

Ms Hanna Jaireth  
Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Planning and Environment  
Legislative Assembly  
GPO Box 1020  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ms Jaireth

## **Re Submission on Draft Variation Plan No 231 – East Gungahlin Suburbs of Kenny and Throsby and Goorooyaroo Nature Reserve**

The Conservation Council welcomes the Standing Committee's inquiry into urban vegetation and wildlife corridors, and the integration of biodiversity conservation in land use planning in the ACT and its sub-regions. These issues are central to the preservation of biodiversity in the Canberra region. We strongly support greater recognition and protection of our natural assets in planning for future development of Canberra.

The draft Spatial Plan suggested a biodiversity overlay could be incorporated into the Territory Plan to protect and conserve significant biodiversity values. The Conservation Council supports this and suggests threatened species, threatened species habitat and ecological communities, as well as wildlife corridors, heritage areas and objects, and riparian zones, should have statutory protection in the Territory Plan. There is now an opportunity to incorporate the biodiversity information gathered through the woodlands strategy, grassland strategy – now available and soon to be available about the riparian zone – to identify areas to be protected from development. In addition a biodiversity overlay which guides future development will ensure that the principle of the Spatial Plan in regard to protecting the natural environment is achieved.

### **Summary**

The Conservation Council is extremely concerned about the impacts greenfield development on biodiversity and also more broadly sustainability of our city. In submission on various drafts of the *Spatial Plan*, the Conservation Council argued consistently in favour of the consolidated city model. The proposed development in east Gungahlin, and also in north and north-west Gungahlin, will impact arguably the most significant box-gum woodland remnant remaining in Australia. The Conservation Council supports the establishment of Goorooyaroo Nature Reserve which augments and connects with Mulligan's Flat making the combined complex the largest woodland complex of its type left in public hands. Nevertheless, many areas in East Gungahlin contain patches of high and lower quality vegetation (both grassland and woodland) which could be restored and reconnected.

The opportunities for reconnection and restoration are often overlooked, for example Paragraph five (page 10) of DV 231 is rather dismissive of remnant vegetation.

The Conservation Council urges the Committee to examine the issue of natural vegetation loss

and the associated loss of habitat for many threatened and declining plant and animal species and consider how the consolidated city model with no or limited greenfield development might be progressed.

In our submissions, we have argued that “greater priority be given to urban infill along key public transport routes particularly near transport nodes and around the larger town centres to minimise the need for greenfields development”. We have also made the argument, based on evidence from elsewhere, that development around public transport nodes attracts a valuation premium. DV 231 largely ignores the importance of public transport, fails to address the need for a behavioural switch from car to public transport, and makes no attempt to integrate a potentially very value public asset into overall urban design. For example, DV 231 makes no reference to the “inter-town public transport route” except on page 18.

The Conservation Council’s submission on DV 231 in August 2004, which repeats our earlier comments on the *Spatial Plan*, is attached for your information.

### **Availability and adequacy of information, and wildlife corridors**

Information, in the form of descriptive material and maps on the ACT’s biodiversity has greatly improved over time, although there still remains scope for augmentation and greater dissemination of the information, for example via the internet. The descriptive information and maps in the woodland and grassland strategies are very good and have greatly informed thinking on issues such as areas of high conservation values, connectivity and corridors. When completed, the riparian review will fill in an important gap in knowledge. However, we still lack a comprehensive vegetation map for the ACT comparable to that available in NSW. Environment ACT has been labouring for some years to produce a vegetation map for the whole of the ACT, and we understand that this task is expected to be completed before the end of 2005. While we are very impressed with the quality of work undertaken by the Wildlife and Research Section of ACT Environment, we have been concerned for some time that the unit is under resourced.

In our earlier submissions we have argued for ecological and wildlife habitat corridors and the protection of areas of high and very high conservation values. There are several issues here.

First, regarding the issue of buffers to the reserve. Page 17 of DV 231 recognises that “a buffer area (within the residential area) will contain several elements, including edge roads, appropriate fencing and a fuel free zone to create an overall buffer that fulfils both conservation protection and fire management requirements.” The Conservation Council supports this principle, and hopes the Standing Committee will ensure the principle is implemented. We would encourage the Standing Committee to ensure that the buffer areas are sufficiently wide (size is not stated in the DV 231) to achieve the conservation and fire management objectives. It should also examine issues such as; whether fences should be improved to stop flow of unwanted animals between urban area and reserve; and what should be done to protect the reserve against such threats as wood collection and trail and other bike riding.

With regard to fire management, it is particularly important that the Goorooyaroo-Mulligan’s Flat complex is managed for its biodiversity values, i.e., not managed in such a way that fire protection for nearby urban areas adversely impacts on biodiversity values. It is important that these reserves are managed to allow natural regeneration to take place, to retain and augment fallen timber for habitat, and to allow natural variability in ground storey vegetation resulting

in a rich mosaic of habitat niches.

Second, with regard to habitat corridors and areas of connectivity, the Territory Plan should be amended to protect wildlife corridor and areas of connectivity. There are four areas that should be covered here:

- Lowland woodland ecological communities and corridors. These are identified in Figure 6.1 of the *ACT Lowland Woodland Conservation Strategy* (Action Plan 27) and repeated in the *Canberra Spatial Plan*. Much of the ecological community and corridor exists in reserves or on hills and ridges, and some occurs in open space. Some of the ecological community and corridor is under other land tenure. We believe that a separate category could be created in the Territory Plan which would give formal recognition to “areas of high conservation/connectivity/corridors value” and provide protection, including prohibition of activity that might undermine their sustainability as conservation areas. Creation of such areas would not prevent continuation of current activity (e.g. rural land use, certain broad acre activity) if that was not inconsistent with managing zone for their ecological, habitat and connective values.
- Lowland native grassland ecological community and threatened species habitat. These are identified in the *ACT Lowland Native Grassland Conservation Strategy* (Action Plan 28) Figure 2.2. Those maps illustrate that these remnants are highly fragmented. They need to be grouped together with the overlays for threatened species. Some of these areas are included in reserves. Again the Territory Plan should be amended to incorporate these areas into reserves and “areas of high conservation/connectivity/corridors value” to permanently protect areas which (a) are natural temperate grasslands, (b) habitat for threatened grassland species, (c) areas of native pasture and even exotic pasture which have potential for restoration to natural temperate grassland, especially those areas which will restore connectivity for threatened and declining plants and animals. Areas which need to be managed strategically are: Majura Valley, Jerrabomberra Valley, Gungahlin, Lawson, and West Belconnen.
- Riparian areas. Environment ACT is currently preparing a conservation strategy for riparian areas. This is the third part of the trilogy, woodlands and grasslands being parts one and two. Like the woodland and grassland strategies, it will identify key areas for protection which should be classified in the Territory Plan as “areas of high conservation/connectivity/corridors value”.
- Other remnant vegetation in urban areas. The Conservation Council has encouraged and supported the preparation of the woodland, grassland, and riparian trilogy, and the special protection of strategic conservation areas and habitat corridors. Each strategy is built around threatened species and communities, which should continue to receive high priority. Nevertheless, the natural and semi-natural areas in the hills, buffers, ridges, and along water ways include important remnant vegetation patches and potentially areas of biodiversity and aesthetic enhancement. Many patches have been identified in the woodland and grassland strategies (e.g. small patches of natural temperate grassland along Ginninderra Creek in Belconnen, and grassland and woodland areas within the area covered by DV231), but other remnant areas such as rocky outcrops and smaller areas of natural grassland along creek lines remain unmapped. These are often herpetofauna (frogs and reptile) refuges. There is anecdotal evidence is that many

herpetofauna species are undergoing serious decline in the region, but apart from the grassland species and the pink-tailed worm lizard, have received little serious study. Such remnant areas should wherever possible be identified and given appropriate conservation management, and strategies developed to reconnect them with suitable (appropriate to indigenous ecosystems) vegetation. These would be aesthetically pleasing, provide a connection between local residents and indigenous vegetation, and enhance habitat and biodiversity.

### **Policies and programs for promoting urban wildlife habitat in the ACT**

Many ACT Government policies and programs deserve praise for promoting urban wildlife habitat in the ACT. However, we believe much more needs to be done to integrate policies. Particular recognition should be given to protecting natural temperate grassland, high quality woodland, and areas of connectivity and habitat corridors. Creating and protecting the woodland habitat corridors and grassland connective areas, should receive highest priority. Secondary habitat corridors and areas of connectivity should also be identified and isolated patches reconnected.

The community have the potential to be an important component of this and we recommend a mixed approach of activities and incentives be adopted to promote the improvement of urban wildlife habitat in the ACT. Some possible actions might include:

- Targeting all new home owners and lessees' (living in close proximity to the ACT's nature reserves, national parks, and natural areas of ridges, buffers and open space) with advise (and/or providing education opportunities) on topics such as sympathetic gardening techniques, suitable native garden plants, potential weeds, and the possible effects of domestic pets on native flora and fauna.
- Where practicable in new development areas, seeking to maintain as much naturalness as possible through retention of native trees and grasses and revegetation using species. Targeting habitat for particular species (e.g. superb parrot corridors require particular eucalypts to be in flower) might also be appropriate.
- Minimising the impact on urban riparian areas through the use of Water Sensitive Urban Design Principles in newer developments and the retrofitting of wetlands in established suburbs.
- Encouraging the formation of partnerships between local environmental and community groups, with consultation during the planning and opportunities to participate in education campaigns.

### **Transboundary issues**

The Conservation Council acknowledges the various cooperative projects by Environment ACT and the NSW Department of Conservation (e.g. coordination of grassland, woodland, and various threatened species projects) and applauds them. One important element of cooperation was the development of a *planning framework for natural ecosystems of the ACT and NSW Southern Tablelands* (2002) which provides very valuable vegetation mapping for the northern end of the Southern Tablelands and facilitates a view of the ACT in a broader regional background. This is an important reference work. The Conservation Council is also aware that in the Jerrabomberra Valley both governments compliment each other in natural temperate grassland protection.

Likewise, both governments are attempting to link in efforts to save important woodland corridors.

The Commissioner for the Environment also provides an important transborder link through the production of *State of the Environment Reports* for the ACT and local governments in the Capital Region.

### **Domestic pet policy**

The Conservation Council with Environment ACT and ACTPLA initiated work that led to ACT Government legislation of cat containment in Forde and Bonner. While the Conservation Council advocated a cat ban in these suburbs, the recently announced cat legislation is a welcome development. Equally, cat containment ought to apply in any new suburbs adjacent to reserves. This applies to Kenny and Throsby because of their borders with the Mulligan's Flat-Goorooyaroo, and the Gungahlin grassland.

### **Other issues – shape of Throsby**

In our submission to DV231, we pointed that the particular shape of Throsby, as proposed, would pose significant fire abatement issues, as well as creating a long urban edge next to the reserves of Gooroo and Mulligans Flat, with potential negative impacts on the nature conservation values of these reserves, and a direct threat to threatened bird species. Of particular concern is the northern part (the neck) adjacent to the large dam wetland at Mulligan's Flat Reserve. Siting an urban area immediately adjacent to this wetland is likely to compromise the biodiversity of this part of the Mulligan's Flat reserve

The Conservation Council suggests that this land could be used as sportsfields, restored for its riparian, grassland and habitat values or retained as rural lease with a strong conservation management focus.

### **Other issues – fundamental research**

The Mulligan's Flat-Goorooyaroo complex and the Gungahlin grassland complex will become significant areas of fundamental research. This important research will be strengthened by community awareness of the nature and importance of the research.

The Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra would be pleased to provide further information to the Committee on any of the above issues if required.

Yours sincerely

Trish Harrup

Director

September 2006