



Enhancing Biodiversity Conservation on Rural Leaseholds in the ACT

A Report for the Conservation Council ACT Region

Written by Zoe Duffin-Pruksapun

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Zoe Duffin Pruksapun U5956901

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Title page Image sourced from Giannini, 2020, 'ACT grasslands, woodlands classified as critically endangered', *RIOTACT*, URL: <https://the-riotact.com/act-grasslands-woodlands-classified-as-critically-endangered/378733>

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Executive Summary

Private land conservation provides greater habitat resilience and connectivity in ecological communities that might otherwise be threatened by climate change and urban expansion. With the ACT Government commitment to enhance connectivity between native vegetation remnants on agriculturally productive rural leases between 2013 and 2023 in the ACT's *Nature Conservation Strategy*, it is imperative that the ACT's biodiversity conservation policy futures are addressed. The current report aimed to investigate how biodiversity conservation could be enhanced on rural leaseholds in the ACT.

Desktop research was used to inform the literature review on Australia's federal, state and territory solutions for private land conservation. Peer-reviewed literature was used to evaluate challenges in existing models for private land conservation and recommend opportunities for future directions. Stakeholder engagement informed the direction of the research specific to rural leaseholds in the ACT.

It was found that conservation agreements were the primary policy mechanism used for private land conservation in Australia. The ACT was the only Australian jurisdiction that did not use conservation agreements due to the ACT's exclusively leasehold tenure. Land Management Agreements (LMAs) and Environmental Grants are the primary policy tools employed by the ACT Government for biodiversity conservation on rural leaseholds. Challenges associated with private land conservation in the ACT included constraints of perpetuity on rural leaseholds, insufficient enforcement of LMAs, demotivation in rural landholders, and lack of ongoing government support in the Environmental Grants Program. Opportunities included targeting agricultural interests for conservation, introducing financial incentives for conservation uptake and outcomes, formalising conservation actions and landholder security through conservation agreements, and building stewardship and trust between the landholder and the ACT Government.

The present report recommends; (1) amendments to the land-use conditions in Rural Leases in the *Planning and Development Act 2007* to include biodiversity conservation as a primary land use; (2) reframing traditional notions of biodiversity conservation to a more inclusive framing of how biodiversity conservation could *enhance* productivity; (3) introducing fixed-term conservation agreements on rural leaseholds to formalise commitments; (4) financial incentives for conservation uptake and conservation outcomes; and (5) building stewardship capacity in ACT rural landholders through ongoing access to government support and expertise.

1 Introduction

1.1 Problem framing

Private protected areas are of growing importance in Australia's biodiversity conservation narrative. Australia has fallen short of its commitment to Aichi Target 11, at the Convention on Biological Diversity 1992, to protect 17% of all Australian terrestrial bioregions in the NRS by 2020 (May, 2017). Failure to meet this target threatens the resilience of native biodiversity as urban development continues to spread and climate change impacts intensify (May, 2017). Moreover, much more than 17% representation will be required to ensure that protected areas maintain ecological integrity (Larsen, Turner & Mittermeier, 2014). The Australian Government recognises that objectives of the NRS cannot be solely built on public land (Fitzsimmons, 2015). Private protected areas are therefore increasingly important for improving ecological connectivity and the resilience of Australia's biodiversity.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) presents a unique situation to Australia's private protected area estate. All land in the ACT is owned by the Commonwealth and managed under a Crown Lease system. The uniqueness of the ACT's leasehold system means that the implementation of nature conservation strategies in the territory cannot simply emulate those employed in other Australian jurisdictions. In the *Nature Conservation Strategy*, the ACT Government committed to enhancing connectivity between native vegetation remnants on agriculturally productive rural leases between 2013 and 2023 (ACT Government Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate; The Directorate, 2013). The strategy recognises that ongoing engagement with rural landholders is critical for managing biodiversity conservation on rural leaseholds in the ACT (The Directorate, 2013). As a result, landholders with high biodiversity values in the ACT possess a unique opportunity to manage and conserve vital ecological communities at their doorstep.

1.2 Research question & aims

The present research aims to identify how rural landholders in the ACT can be better supported in biodiversity conservation actions on their properties. This aim has been broken down into three research questions:

1. What is the ACT government currently doing to protect biodiversity on rural leaseholds?
2. What are the challenges and opportunities associated with the current system?
3. How can biodiversity conservation in ACT rural leaseholds be better supported in the future?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Conservation covenants in Australia

The aim of the literature review was to investigate existing state and territory policy mechanisms for private land conservation in Australia. Conservation covenants (also conservation agreements) are the primary policy instrument used to protect biodiversity on private land (Fitzsimmons, 2015). Conservation covenants are voluntary, legally binding agreements between an authorised state-based organisation and a landholder. Landholders retain land ownership but possess a reduced 'bundle of rights', through restrictions on development and land-use on areas placed under the covenant (Hardy, Fitzsimmons, Bekessy & Gordon, 2016). While conservation covenants are typically considered permanent conservation mechanisms, they can be agreed upon for varying durations (Hardy et al., 2016). Accordingly, conservation agreements are formally considered a protected area that can contribute to Australia's international biodiversity protection targets through the NRS (Hardy et al., 2016).

The duration of a conservation agreement influences the level of protection provided to the covenanted land. There are typically three classes of conservation agreement. Literature on the NSW conservation agreements program was the most well-documented and will therefore provide the basis for explaining the classes of conservation agreements in this report. These conservation agreements vary on three fundamental levels (See Table 1; BCT, 2019):

- Agreement duration
- Eligibility for financial support
- Access to advice and education

Table 1. Examples of Australian State and Territory conservation agreements and equivalents based on NSW's three classes of conservation agreements

Policy Instrument	Eligibility	Level of Protection	Duration	Payment Eligibility	Equivalent Agreements	Program Examples
Biodiversity Stewardship Agreements	High conservation value (intact) sites that are available for biodiversity credits for offsets	Highest	In perpetuity	Payments from the Biodiversity Stewardships Payments Fund (alternative income)	QLD WA	Special Wildlife Reserves Conservation Covenant
Biodiversity Conservation Agreements	Relatively high conservation value	Medium	In perpetuity or fixed-term	Payments depending on the management projects proposed by the landholder	TAS SA	Tasmania's Private Land Conservation Covenants Heritage Agreements
Wildlife Refuge Agreements	For landholders wishing for flexible, entry-level protection	Lowest	Fixed-term, flexible	Not-eligible. Only access to workshops and education	QLD TAS, VIC WA	Nature Refuges Program, Land for Wildlife Program Agreement to Reserve Program

It should also be noted that where conservation covenants address the legal requirements for a private protected area's inclusion in the NRS, they are often accompanied by other policy instruments to assist with uptake, long-term management and ongoing participation (see Table 2).

Table 2. Common policies accompanying conservation covenants in Australia

Policy Instrument	Policy Type	Policy Description	Operating States	Program Examples
Conservation Tender	Market-based	Auctions for environmental grants allocated to most cost-effective projects	QLD QLD VIC	Vegetation Incentive Program Desert Uplands Landscape Linkages Program BushTender Program
Revolving Fund	Market-based	Properties with high conservation values purchased and sold with pre-commitment to perpetual conservation covenant on property	NSW VIC SA TAS	Conservation Management Program Trust for Nature Revolving Fund Program BushBankSA Tasmanian Land Conservancy Revolving Fund Program
Certification Schemes	Market-based	Certification demonstrates "clean and green" provenance and earn farmers a financial premium for their produce	Federal (NSW and VIC trial commenced 2019)	Australian Farm Biodiversity Certification Scheme
Tax Concessions	Price-based	Landholders in approved covenanting programs can apply for land tax concessions through the federal government	QLD NSW SA TAS WA	Cassowary Coast Conservation Covenant Rate Deferral Scheme Conservation Agreement and Biodiversity Stewardship Agreement Programs Heritage Agreement Scheme Protected Areas on Private Land Program The National Trust of Australia (WA) Covenant Program

2.2 Review of conservation covenants in Australia

Conservation covenants are a useful for formal inclusion of private protected areas in the NRS (Fitzsimmons, 2015). They are positively regarded when they conservation efforts do not threaten social or economic welfare of participating landholders (Kabii & Horwitz, 2006). Internationally, conservation agreements have been associated with landholder behaviour change, through the avoidance of potentially harmful activities to biodiversity and the active participation in conservation activities (Niesten, Zurita & Banks, 2010).

In Australia, current participation in conservation agreements is insufficient to protect biodiversity in the long term (Watson et al., 2014; Butchart et al., 2015). Two key

issues have been highlighted; effectiveness and permanence. The effectiveness of conservation agreements is difficult to measure (Hardy et al., 2016). The Australia-wide implementation of conservation agreements could highlight their efficacy and acceptability for private land conservation. However, lack of access to information about conservation agreements and relevant spatial data may be a barrier to uptake of conservation agreements (Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019). This is a direct result of discoordination between governments and nature conservation trusts (Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019). With conservation agreements falling exclusively under state governments, or even non-government organisations, there is no standardised measurement of effectiveness and no certain way to identify the general outcomes of Australia's conservation covenants.

The permanence of conservation covenants is a limitation of the contractual instrument for multiple reasons. Covenants placed in perpetuity are considered a barrier to uptake (Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019). This is due to the landholders' concern for restricted property rights (Moon & Cocklin, 2011; Productivity Commission, 2001), concern for funding (Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019; Kabii & Horwitz, 2006; Hanley, Banerjee & Lennox, 2012), loss of productivity and different land tenure categories (Fitzsimmons, 2015). These issues will be explored further in the context of the ACT in the following sections.

3 Methodology & Limitations

3.1 Methodology

The current report investigated the needs and capabilities of rural landholders to conserve biodiversity on private properties in the ACT. Data was collected primarily through extensive desktop research. Literature review information was synthesised using Federal, State and Territory documents, legislation and strategies. Peer-reviewed literature was sourced to review the implementation of conservation covenants elsewhere, with a strong focus on Australian policies. Online search engines such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate and Elsevier, were used to source initial peer-reviewed literature. Further peer-reviewed literature was sourced using snowball methods. Key stakeholders were identified and contacted to gain greater understanding of the values surrounding biodiversity conservation on the ACT's rural leaseholds (see Appendix A). Drawing on key findings from these references, the relevant points were synthesised into Sections 5 (Challenges in an ACT Context), 6 (Opportunities in the ACT) and 7 (Recommendations).

3.2 Limitations

3.2.1 Limited data about nature conservation on private land in the ACT

Only a process of elimination revealed that the ACT does not use conservation agreements. No government documents account for a replacement of these formal agreements, nor go into specific detail about why conservation covenants may be difficult to implement in the ACT. This was attributed to governments not advertising what their own policies lack, especially when the incumbent party has been consistent for over two decades.

3.2.2 Stakeholders could not be directly referenced

Building on the previous limitation, understanding the nuances of the ACT Government's response to nature conservation on rural leaseholds was difficult. Time constraints and the need for ethics approval limited the scope of the report in conducting formal interviews with stakeholders and therefore could not be

referenced. While this limited the depth of my research, I was still able use stakeholder consultation to guide the direction of my research.

4 Current management of conservation values in the ACT

The ACT's *Nature Conservation Strategy* (The Directorate, 2013) identifies the importance of engaging with rural landholders for the purpose of biodiversity conservation. While 54% of the ACT is protected under the NRS (The Directorate, 2013), this statistic does not account for the representativeness of the ACT's reserve system. For instance, only 5% of the original range of the critically endangered Yellow Box Blakely's Red Gum Grassy Woodlands and Natural Temperate Grasslands remain in good condition in the ACT (ACT Government, 2019a; Gilles, 2000). Almost half of these remnants are found on rural leaseholds (ACT Government, 2019b).

The ACT is the only region in Australia that does not have an equivalent agreement to conservation covenants as a product of the Crown Lease system. Conservation covenants are not used in the ACT because covenanting leasehold land is significantly harder than freehold land, which comprises the majority of the remaining land in Eastern Australia (Fitzsimmons, 2015). This difficulty is due to conflicts with management intent for land-use between conditions in conservation covenants and pastoral lease legislation (Fitzsimmons, 2015).

Land Management Agreements (LMAs) can be likened to conservation covenants on private properties in the ACT. Rural lease LMAs are intended to identify important natural features on the property, outline a landholder's land management responsibilities and occur between the government and the landholder. However, there are some key differences between the two. Where conservation covenants are typically voluntary, LMAs are a mandatory component within an ACT Rural Lease (*Planning and Development Act 2007*). Where conservation agreements protect specific "conservation areas", an LMA must be signed irrespective of the significance of natural assets on the property, and therefore covers the entire property (*Planning and Development Act 2007*).

The ACT Government currently offers financial assistance for community-based environmental projects that complement the ACT Government's environmental priorities, through the ACT Environment Grants Program. Community members are invited to apply for grants for environmentally advantageous projects that are

completed within twelve-months of their one-off payment (ACT Government, 2019c). Grants are allocated based on the following selection criteria: alignment with funding priorities for ACT Environment Grants, cost-effectiveness, project planning and budgeting, and the demonstration of community partnerships (ACT Government, 2019c).

5 Challenges to Private Land Conservation in the ACT

5.1 Constraints of the leasehold system on private land conservation

One-hundred percent of land in the ACT is owned by the Commonwealth and allocated using Crown Leases. The length of a rural lease is reflective of the ACT Government's land use intentions for future urban development (*Territory Plan 2008*). Moreover, the Commonwealth owns the rights to soil and timber on rural leaseholds, as well as the right to resume the land for specific purposes in the ACT. The ACT's *Planning and Development Act 2007* specifies that land may be resumed by the ACT Government within 15 days-notice to the lessee. Naturally, a rural landholder may feel uncertain that their tenure is secure. Compounding this, is the fact that conservation is not recognised as a primary land use category for Crown Leases in the ACT (*Territory Plan 2008*).

State and territories hold the power to make amendments to rural leases to include additional land uses to the conditions of the lease (Productivity Commission, 2001). But in agricultural rural leases, stocking provisions have been agreed to on the lease, there is limited scope for altering the nature of the pastoral lease (Productivity Commission, 2001). This is especially problematic if the productivity value of the land is high (Productivity Commission, 2001). The relevant minister, who decides on the stocking provisions of the property, may then rule that it is in the best interests of the state to ensure the land is not removed from productivity. The nature of the lease system thereby inhibits conservation as a land-use on rural properties.

5.2 Land Management Agreement are not enforced

Land Management Agreements are a barrier to biodiversity conservation on private land in the ACT because they are not enforced. *The ACT Native Woodland Conservation Strategy and Action Plan 2019* presents LMAs as positive mechanisms for promoting biodiversity conservation and government cooperation with rural landholders in the ACT (ACT Government, 2019b). The strategy further suggests that landholders are held accountable for conservation efforts on their properties (ACT Government, 2019b). Yet an audit of rural leases in Western ACT revealed that almost half of the audited properties did not have an LMA at least 3 years after

the property was purchased. This is significant because Section 286 of the ACT's *Planning and Development Act 2007* specifies that an LMA must be negotiated within 6 months of signing a rural lease (General Auditors Office, 2018). This suggests that LMAs are not enforced and are risking the management and protection of biodiversity on rural properties in the ACT. Moreover, despite being the ACT's only mechanism for contracting nature conservation on private property, literature describing the use and evaluations of LMAs in the ACT is limited. This suggests that LMAs in their current implementation, are insufficient for enhancing biodiversity conservation on rural leaseholds in the ACT.

5.3 Landholder demotivation for biodiversity conservation associated with perceptions of property rights

Landholder motivation for biodiversity conservation is critical to biodiversity gains (Kabii & Horwitz, 2006; Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019). The present research was unable to empirically evaluate the levels of willingness or motivation for biodiversity conservation in members of the ACT's rural leasehold community. However, inferences were made by understanding the nature of the ACT's Rural Leases and important key considerations from empirical data from other private conservation programs around Australia.

While land ownership in the ACT is not possible, rural leases are typically fixed for 99 years, depending on the property's proximity to Canberra City and the prospective developments of the area over time (Love, 2017). The term of the lease is not renewed when the lease is purchased by a new landholder (Love, 2017). Consequently, the ACT's rural leasehold system may affect a landholder's perceptions of their property rights. Private land conservation typically removes the landholder's right to mine and restrict certain types of development on the land (Kabii & Horwitz, 2006). While there is no universal definition of property rights (Meyer, 2000, as cited in Kabii & Horwitz, 2006), because private protected areas contribute to the National Reserve System, the land that is protected is transformed from "private" to "common" property (Kabii & Horwitz, 2006). This increases concern about government interventions on land tenure and management, a particularly poignant challenge for productive landholders who desire the autonomy to manage their land agriculturally (Moon & Cocklin, 2011). This is exacerbated by the

Commonwealth's ability to resume the land at any time (*Planning and Development Act 2007*). ACT rural landholders may therefore be discouraged from placing perpetual conservation covenants on their land because they feel their management and tenure of the property is insecure for the commitment (Productivity Commission, 2001). There remains a challenge in how to motivate ACT rural landholders to enhance conservation actions on their properties.

5.4 One-off environment grants do not ensure ongoing nature conservation

Single upfront payments for conservation actions are not sustainable, especially when participants do not feel supported for ongoing regulatory assistance. In a review of the ACT Environment Grants Program, it was reported that recipients viewed the program positively and were mostly satisfied with the application and implementation process (Immediate Media Consultants; IMC, 2019). However, it was found that participants who were unable to complete their project the prescribed twelve-month frame believed that the funding period for Program was too short, especially when the "(grant) approvals take months" (pg.19, IMC, 2019). The frustration associated with the approval process was perceived as a lack of assistance from the ACT Government's Natural Resource Management (NRM) team, who were identified as key intermediaries that could have facilitated inter-departmental communications (IMC, 2019). The frustration resulting from the combination of delays in grant receipt and attaining project outcomes may therefore be associated with participants not feeling supported to achieve their environmental project outcomes. This highlights a need for more active community engagement by NRM professionals in the ACT Government to assist recipients with logistical difficulties and project scoping.

6 Opportunities for Enhancing Private Land Conservation in the ACT

6.1 Targeting agricultural interests for increased uptake

Landholder motivation and willingness to participate in biodiversity conservation is key to achieving outcomes biodiversity and ecological connectivity gains. In 2017-18 there were 33 farms in the ACT and the highest valued agricultural commodities were cattle and calves (Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment; DAWE, 2020). Land clearing for agriculture is a key threat to biodiversity nationally and globally and has been a key driver for conservationists to develop traditional protected areas where agricultural activity is officially excluded (Scherr & McNeely, 2008). But total segregation of land uses is major barrier to agricultural uptake of conservation areas on rural properties (Scherr & McNeely, 2008).

Many landholders regard land management for biodiversity conservation as incompatible with their production priorities (Whitten, Reeson, Windle & Rolfe, 2012). In an analysis of design and implementation six Australian conservation programs, it was found that communication techniques were often centred on removing land from production by fencing-off portions of productive land and revegetating those “red-tape” areas (Whitten et al., 2012). This is important because “many conservation messages fail to be as effective as they could be because the message is framed in a way that only a subset of people will find important” (Ives and Kendal, 2013, pg. 71, as cited in Kusmanoof et al., 2016). This subset are landholders who do not rely on farming as their primary income (Moon & Cocklin, 2011).

One way to alter this pattern of attitudes to conservation in agricultural landholders is reframing of exclusive biodiversity conservation to a holistic view of the landscape, encouraging the landholder to see how conserving biodiversity on their property not only sustains their agriculture, but will enhance productivity. One example of this could be the enhancement of remnant trees on farming lands to counter the risk of increased soil salinity in dryland farming (Clough, 2000). Productive landholders are willing to participate in private nature conservation if they perceive the program will have direct benefits, like grazing rights and financial incentives (Kabii & Horwitz, 2006). Thinking critically about how biodiversity on private properties is framed to

address the values of productivity held by rural landholders, and how biodiversity may increase productivity could therefore increase landholder participation in conservation programs.

6.2 Financial incentives increase conservation uptake and outcomes

Financial incentives for conservation actions on rural properties in the ACT offers an opportunity to engage rural landholders who may be more reluctant to commit land to enhancing biodiversity. The major question arising from the need for a fiscal incentive is whether the landholder should be reimbursed or compensated for the sacrificed income. This choice relies on whether the landholder has the right to degrade habitats and should be paid to inhibit such behaviour, or whether the landholder owes a duty of care to the habitat as specified in the conditions of their tenure.

Farming as a primary income source is a key predictor of a landholder's reluctance to commit to nature conservation (Kabii & Horwitz, 2006; Moon & Cocklin, 2011; Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019). If conservation actions rely solely in the income of the landholder, the success of conservation areas is vulnerable to extraneous factors outside the landholder's control. Resulting, is the issue of short-term profits and long-term sustainability because a landholder may not be able to sustain their financial inputs for effective conservation efforts (Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019). This means government policy cannot rely on the fact that landholders will self-motivate for the purpose of biodiversity conservation and a more effective funding scheme is required.

Ongoing payments for conservation actions are likely to compensate for continuous productivity losses to agricultural leaseholds. Outcomes-based payments are most effective for encouraging agriculturalists to conserve biodiversity, as they would already be managing their land according to a specific outcome (Hanley et al., 2012). The money provided by outcomes-based funding minimises the financial risk to landholders that is associated with participation in nature conservation, and its potential conflict with agricultural objectives (Moon & Cocklin, 2011). Moon and Cocklin (2011) warn that a blanket rule for financial incentives for conservation uptake must be approached with caution because of issues like additionality and

non-productive landholders with a predisposition to conservation. Yet, payments based on conservation outcomes are more successful at reaching conservation targets than upfront payments (Whitten, Reeson, Windle & Rolfe, 2007). Whitten and colleagues (2007) studied how different payment models could be used to incentivise conservation of the Bush Stone curlew and brolga (ground nesting birds) on private land in the Murray Catchment area. By setting a significantly higher outcome payment relative to the initial landholder payment, the study found higher levels of conservation effort and a stronger landholder preference for outcomes-based agreements, compared to action-based agreements (Whitten et al., 2012). Moreover, outcomes are easier to measure than actions because they are observable (Hanley et al., 2012).

6.3 Formal agreements are important for enforcement and monitoring

Permanence is the primary challenge to the administration of conservation covenants in the ACT. Nevertheless, conservation agreements provide the opportunity to formalise the conservation actions performed by the landholder to ensure that conservation areas can be adequately monitored (Whitten et al., 2012). In an outcomes-based payment system, contracts and payments should be closely tied to conservation outcomes and measurements of the effectiveness of conservation efforts on the property (Whitten et al., 2012).

Landholders may perceive conservation covenants negatively due to concerns about the effects of perpetuity on property rights and future land uses (Zammit, 2013; Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019; Moon & Cocklin, 2011). A review of Queensland's Vegetation Incentives Program (VIP), a single-round conservation tender and covenant scheme, revealed that anticipating management plans forecasting actions five years into the future, and specifying reactive strategies to mitigate for factors outside of the landholder's control (e.g. drought), were the primary concerns with perpetual conservation covenants (Comerford 2014). But ecological outcomes typically take many years to monitor (Whitten et al., 2012) and land use change is a major threat to biodiversity, so ensuring that land is protected long-term is vital for assessing biodiversity gains (Gooden & Sas-Rolfes, 2019). Moreover, the ongoing nature of outcomes-based conservation programs (as recommended in Section 6.2) suggests that conservation actions must be monitored and enforced.

The ACT's LMA system is limited by lack of enforcement, a lack of salience for conservation efforts on rural leaseholds in the ACT and are essentially simplified to ticking a box on the checklist for the purpose of a rural lease. This means that conservation actions in the ACT are likely to require a covenant for the financial security of the landholder as well of the administering organisation (Clough, 2000). Given the nature of rural leases, it is unlikely that the ACT Government will place a permanent conservation covenant on leasehold land. A fixed-term conservation agreement negotiated between the ACT Government and the landholder may be better suited to complying with ACT lease conditions.

6.4 Building trust through ongoing government support

Landholder participation in biodiversity conservation is significantly influenced by levels of trust in the government as the administrative body of nature conservation programs (Moon & Cocklin, 2011). The ACT Government will need to “work with the landholder not dictate terms” (pg. 177, Comerford, 2014) of biodiversity conservation on rural leaseholds. A key difference between participants with a positive sense of ownership over their conservation covenants in the VIP program, compared with those who perceived covenants as restrictive, was trust in the Queensland Government's ongoing support (Comerford, 2014).

Building stewardship capacity will enhance feelings of trust between the ACT Government and participating landholders. Stewardship is the partnership between farming communities and other agencies for nature conservation, where perceived benefit of conservation actions extends beyond the landholder to the wider community (Kabii & Horwitz, 2006). Where conservation covenants have been withdrawn by the landholder, landholders blamed a lack of adequate information about the program, over-extended processes and lack of assistance from the administering organisation (Comerford, 2014). Countering this means starting simple and engaging early and often (Lindenmayer, Burns, Zammit, & Attwood, 2016). Access to expert assistance is highly recommended to support nature conservation programs that may be complex and unfamiliar to the landholder (Kabii & Horwitz, 2006). Enhancing stewardship also places landholders as key decisionmakers in biodiversity conservation which may motivate the collective action of local communities (Scherr & McNeely, 2008). In the ACT, this is particularly

important because of the small size of the rural community relative to the larger groups formed in adjacent states, like NSW or VIC. The ACT Government must fully embrace farming partners, by developing agricultural expertise and advocate for biodiversity conservation investment specifically aimed agriculturalists, to ensure rural communities are recognised as key biodiversity stewards.

7 Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to address the answers to Research Question 3 ('How can biodiversity conservation in ACT rural leaseholds be better supported in the future?') and should be used as a guideline to the ACT Government as the presiding authority for biodiversity conservation in the ACT. A summary of recommendations based on the analysis of challenges and opportunities discussed in Sections 5 and 6, can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Recommendations to the ACT Government for enhancing biodiversity conservation on rural leaseholds in the ACT.

Recommendation	Justification
<p>1) Amend ACT Rural Lease conditions to include biodiversity conservation as a primary land-use activity</p>	<p>Amendments to conditions of Part 9.7—Rural Lease in the <i>Planning and Development Act 2007</i> will allow for the formal recognition of biodiversity conservation as a land use in the ACT. This will ensure the ACT Government carries out its commitment to commitment to strengthening connectivity between native vegetation remnants on rural leaseholds.</p>
<p>2) Reframe biodiversity conservation to how conservation can enhance productivity</p>	<p>Conservation programs in the ACT should aim to engage with productive landholders by reframing traditional ideas of exclusive biodiversity conservation, to how biodiversity conservation can enhance productivity, in communications about nature conservation on rural properties in the ACT.</p>
<p>3) Place fixed-term conservation agreements on rural leaseholds</p>	<p>Conservation agreements will formalise conservation actions and ensure landholder compliance to conservation actions and outcomes, as well as the ACT Government for payment periods and ongoing support. Fixed-term agreements will likely reduce issues of land resumption by the ACT Government and landholder uncertainty in anticipating long-term biodiversity management.</p>
<p>4) Ongoing payment scheme based on meeting conservation targets</p>	<p>Economic incentives are recommended to increase initial uptake of biodiversity conservation on rural leaseholds to engage with a wider range of landholders with varying productive and pro-environment priorities. Ongoing outcomes-based payments will ensure consistent monitoring of biodiversity gains and facilitate landholder compliance with their biodiversity management goals.</p>
<p>5) Ongoing access to government support and education programs</p>	<p>Private land conservation programs in the ACT should aim to build stewardship capacity in the rural leaseholder as primary land managers for nature conservation on their property. Consistent monitoring, access to support and expertise is paramount for ensuring landholders are empowered to carry out conservation actions effectively.</p>

8 Conclusion

The present research aimed to identify how rural landholders in the ACT could be better supported in biodiversity conservation actions on their properties. In the context of our current climate emergency, enhancing terrestrial biodiversity through stronger ecological connectivity and resilience is more important than ever. Nature conservation on private land is vital to Australia's conservation jigsaw. The conservation agreements recommended in this report aim to ensure that biodiversity conservation actions are formalised and recognised through consistent monitoring and rewards-based payments. Engagement with rural landholders should involve capacity building for stewardship and enhancing feelings of ownership over their conservation actions. Given the ACT's uniqueness from other Australian states and territories, it is imperative that the ACT Government addresses policy solutions for the complex issues that currently limit biodiversity conservation on rural leases.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Stakeholder Consideration

Stakeholder consideration and consultation is a vital component of decision-making processes in biodiversity conservation and management in the ACT. Key stakeholders were identified and contacted to gain greater understanding of the values surrounding biodiversity conservation on the ACT's rural leaseholds. The key stakeholders identified were:

- **ACT Government;** particularly members of the Directorate responsible for decision-making, policy planning and implementation.
- **Catchment groups;** community groups for biodiversity conservation and land care in the ACT
- **Law academics;** understanding ACT land title laws and constitution
- **Rural Leaseholders;** lessees of "private" rural land in the ACT most affected by changes to the ACT system for private biodiversity conservation and land management