

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

Question No: 05
Hearing: Budget Estimates
Outcome: Outcome 1
Program: Biodiversity Conservation Division (BCD)
Topic: WA Wheatbelt woodland ecological community listing under the EPBC Act
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Question Type: Spoken

Senator Back, Chris asked:

Senator BACK: Given the shortness of time, I wonder if you would take on notice to give me some advice. I refer to the Western Australian Wheatbelt Woodland ecological community listing under the EPBC Act. I am anxious to know what impact the listing will have on normal farming operations for farmers, pastoralists and graziers in the affected area. Rather than have the time now, I would be most appreciative if you could provide me that on notice. And I wonder if it could be done reasonably quickly—though not by Monday at 5 pm.

Answer:

Listings under the EPBC Act have minimal impact on normal, routine farming operations. They encourage support for farmers to manage common threats to agriculture and the environment in the region, notably salinity and erosion caused by past vegetation clearance, and the impacts of invasive species.

EPBC Act consideration could be triggered on farms in exceptional circumstances, e.g. large scale clearing of high quality woodlands, where the impact to woodland remnants is likely to be significantly detrimental to the Eucalypt Woodlands of the Western Australian Wheatbelt as a whole. However, there are a number of reasons why any regulatory burden on farmers will be minimal:

- (i) The EPBC Act has exemptions for continuing use and prior authorisation that covers most activities by individual farmers.
- (ii) The wheatbelt region is one of the most heavily cleared landscapes in Australia. Most broad clearing of eucalyptus woodlands occurred in the past for agriculture, and now is kept to a minimum.
- (iii) Minimum condition thresholds are applied to nationally listed ecological communities, such that EPBC Act protection does not extend to many woodland remnants on farms as they are too small or degraded to meet condition standards. The focus is on protecting the bigger and better quality patches of woodland which are crucial habitat for the many unique plants and animals in the region. The condition thresholds exclude from the protected ecological community any isolated paddock trees, small stands that serve as windbreaks or shelter belts, and most other small or degraded patches left on farms.
- (iv) When native vegetation clearance is proposed, state laws apply to help minimise impacts to the environment. For the EPBC Act to then be triggered there needs to be a potential significant impact on the listed woodlands or threatened species within. Most

activities of individual landholders in the region are unlikely to be considered for EPBC Act purposes to have a significant impact, particularly in comparison to major infrastructure projects that typically trigger the EPBC Act, e.g. new mines, roadworks or housing/infrastructure developments.

- (v) The woodlands provide habitat for 87 EPBC Act-listed threatened species. These species are already triggers for the EPBC Act in the wheatbelt, particularly key species that nest in eucalyptus trees such as Carnaby's and Baudin's black cockatoos.
- (vi) While listing decisions are based on science, socio-economic circumstances of individuals or organisations can be taken into account on a case-by-case basis when considering EPBC Act approval.

There are many other threatened species and ecological communities listed in other farming regions of Australia, including other similar broad-scale woodland listings. Despite this, there are a very low number of EPBC Act referrals for agriculture-related activities. Those referrals have typically been for industrial-scale developments that may remove large areas of native vegetation or significantly impact on aquatic ecosystems such as for large new feedlots, greenhouses for vegetable crops or regional irrigation projects. At the same time, national woodland listings have generated considerable support to landholders through government environment programmes. For instance, the 2006 listing of the Box-gum grassy woodland ecological community in the eastern wheat-belt region of Australia has been targeted by a range of Australian government environmental programmes that provide support to interested landholders. It is anticipated that the listing of the Eucalypt Woodlands of the Western Australian Wheatbelt will similarly support the efforts of landholders to repair and manage the landscape in the region through programmes such as National Landcare, Green Army, 20 Million Trees and the Emissions Reduction Fund.

An illustrated information product has been developed about the woodland listing aimed at helping farmers, councils and others to better understand the listing. The draft was circulated to the National Farmers Federation, Department of Agriculture, and relevant NRM bodies for their input and comments received were incorporated. It is now available online alongside the Conservation Advice, and on the EPBC Act Information for Farmers webpage: <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/information-for/farmers>.