



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Budget Consultation – Priorities for the 2024/2025 ACT Budget

March 2025

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. Since 1981, we have spoken up for a healthy environment and a sustainable future for our region. We harness the collective energy, expertise and experience of our more than 40 member groups to promote sound policy and action on the environment.

At a time when climate stresses, habitat loss and degradation are leading to a deterioration of Australia's and the ACT's natural environment, the Conservation Council ACT calls upon the ACT Government to play a leadership role in protecting, restoring and enhancing biodiversity. Environmental stewardship benefits both nature and our community by enhancing biodiversity, supporting tourism, safeguarding livelihoods and improving overall health and wellbeing.

As the window to keep warming to within 1.5 degrees higher than pre-industrial average is rapidly closing, there is an urgent need for mitigation. The ACT has been leading climate action in Australia with its move to purchase all the Territory's electricity from renewable sources. We call for the ACT to continue being ambitious by bringing forward the net zero target date as well as a push to reduce further emissions through electrification and phasing out woodburners.

Investing in active and public travel is crucial for Canberra's future. A safe, accessible, convenient and comfortable active and public travel system will make our city cleaner and healthier. It is crucial to ensure the maintenance of existing active travel infrastructure and the creation of new active travel infrastructure deliver travel equity in our community.

Canberra-based Environment and Climate community organisations play a crucial role in Government strategies to reduce emissions on the pathway to net zero emissions by 2045, for a circular economy and to restore and conserve natural places in the ACT region. Despite the central role the ACT's Environment and Climate sectors play they continue to face considerable challenges. We urge the Government to provide substantive support to strengthen the ACT's environmental and climate sectors through sustained and substantial funding.

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Priorities

- Lead the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in the region
- Accelerate the implementation of strategies for a safe climate
- Invest in public and active travel
- Provide substantive support to strengthen the ACT's environmental and climate sectors

Recommendation 1. Lead the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in the region

- 1.1 Implement the [Biodiversity Network](#) - including introduction of voluntary stewardship / custodianship agreements.
- 1.2 Extend the rapid response biosecurity team, including increased ongoing funding and additional staff.
- 1.3 Increased staffing to manage enforcement and compliance of Construction Environment Management Plans.
- 1.4 Increase staffing for Urban Parks and Places management.
- 1.5 Employ additional dedicated volunteer coordinators within TCCS to support the Urban Parks and Places Program and other urban community on-ground programs who work to keep our urban environment healthy.
- 1.6 Fund and fully implement all existing action plans and conservation strategies, applying specific timeframes to improve accountability.
- 1.7 Fund community groups to collaborate with the Connecting Nature Connecting People program to continue the program beyond the first two years.
- 1.9 Invest in Healthy Waterways:
 - Commit to a schedule and funding to repair, modify and progressively ecologically upgrade existing major creeks and stormwater channels including Tuggeranong Creek, Weston Creek, Yarralumla Creek, Jerrabomberra Creek and Sullivan's Creek.
 - Develop an incentive scheme to encourage developers and homeowners to install permeable surfaces on residential properties.
- 1.9 Invest in invasive species management:
 - Commit to providing ongoing recurrent funding to manage invasive plant and pest species including adequate funding for further Parks and Conservation staff.
 - Increase funding provided to weed management to better tackle invasive species such as St John's Wort to reduce their damaging impact on our environment.
 - Increase staffing for Urban Parks and Places management to support volunteer weeding work parties.
 - Audit all the planting guide lists to remove invasive plants. Please see Appendix 1.
 - Increase funds for the maintenance of the Canberra Nature Map and iNaturalist.
 - Extend annual funding with a multi-year security for citizen science programs, such as VegWatch, to complement other biodiversity monitoring programs.
 - Implement a cat containment education program for 3 years.
 - Implement an invasive plant species education program for 3 years including education on the use of the Canberra Nature Map to track, report and respond to invasive species.

Canberrans love our nature. We are blessed to live in the bush capital – a home to incredible and unique ecosystems, plants and animals. We know that all Canberrans are proud of our city's record of protecting this beautiful environment.

But our bush capital is under threat. The further spread of our city is destroying vital ecosystems, while our legal frameworks benefit profit over nature. We aren't investing in the real money we need to protect and regenerate our biodiversity. That's creating a crisis for our nature, with five species added to the ACT's threatened species list since 2020 – including the iconic gang-gang cockatoo.

It doesn't have to be this way. We know what it takes to protect our bush capital. At a time when climate stresses, habitat loss and degradation are leading to a deterioration of Australia's and the ACT's natural environment, the Conservation Council ACT calls upon the ACT Government to play a leadership role in protecting, restoring and enhancing biodiversity in the ACT region. Such environmental stewardship benefits both nature and our community by enhancing biodiversity, supporting tourism, safeguarding livelihoods and improving overall health and wellbeing.

Current ACT Government initiatives have already identified the importance of biodiversity for our region. Such initiatives including the Urban Forest Strategy and Connecting Nature Connecting People require further implementation and ongoing support. For the 2025-26 budget we call on the Government to focus its biodiversity efforts in two areas - implementing a Biodiversity Network and increasing funding for invasive species management.

The Biodiversity Network

To combat biodiversity loss across the Territory, the Conservation Council's Biodiversity Working Group and Friends of Grasslands have also co-authored a paper that outlines a key part of the solution to protecting and enhancing the ACT's remaining natural places: [The Biodiversity Network](#). The purpose of the Biodiversity Network is to protect remnants of natural value that are not reserved, whereby these remnants, together with those in reserve, will be unified into a single legal and management framework.

It is important that the ACT plays a stewardship role in the protection of important local species and ecosystems. Investing in maintaining high-quality urban greenspace helps build resilience against the impacts of climate change, enhance nature connectivity across the urban landscape, and deliver quality-of-life benefits to the community. Trees and shrubs provide vital refuge for wildlife and pollinators across the urban landscape and cool the urban environment.

We urge the Government to implement this proposal, with proper resourcing to manage land for biodiversity purposes across the territory.

Invasive species management

To ensure Canberra's nature, people and culture can flourish, our urban landscapes need to host biodiverse and resilient green spaces. Biodiversity in the ACT region is under strain from invasive plants and animals. Invasive species degrade our waterways, natural landscape, habitats, biodiversity and threaten the production of food in our region. The ACT has a responsibility to rapidly respond to biosecurity threats accelerated by climate change, through sustained intervention and management of invasive plants that have been bolstered by a prolonged period of frequent rain.

In the 2021-22 ACT Budget, the ACT Government implemented the The Rapid Response Biosecurity Team. This was met with an investment of \$3 million over four years to rapidly respond to biosecurity threats, which at the time were accelerated by recent bushfires, extended

dry periods, and La Nina conditions. While it would be tempting to consider the need for this to be over, this is not the case. The ACT continues to face significant biosecurity threats, and it is essential that this program be extended, becoming a permanent part of Canberra's management of invasive species.

Currently, small community organisations play a big role in tackling the threat of invasive species. Volunteer labour is relied on heavily for the management of invasive plants including LandcareACT, the three member Catchment Groups, National Parks Association of the ACT, Friends of Grasslands and Park Care Groups. These organisations need sustained and proportionate funding to continue doing the important work that they do, supporting government programs in the region.

Recommendation 2: Accelerate the implementation of strategies for a safe climate

- 2.1 Invest in Accelerating Electrification of Canberra homes and businesses
- 2.2 Invest in the Rapid Phase-out of Wood-Burning Heaters from ACT suburbs
- 2.3 Mandate all government agencies to prepare, implement and publicly report on progress with climate change adaptation plans.
- 2.4 Prepare a separate annual Budget Paper on the funding of the Climate Change Strategy, and annual reporting on its delivery.

2.1 Invest in Accelerating Electrification

- 2.1.1 Fund a pathway for all ACT Government Assets including social housing, schools, health facilities and office blocks to replace gas appliances with all electric alternatives by 2030 (noting that an audit is underway to inform this).
- 2.1.2 Fund industry information campaigns on the phase out of gas (including for architects, builders, developers, plumbers, gasfitters, appliance retailers, chefs, cooks, real estate agents and property managers).
- 2.1.3 Support trades sector training institutions in regards to electrification and gas transition, such as funding a free, mandatory training / information session for all current chefs, cooks, builders, gas fitters and plumbers.
- 2.1.4 Invest in industry research partnerships to develop electrification solutions for complex buildings, and consider an industry contribution scheme to fund retrofitting of existing buildings.
- 2.1.5 Fund materials recovery of removed gas appliances to divert resources from landfill.
- 2.1.6 Provide adequate support to low-income households to reduce energy use including through schemes such as the Sustainable Households Scheme.
- 2.1.7 Extend the Sustainable Households Scheme including implementing an objective review.
- 2.1.8 Extend the Home Energy Support Program from 5 years to 10 years.
- 2.1.9 Develop regulation for electrification of rental properties, similar to the ceiling insulation Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard.
- 2.1.10 Increase the funding for the Community Zero Emissions Grant Program to \$200,000 per year and continue beyond 2025.

It is a point of pride for many ACT residents that Canberra is one of the only places in the world with such progressive plans for emissions reductions. ACT has demonstrated commitment and leadership to climate action by purchasing the Territory's electricity from renewable sources and setting a target of net-zero emissions by 2045 including phasing out fossil gas.

However, the impacts of climate change are becoming stronger, leading to widespread impacts in our communities and ecosystems. While the ACT Government has done amazing work, we are concerned that progress on more difficult issues is becoming too slow, with the Government becoming complacent about recent success.

We call upon the Government, therefore, to adopt a more ambitious approach. ACT has another opportunity to lead the way in climate mitigation, by committing to deep emissions reductions. Almost 90% of the ACT's emissions come from transport, fugitive emissions and the gas network¹. The solutions for eliminating emissions from these sectors are technologically straightforward – electrification of buildings and vehicles and increased public and active transport. Implementing these solutions requires investment in infrastructure, supply chains, trade skills and public behaviour-change programs, as well as regulation to accelerate the transition. The “replace when your existing appliance breaks down” approach is inconsistent with the pace of the climate emergency, as declared by the ACT Government in 2019.

As an agile and relatively wealthy community, we can continue to show what is possible and implement innovative policies to decarbonise all sectors. Ensuring that emissions reduction policies and programs are designed to prioritise helping our most vulnerable residents and those with least capacity to act – those people on low incomes, with a disability or living in public housing, rental properties and apartment buildings – will have the co-benefit of building social equity and resilience to deal with the climate changes that are already occurring and increasing.

The ACT Government must also consider the scope 3 emissions impacts of electrification, that is, the materials and energy used in manufacturing and importing the electric appliances to replace gas. Applying a circular economy approach and investing in materials recovery will be critical in diverting removed gas appliances from landfill and increasing public confidence and participation in the transition.

2.2 Invest in the Rapid Phase-out of Wood-Burning Heaters from ACT suburbs

2.2.1 Accelerate the target date for the replacement of wood heaters with electric alternatives in all ACT suburbs (excluding rural areas), as has been done for fossil-fuel gas. This should be supported through accessible financial support for lower income households.

2.2.2 Remove and replace all wood-burning heaters in Government owned buildings including social housing as quickly as possible.

2.2.3 Fund a community education program that includes explicit messaging about the health risks associated with wood heater usage in ACT Government education and communication activities.

2.2.4 Invest in increasing the number of air quality monitoring stations. There are currently only three monitoring stations across the Territory. The inadequacy of this was highlighted in 19/20 bushfire season.

The Conservation Council ACT Region supports the recent commitment to phase out wood burning heaters from ACT suburbs. However, the target phase out date of 2045 must be accelerated. Burning wood for energy in wood-burning heaters increases emissions and is a risk to the health of our community. Additionally, wood heaters negatively impact the environment in several ways - emitting warming methane and black carbon, destroying forests and woodland

¹ Point Advisory, 2021, ACT Greenhouse Gas Inventory for 2020–21, https://www.environment.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1918038/ACT-Greenhouse-Gas-Emissions-Inventory-Report-2020-21.pdf

and endangering our native fauna through habitat loss. We call upon the Government to accelerate the phase out of wood heaters in the region and support the community to transition away from them.

Recommendation 3: Invest in Public and Active Travel

3.1 Increase and provide sufficient funding for the annual maintenance budget for active travel infrastructure. This includes addressing the maintenance backlog within the next five years.

3.2 Make it easier for Canberrans to choose cycling as a mode of travel

- Build a connected, safe, and convenient cycle network, [as proposed as priority two of the ACT Government's \(draft\) Active Travel Plan](#), within the next five years.
- Expand the Sustainable Household Scheme to include electric bikes and second hand Electric Vehicles.
- Expand the Canberra Electric Bike Library run by SEE Change and Switched on Cycles.
- Invest in secure electric bike parking cages with charging facilities in multi-unit developments, new office buildings, new residential precincts and at already established suburban hubs.

3.3 Make it safe and convenient for more Canberrans to use public transport

- Speed up the planning and construction of light rail to Woden, and begin planning stage three of light rail to Belconnen and the airport.
- Fill in missing links in the bus network including investing in sufficient transport options for university and CIT students.
- Review the current public transport concession arrangements.
- Invest in pedestrian crossings near bus stops on roads with high levels of traffic.
- Increase the number of crossing supervisors at schools to encourage students to commute to school using active travel.
- Upgrade bus stops to shelter people during extreme weather.

3.4 Continue the Slower streets program as a priority, and make “street calming” design changes to suburban streets in consultation with local residents as an effective way to slow traffic.

3.5 Invest in community engagement programs that support and incentivise people to make sustainable transport choices including encouraging people to use active travel for short trips to work, school and the shops.

3.6 Invest in expanding community transport options including electric bus services and bike and walking use. This includes for vulnerable children to attend early learning centres who have transport barriers preventing them.

Our transport choices have a significant impact on our environment, the liveability of our city, and our productivity, health and wellbeing. Canberra urgently needs:

- A strong public transport network
- Safe, accessible, convenient and comfortable active travel infrastructure as a viable and attractive option for commuters

- To cut emissions from use of cars
- To transition to an electrified transport system, which can run on 100% renewable energy.

As the jurisdiction that has led the way in climate action, the development of strong public and active travel infrastructure needs to be a priority for Canberra. Transport emissions contribute 63% to the ACT's direct greenhouse emissions, primarily through the use of petrol and diesel vehicles. Moving to a clean, safe and convenient active and public travel network will allow the region to reduce emissions considerably. The urgency is underpinned by the Declaration of a Climate Emergency that was passed by the Legislative Assembly in 2019. Making significant investments in public and active travel over and above what has been allocated to date will also send a strong, positive signal to the community that public and active travel is a strong priority for the government.

Public and active travel development needs to take place with a strong commitment to delivering transport equity. Paths need to be connected to services, integrated and wide to allow access for all ages and abilities. Better streets will create cleaner and healthier communities. Access to public and active travel will also reduce cost of living pressures.

While hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated for the construction and upgrade to roads, funding for public and active travel infrastructure has been small by comparison. Where funding is allocated for active travel infrastructure, expenditure of the funds has seen delays.

Maintenance of paths is a huge issue. In all but the very newest suburbs, paths are in poor and/or dangerous condition with piecemeal and slow maintenance. There are many upgrades, connections and paths that are required to be constructed and/ or completed. Without reprioritising funding from car-based travel towards walking and cycling, there won't be an increase in the uptake of active travel until the infrastructure supports safe, efficient use.

Accounting for large chunks of funding for road upgrades that include things such as on-road cycling paths or road shoulders where cars drive at 100 km/hr (such as the Monaro Highway shoulder) as part of the Active Travel budget results in heavily skewed figures that give the impression of high investment, but in reality those kind of projects have limited capacity to build engagement in active travel or support a high number of active travel users. In addition, while the inclusion of active travel provisions in large projects is welcome in the main (as long as they are suitable), it should not negate the need for investment within the existing urban form. As proposed in [the ACT Government's \(draft\) Active Travel Plan](#), we urge the Government to prioritise:

- The construction of safe and convenient cycling routes to and from all Canberra schools, health facilities, town centres, and major public transport stops.
- The expansion and upgrading of all principal cycle routes, including the construction of raised pedestrian crossing at all road crossings on these routes.
- The conversion of all on-road cycle lanes on roads 60 km or above to be replaced by segregated cycle lanes. This can occur with quick-build protected cycling lanes – initially on Northbourne Avenue, Bowen Drive and Commonwealth Avenue, but rolling out to all trunk roads including Belconnen Way, Drakeford Drive etc.

In addition, for the purposes of transparency around funding, all active travel expenditure and funding should be clearly identified in budget papers, including the maintenance funding. The accountability indicators in Budget Statements also need to reflect publicly-stated Government

priorities and goals and ensure the indicators for active travel infrastructure match those for roads.

Recommendation 4: Provide substantive support to strengthen the ACT's environmental and climate sectors

4.1 Increase operational funding for the Conservation Council ACT Region, SEE Change and the Canberra Environment Centre to increase the organisations' impacts to reduce greenhouse emissions, promote sustainability and conserve biodiversity.

4.2 Create an Environment and Sustainability hub for Canberra - a multipurpose, accessible community hub for everything related to the environment and climate movement in the ACT.

4.3 Provide adequate yearly ongoing funding for LandcareACT and the three member Catchment Groups (Southern ACT Catchment Group; Molonglo Conservation Group; Ginninderra Catchment Group).

4.4 Provide sustainable operational funding for the National Parks Association of the ACT to undertake vital activities including Indigenous engagement programs, part-time office support and ongoing IT support.

Canberra based Environment and Climate community organisations play a crucial role in Government strategies to reduce emissions on the pathway to net zero emissions by 2045, for a circular economy and to restore and conserve natural places in the ACT region. Despite the central role the ACT's Environment and Climate sectors play, and the important work they do in building our communities and advocating for change, they continue to face considerable challenges.

The key challenge that many organisations in the sector face is the lack of sustained and appropriate funding. This lack of funding leads to several organisational issues ranging from lack of tenancy, challenges in investing in staff and systems and considerable negative impacts on staff wellbeing.

Despite these issues, the sector continues to draw upon the goodwill and passion of the community. But this is not a sustainable situation. Continued lack of sustainable, ongoing funding will result in a sector that will not have the capacity to fully contribute to environment and climate justice in our region.

The Conservation Council ACT Region plays an important role in the region, supporting and implementing the ACT Government's own strategies and advocating to build a more sustainable Canberra. Only with more staff can Conservation Council ACT meaningfully participate in all of the requested government roundtables, consultations, forums and community consultations. This requires sustained and substantial funding.

Creating an Environment and Sustainability hub for Canberra will provide a long-term solution to another major challenge the sector faces - tenancy. This dedicated centre would host organisations including the Canberra Environment Centre, SEE Change, the Community Toolbox Canberra and Repair Cafes. The space would be used by the community for meetings, workshops, a demonstration garden, office space and work rooms.

By creating a space for the sector, the region will benefit from greater collaborations and partnerships between sector organisations and more climate and climate and environmental engagement with the ACT community.

Appendix 1: PLANTING GUIDE AUDIT PROJECT IN THE ACT

PLANTING GUIDE AUDIT PROJECT IN THE ACT

<i>RESOURCE NAME/ LINK</i>	<i>RESOURCE TYPE</i>	<i>YEAR PUBLISHED</i>
Canberra Plant Selector Website	Online database (342 species)	n/d.
Plant Species for Municipal infrastructure standards	TCCS publication	Feb, 2021
ACT Gov/ Yarralumla Nursery Fact Sheets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire retardant plants • Hardy Shrubs for Hot, Dry, spots • Hedging plants for Canberra Gardens • Bog plants for Canberra gardens • Small eucalypts for Canberra Gardens • Small trees for Canberra gardens • Deciduous trees for Canberra gardens 	Yarralumla Nursery/ ACT Gov. publication	n/d.
Urban Forest Tree Species ANU research	ANU research published for EPSDD	2019
Pest species declaration	Legislation	Latest update 2021
Climate wise planting guide	SLA publication	2021

Yarralumla Nursery Initiatives

- [Free Plant Scheme](#)
- [Lone Pine scheme](#)

Other resources

- [Nature strip guidelines](#) (2019)
- [Yarralumla Nursery Catalogue](#)