

Comments on EPBC Act and other Federal impacts on biodiversity within Australia

by

Friends of Bass Valley Bush Inc Landcare Group

When the EPBC Act was introduced it was widely regarded as a vital piece of legislation which was expected to make a huge difference to the maintenance of biodiversity in this country.

Unfortunately, despite significant expenditure of taxpayers' dollars, there has been a continued decline in the viability of habitats and the distribution of plant and animal species.

One reason is that forestry operations that are undertaken in accordance with Regional Forest Agreements are excluded by section 38 from the referral, assessment and approval procedures contained in the EPBC Act.

There are also tight limits on referrals. The Act is very specific in setting out when the public can have input into the referral and assessment process – effectively constraining the referral process. State and Federal Governments have traditionally placed more emphasis on commercial and industrial development than on maintaining biodiversity and despite the rhetoric, there is no real sign of a change in attitude.

The EPBC Act is just one tool for attempting to protect the future. Maintaining and enhancing existing natural ecosystems should form a core part of Australia's response to climate change.

We need a scheme that eliminates carbon emissions from deforestation and environmental degradation, not one that allows more emissions.

Australia's natural ecosystems store huge volumes of carbon and it's disappointing that their protection has not been regarded as a priority in the climate change battle.

There has been, and still appears to be, a fixation that spending hundreds of millions of dollars on creating Landcare networks and employing staff will somehow fix the problem. What's needed is more on-ground works designed to achieve the objective of retaining native vegetation. Simply putting up a fence does not offer permanent protection (but it does create employment).

The previous NHT funding program did little more than allow the creation of networks and staff positions. It had little regard for skills or performance. Encouraging regeneration of native bushlands and grasslands is usually far more effective than high cost revegetation works – but again the active intervention model has been preferred because it generates employment.

Effective land stewardship as part of landscape-scale programs is an essential prerequisite for good management of private as well as public land and our catchments. It can't happen without a system of permanent protection measures in place.

Public funding for revegetation/fencing or enhancement works should only be provided if permanent protection is included (ie a covenant on title). There have been far too many examples of publicly funded revegetation projects being ripped up after a few years because a property has changed hands or the owner has changed his or her mind. In some cases further public money has been spent on additional revegetation works on the same property – only to receive the same fate.

One major hurdle is the inconsistency of catchment management practices across the country. Some management is conducted effectively whilst some is abysmal and there is little accountability or benchmarking. If an audit process was introduced to log environmental outcomes and all future funding depended on meeting base criteria, a significant part of this problem may be solved.

The introduction of the Caring for our Country funding model is showing promise. If it can deliver funds to meaningful programs that actually achieve results rather than projects dreamed up by centralised bodies to meet the funding requirements, then it will help to improve biodiversity outcomes in this country.

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