

- Investigation of the value of bilateral arrangements with the Federal Government to leverage resources for WA landcare efforts. WALN maintains that there is value to also investigating trilateral arrangements which include local government.
- Re-assessment of the 'State NRM Framework 2018' and the need to develop a strategy to guide the allocation of funding and resources. WALN supports strong community involvement and consultation in development of such a strategy, and is ready to assist in achieving that.
- Review of the role of Government enablers of the Remnant Vegetation in WA Policy including the State NRM Office, the Land for Wildlife unit and the Soil and Landcare Conservation Commission. How Landcare policy direction is being decided and driven in WA is currently not clear and WA Landcare Network is of the view that the NRM Office could aptly fill that need.
- The WA Landcare Network would like to reiterate the importance of supporting local landcare coordinators for the implementation of the remnant vegetation policy. This is already a prime role that they play with limited resourcing. We note that several other states, including NSW, Victoria and South Australia provide core staff funding for local coordinators, and have been recently joined in this by the ACT. This investment pays back handsomely at both local community level and in terms of leveraging extra Commonwealth funds to those states.

The WA Landcare Network is keen to participate in further dialogue with the NRM Ministerial Council on a regular basis for the benefit of the state government and community Landcare objectives with remnant vegetation being one of the core objectives.

Thank you for this opportunity to make comment.





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Executive Officer WA Landcare Network

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