



Ms Rebecca Vassarotti MLA
Minister for the Environment
ACT Legislative Assembly
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30 May 2023

Dear Ms Vassarotti,

RE: Environment Ministers Meeting - ACT Priorities

Australia's Environment Ministers last met in October 2022 and made three landmark commitments to halt and reverse biodiversity loss across our nation and put Australia's environment back on a path of recovery:

1. To work collectively to achieve a national target to protect and conserve 30% of Australia's landmass and 30% of Australia's marine areas by 2030.
2. To note the Commonwealths' intention to establish a national nature repair market and agreed to work together to make nature positive investments easier, focusing on a consistent way to measure and track biodiversity.
3. To work with the private sector to design out waste and pollution, keep materials in use and foster markets to achieve a circular economy by 2030.

We ask that Environment Ministers follow through on their commitments in recognition of the scale and urgency of environmental challenges.

The 2021 State of the Environment Report found that Australia's unique animals and plants are under significant pressure. Action is needed quickly to arrest environmental decline and prevent new extinctions of plants and animals.

At the upcoming Environment Ministers Meeting the Conservation Council ACT Region and our Member Groups ask that you please make the following representations to your fellow environment ministers to follow through on the commitment to reverse biodiversity loss.

Recommendations:

Biodiversity at risk – work towards zero extinctions

- **Lawson Grasslands:** The proposed development at Lawson Grasslands in Belconnen will impact species and ecosystem survival. Over 99% of natural temperate grasslands have been destroyed since colonisation. This has pushed species like the Golden Sun Moth, Perunga Grasshopper, and Striped Legless Lizard to the edge of extinction. Lawson Grasslands is a stronghold for these species and in the 1% of remaining Natural Temperate Grasslands - it needs to be urgently protected. But in the face of strong community opposition, Defence Housing Australia is proposing to build over site, clearing 23.52 ha of native vegetation, including 15.8ha of critically endangered Natural Temperate Grassland and 1.31 ha of critically endangered Box Gum Woodland. The project is set to be reviewed under the EPBC act in the coming months. We ask that you recommend to the Environment Minister that the project be refused approval due to unacceptable risk to biodiversity loss and not being inline with the commitment for no more extinctions.
- **Airport North Road:** a proposed road from Fairbairn to Majura Road in Pialligo concerningly, if it proceeds, will destroy and fragment critically endangered Natural Temperate Grassland at a site of significant importance due to its population of Canberra Grassland Earless Dragons. The Canberra Dragon is currently proposed for listing as “critically endangered” under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. Once widespread from Bathurst to Cooma, today the Canberra Dragon is known at only a handful of locations, one of those being the Airport North site. The proposed road threatens the survival of this species and therefore approval of the road is not inline with the Australian Environment Minister’s commitment to reverse biodiversity loss. The Council requests that you recommend the Airport North Road not proceed by asking the Federal Environment Minister to take action using her powers under s144(2) of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.
- **Regional Forest Agreements:** The RFAs are long standing agreements between state and federal government's which give logging a special exemption from complying with federal environment laws - the Environment Protection, Conservation and Biodiversity Act (EPBC Act). This has allowed native forest logging to proceed without being reviewed under the EPBC Act, severely contributing to biodiversity loss. The Graeme Samuels independent review of the EPBC Act recommended RFAs be abolished. We ask that you recommend the Australian Environment Ministers commit to abolishing RFAs.
- **Invasive species:** The Council strongly supports rapid action to reduce the number of feral horses in the Australian Alps owing to the significant toll that horses place on our sensitive alpine environment. Indeed, there is no way for the Australian Government to meet its statutory obligations to protect the environment or its commitment to end extinctions without rapid and targeted action on feral horses in the alps. The Council recommends that Australia’s Environment Ministers commit to the development of strong national environmental standards that require the effective management of invasive threats and apply to the management of National Heritage Places like the Australian Alps, as well as World Heritage Areas or Ramsar wetlands.
- **Nature Repair Market: OECMs:** We ask you to recommend other effective area-based conservation measures be consistently recognised and monitored for their conservation

values. This will assist Australia in reaching the target of protecting 30% of our land and 30% of our oceans by 2030, by recognising conservation efforts in areas where classification as a protected area is not feasible.

- **Off Reserve Protection:** To combat biodiversity loss across the Territory, the Conservation Council's Biodiversity Working Group and Friends of Grasslands have 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](#). We ask you to raise the matter with your fellow Environment Ministers as an approach to off reserve protection that could be emulated across the country.

Design out plastic pollution

The collapse of the REDcycle soft plastics scheme in 2022 demonstrated that the market for post-consumer recycled soft plastic is weak and that far too much waste is being generated: 96% of soft plastics end up in landfill.¹ Industry is not on track to meet 2025 recycling targets², and is unlikely to while it remains cheaper and easier to produce virgin plastics than to recycle. The Federal Government must step up to address this market failure: voluntary schemes do not address the lack of financial drivers or place effective responsibility on producers.

- Legislate **mandatory plastics and packaging reduction targets** by the end of 2023, particularly mandatory inclusion of recovered post-consumer materials in new products to displace demand for virgin materials and drive a market for recovered materials.
- Introduce a **mandatory stewardship scheme for all plastics** producers and importers/suppliers commencing in 2024, like drinks container deposit schemes. The collected levy must then be used to build recovery systems and processing facilities to provide high-quality raw materials for further production.
- Legislate to **phase out problematic and unnecessary single-use plastics**.

End fossil fuel projects

The Synthesis Report of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6-SYR) released in March 2023 is unequivocal in its statements about the urgency required in global emissions reductions.

*"Keeping warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels requires deep, rapid and sustained greenhouse gas emissions reductions in all sectors. Emissions should be decreasing by now and will need to be cut by almost half by 2030, if warming is to be limited to 1.5°C."*³

As one of the largest exporters of fossil fuels, Australia could show significant climate-action leadership by winding down our fossil fuel industries and switching our resources and industries to clean energy and materials production (solar power, "green" hydrogen, "green" steel etc). Fossil fuel mining, transport and processing also has damaging physical impacts on our landscapes, cultural

¹ Boomerang Alliance, 2023, 'Dear Tanya, please don't go soft on plastics', https://www.boomerangalliance.org.au/please_dont_go_soft_on_plastics

² Boomerang Alliance, 2023, 'A plan for recovery and recycling of household soft plastics', <https://assets.nationbuilder.com/boomerangalliance/pages/4078/attachments/original/1676239894/BA-20230213-soft-plastics-recycling-plan.pdf?1676239894>

³ IPCC, 2023, 'Urgent climate action can secure a liveable future for all', Press release, 20 March, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/press/IPCC_AR6_SYR_PressRelease_en.pdf

heritage, native habitats and the marine environment, contributing to decline and extinction of native species and loss of indigenous history.

Every Australian State and Territory has a legislated target of net-zero emissions by 2050 at the latest – merely 27 years away. The electrification movement is underway for buildings, transport, industrial processes and materials, with technological solutions now economically viable for almost every application previously performed by fossil fuels. There are no more excuses for delay. The fossil fuel industry must be closed down.

- Commit to **no approvals for new or expanded coal, oil and gas projects**, and industrial projects fueled by fossil fuels.
- Revise the **EPBC Act to include a climate trigger** for all development applications.
- Advocate for all States and Territories to **include climate triggers in all development applications**.
- Tighten taxation laws (including the PRRT) and revise federal budget spending to **remove all subsidies to fossil fuel industries**⁴, and revise legislative and regulatory loopholes that enable fossil fuel companies to evade paying tax and rehabilitation costs in Australia.
- **Review rehabilitation policies and funding** for their effectiveness at driving ecosystem rehabilitation of abandoned mining sites and progressive rehabilitation of working mines.^{5 6}
- Develop an action plan and timeline to progressively and **proactively phase out all fossil fuel projects by 2050**, including introducing all required legislation.
- Remove clauses from Australia's **international trade agreements** that uphold or favour the fossil fuel industry or that deter or prevent Australia from implementing policies to protect the environment and climate.⁷

Yours sincerely,



Elle Lawless

Executive Director

Conservation Council ACT Region

⁴ The Australia Institute, 2023, 'Fossil fuel subsidies in Australia 2023', <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/P1378-Fossil-fuel-subsidies-2023-Web.pdf>

⁵ Bourke, J, 2022, 'Australia's abandoned mines: rehabilitated', Australian Geographic, <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/history-culture/2022/07/australias-abandoned-mines-rehabilitated/>

⁶ Chong, JP, 2017, 'The effect of the introduction of the Mining Rehabilitation Fund in Western Australia - An empirical analysis', Murdoch University, <https://researchportal.murdoch.edu.au/esploro/outputs/graduate/The-effect-of-the-introduction-of/991005544839207891>

⁷ AFTINET, 2020, 'Submission to the DFAT Review of Australia's Bilateral Investment Treaties' <http://aftinet.org.au/cms/sites/default/files/200929%20AFTINET%20DFAT%20ISDS%20%20submission%20final.pdf#overlay-context=node/1929>