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Statement for Tabling

Government Update to the Legislative Assembly Resolution on Artificial Grasses – Alternatives and transition from its use

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This statement responds to the assembly resolution of 6 May 2025 in relation to the use of artificial grass in the ACT and alternatives and transition from its use.

I would like first to articulate the Government's policy position on the use of artificial grass in the ACT. The ACT Government has not banned the use of artificial grass by or sale to the public. Canberrans are, however, encouraged to consider available advice to make informed choices about whether its use is appropriate in their particular circumstances.

Artificial grass and a range of other synthetic surfaces (such as acrylic outdoor hardcourts for tennis and netball or synthetic athletics tracks) are utilised to support a range of sporting activities in Canberra and more broadly across Australia. This includes facilities owned directly by the Territory (such as ACT Government sportsgrounds, and major stadiums – including surrounding the playing surface at Manuka Oval), and facilities owned directly by the private sector (including sporting organisations, sporting clubs, and tertiary institutions).

The ACT Government's position does not imply that artificial grass can be considered a like-for-like replacement for natural grass, trees and vegetation. Instead, it recognises that the appropriate use of artificial grass is dependent on the circumstances in which it is being used and the standards to which it is installed and maintained.

Artificial grass is highly valued among sections of the ACT's sports community for providing a better and consistent playing surface for sports such as hockey. High levels of community participation in sports result in high demand and usage for sports grounds and other sporting assets across Canberra. Natural turf fields experience a significant degree of 'wear and tear', which impacts the quality of the playing surface. These impacts are exacerbated by wet weather, which can lead to game cancellations and the loss of playable hours. During this past winter season, ACT Government turf sportsgrounds required closure on

several occasions to protect the quality of these turf surfaces, which therefore required the cancellation of sport training and competition requirements. During these periods, the synthetic grass sportsgrounds owned by the Territory that support formal sport in Pearce, Nicholls and Holt remained open for use.

The 'wear and tear' also means natural turf fields have higher maintenance costs. Artificial grass sportsgrounds are not taken offline biannually for turf renovation periods – therefore, these sporting fields can assist sports to adjust competition scheduling requirements to meet the needs of the sporting community.

There is an inherent trade-off between relying solely on natural turf sporting fields and providing the community with access to sports and recreation opportunities, with the Government adopting a balanced approach that provides a mix of natural grass and artificial grass sportsgrounds. Artificial grass sportsgrounds can sustain significantly more use per week (approximately 2.5 times the amount) when compared to natural grass sporting fields without the increased risk of the playing surface deteriorating. If we banned artificial grass and instead attempted to accommodate all sporting activity on natural turf fields, this would require a significant expansion of natural turf fields, significantly increased maintenance costs, and not prevent total sportsground closures during and following periods of heavy rainfall. Banning the use of artificial grass surfaces would be a significant issue for a number of sporting organisations and result in some sports not being able to participate in national or international competitions in Canberra.

Such an expansion would constrain our ability to accommodate other land uses in our suburbs. It would also increase the watering requirements for fields, exacerbating water management concerns, particularly during periods of drought or if water restrictions are ever imposed again in the future.

The Government also recognises the challenges with artificial grass. It can exacerbate the urban heat island effect compared to natural turf. It is difficult to dispose of at its end-of-life, with no recycling facilities available in the ACT that can handle artificial grass. In 2024, an artificial grass recycling hub opened near Albury/Wodonga with the capacity to recycle up to 7,000 tonnes of synthetic grass each year. Once recycled, the recovered sand, rubber and plastics are re-used in the artificial grass and construction industries. The availability of this option to recycle artificial grass could be considered by the ACT Government when replacing existing artificial grass sportsgrounds in the future.

There is also potential to re-use some artificial grass from sporting fields. Hockey ACT has commenced work on upgrading the Watt Field (synthetic grass hockey field) at the National Hockey Centre in Lyneham. The old synthetic grass carpet that is no longer suitable for hockey training or match play requirements has been collected by CED - Sport and Recreation Facilities for use at sites across the city, including Greenway and Gungahlin Enclosed Ovals. Uses include high-traffic "transition areas" (between changerooms and the irrigated playing surfaces), erosion control, and suburban cricket nets.

The Assembly Resolution outlines some of the concerns around the environmental impacts of artificial grass. Studies have indicated that rubber infill and turf fibre blades from artificial grass fields can contaminate waterways, particularly for fields near the end of life or under poor maintenance. It has also been observed that weathering, UV exposure and the association of microbes with plastic material influence the leaching of other chemicals into the environment.

The use of artificial grass has been reviewed by states and territories across Australia; however, no Australian jurisdiction has moved to ban its use or phase it out completely.

The NSW Government has recently released new guidelines on best practice management and assessment of artificial grass sports fields.

This is based on findings from a 2022 study by the NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer that recognised many issues with artificial grass can be mitigated through adopting best-practice approaches to its implementation and maintenance.

This review did not make any recommendations in relation to banning artificial grass, but given significant knowledge gaps in key areas of concern around the precise nature of the health and environmental impacts, further research to better understand the characteristics and chemical composition of materials used in artificial grass was recommended.

To ensure that the ACT's approach aligns with this best-practice management approach, I can confirm that the Government's Sports and Recreation policy team is currently seeking expert advice on contemporary design specifications for artificial grass sports grounds.

The advice will inform the development of specifications for the design of future artificial grass sports grounds and will consider environmental factors, including drainage strategies that support natural water filtration, steps to significantly reduce localised urban heat island impacts, and adherence to the Australian Standard for the Migration of Microplastics, and other good management practices to reduce microplastic migration by more than 98%.

While the Government will continue to monitor both research and the policy steps taken by other jurisdictions, I am of the view that the Government's current policy approach strikes an appropriate balance between recognising its benefits for uses such as sporting facilities, if informed by best-practice installation and maintenance, while also recognising the importance of trees and vegetation for supporting environmental and urban heat reduction outcomes.

Resolution 2A – commence a public education campaign about the negative impacts of astroturf and promote the use of more environmentally friendly, easy-care alternatives

The Government already provides advice to the public that promotes alternatives to artificial grass to reduce on-site heat through nature and to maximise biodiversity. For example, the ACT Government's spring climate resilience messaging on actions the Canberra community can take to keep their homes more comfortable and cool over summer includes planting a climate-wise garden and tree management to provide shade.

The Gawari Ngilanmanyin climate-wise landscape guide helps to inform homeowners, developers and landscape architects on how to make climate-wise choices that embed sustainability and climate resilience. The Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design Guide encourages the use of permeable materials and native plants in gardens as an alternative to artificial grass.

The Suburban Land Agency also undertakes a range of educational and demonstration initiatives to proactively engage new residents and the broader public on considering climate-wise approaches to gardens and verges and showcase alternative options to artificial grass. This includes the Climate Wise Garden Designs resource, which provides practical design guidance on sustainable low-maintenance garden and nature strip options. SLA's Growing a Resilient Garden workshop series, commenced in 2025, also provides free individual advice on how to design and maintain a sustainable home garden.

Resolution 2C – develop a program to support the use of alternatives to artificial grass on private land

The Government also supports alternatives to artificial grass. For example, the 2025 round of the Community Garden Grants program includes the removal of artificial grass and its replacement with permeable surfaces as an activity eligible for funding.

The Suburban Land Agency provides a range of incentives to encourage residents to use sustainable alternatives to artificial grass. Under the Jacka Energy and Landscape rebate program, front gardens that include

artificial grass and/or plants, black or dark gravel or colour-dyed mulch are ineligible to receive the Landscape rebate.

The combination of existing guidance and incentives provided through these programs ensures the public is well placed to consider alternatives to the use of artificial grass on private land. As such, the Government does not consider an additional program is required to be developed over and above these existing measures.

Resolution 2B – without prejudice, undertake an analysis of the use of artificial grass on public land and the feasibility for its progressive removal and the phasing out of its installation in the future

Resolution 2D – without prejudice, examine regulation options for artificial grass in the ACT

There are a range of policy and regulatory matters that would need to be overcome before the Government could consider changes to the current policy approach, regulatory options or progressive removal or phase out of artificial grass in public and private settings. This includes addressing knowledge gaps on the precise nature of the health and environmental impacts or the relative contribution of synthetic turf compared to other commonly used outdoor plastic products, such as shade cloth. This would require significant investment and would be very resource-intensive for a small jurisdiction like the ACT.

The Government does not consider the phasing out of artificial grass on public land would be appropriate, given its important function in supporting community participation in sports and recreation in the ACT. We will continue to explore ways of ensuring its installation in the future is informed by best-practice standards.

The use of artificial grass on nature strips is already restricted through the Nature Strip Guidelines, administered by the City and Environment Directorate. These Guidelines were updated in July 2025 and are expected to reduce artificial turf installation on nature strips.

The ACT's ability to go alone is limited in the absence of other states and territory jurisdictions proceeding with a ban or other regulatory approach, such as information standards requiring businesses to provide specific information and including warning labelling. For example, a 'point of sale' consumer ban would be impractical given the ACT's small size and people able to easily purchase artificial grass across the New South Wales border. ACT-specific information standards would be onerous and inefficient for consumers and businesses if it was not consistently applied across all Australian jurisdictions. The ACT Government considers that regulation options for use of artificial grass on private land would be best undertaken in coordination with other jurisdictions.

Resolution 2E – prioritise, and incentivise where possible, the planting of appropriate vegetation throughout Canberra's urban landscape, including through fostering gardens for wildlife

The resolution calls on the Government to prioritise and incentivise the planting of vegetation throughout Canberra's urban landscape. This remains a key priority for the Government and is already reflected in our policy settings and commitments.

One of our key policy priorities to achieve this outcome is the target of achieving 30% tree canopy coverage across Canberra by 2045. We have significantly increased our tree planting program over the past five years with the City and Environment Directorate planting or directing the planting of 65,240 trees since June 2020, across public land and unleased land as part of the development of new suburbs and urban infill upgrades.

Our planning rules also incentivise the planting of trees and vegetation in new developments. The Territory Plan includes provisions that promote and incentivise the planting of trees and vegetation as a means of reducing urban heat in new developments, with the Housing and

Urban Design guides providing extensive information for developers on how to meet these outcomes.

There is also work currently underway to appoint an ACT Landscape Architect and develop a Landscape Plan. I anticipate the new Landscape Plan will provide the Government with guidance and options for better integrating trees and vegetation throughout the urban landscape, both to reduce the urban heat island effect and to foster wildlife and biodiversity connectivity throughout the city.

The ACT Government also continues to provide grants for volunteer-led initiatives that help to foster wildlife and connect the community to nature. For example, I recently announced the successful recipients in the latest round of the ACT Environment Grants program, which provides grants of up to $35,000 for activities such as protecting and conserving native plants and animals and enhancing urban wildlife corridors.

Our efforts in this area make us one of the leading jurisdictions in Australia for conserving and protecting our natural environment and ecosystems within the urban landscape, affirming our reputation as Australia's bush capital.

Resolution 2F – explore options to test for the presence of microplastics in the ACT's waterways, including to identify likely products of origin for any occurring contamination

I acknowledge that reliable information on the presence and prevalence of microplastics in ACT waterways is currently limited. Similarly, local insights into the current, emerging, and future impacts of microplastics are still developing.

At present, ACT surveillance monitoring programs do not include microplastics, and there are no immediate plans to incorporate them unless future evidence supports their inclusion. Building this evidence base will require targeted research. Encouragingly, the ACT Healthy

Waterways program is supporting a PhD project at the University of Canberra focused on microplastics in the upper Murrumbidgee River catchment. This research will explore broadscale patterns of microplastic distribution across the catchment. However, to gain a comprehensive understanding of microplastics across the ACT, further research tailored to local conditions will be needed.

International studies have highlighted the potential for plastics to leach from artificial grass into waterways, contributing to both macro and microplastic pollution. While we know that macro and microplastics are present in ACT waterways, the relative contribution of synthetic turf—compared to other commonly used outdoor plastic products such as shade cloth—remains unclear.

Quantifying the environmental benefits of reducing plastic pollution, including through changes in product use, would require long-term investment in monitoring and source identification. Regular monitoring for microplastics is resource-intensive, and tracing pollution sources adds further complexity and cost.

The NSW Government is currently undertaking a Broadscale Microplastic Assessment of 120 estuaries to establish a baseline dataset for surface water microplastic contamination. One of the study's aims is to identify the items contributing most to microplastic pollution in NSW.

Given this context, the ACT Government considers it prudent to closely monitor research and developments in other jurisdictions, including the NSW study, to inform any future decisions regarding an ACT-specific monitoring program.

Resolution 2G – report back to the Assembly on progress by no later than 29 October 2025

This statement has responded to each of the calls on the Government conveyed within the resolution. In line with our nuanced and evidence-based approach to the use of artificial grass, the Government will

continue to carefully consider the scientific research on artificial grass and the policy settings of other states and territories to inform our position on its appropriate use.