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Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment's Special Report: *At a Crossroad: Extinction or Survival for Our Canberra Dragon*

Government Response

Presented by
Suzanne Orr MLA
Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water
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Introduction

The ACT Government welcomes the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment's Special Report, *At a Crossroad: Extinction or Survival for Our Canberra Dragon*. The report provides a timely and detailed examination of the conservation status of the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon, also known as Bunburung in Ngunnawal language, and the Natural Temperate Grassland ecosystems on which it depends.

The Government recognises the acute conservation challenge identified by the Commissioner. The Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon is critically endangered, has declined significantly across its known range, and depends on active, coordinated recovery action across land tenures and jurisdictions. The Government also recognises the cultural significance of Bunburung and Country, and the importance of working with Traditional Custodians in ways that support self-determination and cultural responsibilities.

The Government's response is grounded in the Action Plan for the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon 2025–2035, which provides the primary recovery framework for the species in the ACT. The Action Plan sets a 50-year vision for viable populations across multiple climatically suitable and protected sites, and establishes four priority outcomes: restoring and expanding wild populations; securing, restoring and connecting quality habitat; maintaining viable captive metapopulations; and building community and policy support for recovery.

The ACT Government has already made significant recent investments in the recovery of the species, including $4.5 million over four years announced in 2025 to support recovery actions, captive breeding, expansion of the breeding colony at Melbourne Zoo, and releases of captive-bred dragons back into the wild. This builds on ongoing investment in habitat management, monitoring, research partnerships and the threatened species breeding program at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

The Government accepts that recovery will require sustained effort beyond any single budget cycle. This response describes how existing policy, recent investment, current recovery programs and further planning all work together to achieve the Commissioner's recommendations.

Government Response

Recommendation 1 - Engage with Traditional Custodians to understand and support their self-determination and aspirations in relation to Bunburung and Country; and develop actions to support them exercising their cultural responsibilities.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

The Government recognises the cultural significance of Bunburung and the deep relationship Traditional Custodians have with Country. The Government supports engagement that is led by Traditional Custodians and respects their self-determination, cultural authority and capacity to participate. Existing mechanisms, including the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee and ongoing engagement through environment and land management programs, provide important pathways for this work.

The Government will continue to work with Traditional Custodians to identify practical opportunities to embed cultural knowledge, culturally informed land management and cultural responsibilities into recovery actions for the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon and Natural Temperate Grassland, consistent with the Action Plan and broader nature conservation reforms.

Recommendation 2 - Strategically plan and protect habitat areas and corridors that support the Canberra Dragon and use planning controls to protect core areas, and create nature-positive neighbourhoods on abutting areas.

Government Response: AGREED IN PRINCIPLE.

The Government agrees that habitat protection and connectivity are central to the survival of the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon. The Action Plan identifies securing, restoring and connecting quality habitat as a priority outcome, and recognises that recovery depends on protecting existing populations, restoring habitat and improving connectivity across a fragmented landscape.

The Government is progressing complementary work through the Nature Conservation Strategy, critical habitat mapping, the Eastern Broadacre Strategic Assessment, the development of the Nature Conservation Network, and planning work to establish an urban growth boundary. These processes will help identify the areas most important for threatened species persistence and inform decisions about avoidance, protection, restoration and connectivity.

The Government also recognises the Commissioner's emphasis on the Jerrabomberra Valley and other remaining habitat areas. Further decisions about planning controls, development proposals, restoration priorities and long-term protection mechanisms will be informed by the best available science, statutory decision-making requirements and the species recovery objectives in the Action Plan.

Recommendation 3 - Significantly raise awareness in the general Canberra community about the Canberra Dragon, to highlight its uniqueness, beauty, perilous situation and what needs to be done for its survival.

Government Response: AGREED IN PRINCIPLE.

The Government agrees that broader public awareness is essential to sustaining support for difficult conservation decisions and long-term investment. The Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon is the ACT's only endemic reptile, and its recovery depends on community understanding of the species, its habitat requirements and the pressures facing Natural Temperate Grassland.

Community engagement is already recognised in the Action Plan as a key recovery outcome. The Government will continue to support education and engagement initiatives through threatened species programs, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, school and community engagement opportunities, and partnerships with community organisations and land managers.

The Government will also explore opportunities to work with Canberra Airport, conservation groups and research partners to increase public awareness of Bunburung and the actions needed to support its survival.

Recommendation 4 - Review funding arrangements to support long-term conservation planning and actions for protecting the Canberra Dragon, including opportunities for sourcing funds beyond those provided by the ACT Government

Government Response: AGREED IN PRINCIPLE.

The Government agrees that recovery of the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon will require careful planning and consideration about future financial investment.

The ACT Government has already committed $4.5 million over four years to support recovery actions, including ACT Government program operations, expansion of the breeding colony at Melbourne Zoo and ongoing release of captive-bred dragons back into the wild.

The Government recognises that this investment does not remove the need for longer-term funding planning. The Action Plan identifies ongoing resourcing as a critical dependency across recovery outcomes. The Government will continue to consider recovery needs through future budget processes, seek opportunities to align Commonwealth, research and partner funding with ACT priorities, and ensure any external contributions, including from Canberra Airport, are directed to actions that support the Action Plan.

The Government will also consider whether clearer public reporting on recovery investment, activities and progress against Action Plan outcomes would assist transparency, accountability and future funding decisions.

Recommendation 5 - Continue with and increase on-ground habitat restoration and management to support wild Canberra Dragon populations and to increase the habitat available for release from the breeding program

Government Response: AGREED IN PRINCIPLE.

The Government agrees that habitat restoration and active management are essential to the recovery of the Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon. The Action Plan identifies quality habitat that is secured, restored and connected as a core recovery outcome, and recognises that wild population recovery depends on the availability of suitable Natural Temperate Grassland with appropriate structure, burrow availability and connectivity.

The Government will continue to prioritise management of known and potential habitat areas, including weed control, biomass management, restoration of native grassland structure, monitoring of grazing pressure and habitat connectivity work. Investment decisions will be guided by the Action Plan, scientific advice and the need to prioritise sites that provide the greatest benefit for viable wild populations and future releases from the breeding program.

The Government will also continue to consider opportunities for culturally informed land management, where Traditional Custodians wish to participate, and for practical collaboration across public, private, Commonwealth and community-managed lands.

Recommendation 6 - Continue with and extend recovery programs to establish and maintain viable Canberra Dragon populations in captivity and in the wild.

Government Response: AGREED IN PRINCIPLE.

The Government agrees that captive breeding, translocation and wild population recovery programs are essential components of the recovery strategy.

The Government has invested in the threatened species breeding program at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and has committed funding to expand breeding capacity at Melbourne Zoo and to release captive-bred dragons back into the wild.

The Government recognises that captive breeding cannot substitute for habitat protection, however it is a necessary insurance measure due to extremely reduced genetic diversity in the wild population. Captive breeding also provides a source of individuals for future releases. Recovery programs will continue to be informed by population viability analysis, genetic management, animal welfare requirements, release site suitability and post-release monitoring.

The Government will continue to work with research partners, zoos, land managers and community organisations to strengthen the recovery program and integrate breeding, release and habitat management decisions under the Action Plan.

Continuation and extension of the recovery program will have financial implications. Any further expansion of recovery activities, including captive breeding capacity, release programs, monitoring, habitat management and supporting research, will be considered through future ACT Government budget processes and subject to available funding.

Recommendation 7 - Continue to support and extend existing research on the Canberra Dragon and Natural Temperate Grassland conservation.

Government Response: AGREED IN PRINCIPLE.

The Government agrees that continued research is necessary because important aspects of Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon ecology, movement, detection, genetics, reproductive biology, burrow use and habitat requirements remain uncertain. Research is a core part of the Action Plan and is essential to adaptive management, translocation decisions and long-term recovery planning.

The Government will continue to support research and monitoring through partnerships with universities, zoos, conservation organisations and expert ecologists. Priorities include improving understanding of invertebrate burrow formation and use, habitat structure, climate resilience, population viability, release outcomes, detection methods and the relationship between Natural Temperate Grassland management and dragon persistence.

The Government will seek to ensure research findings are translated quickly into practical guidance for land managers and reflected in recovery program settings, monitoring protocols and future reviews of relevant conservation strategies.

Continuation and extension of the research program will have financial implications. Any further expansion of recovery activities, including captive breeding capacity, release programs, monitoring, habitat management and supporting research, will be considered through future ACT Government budget processes and subject to available funding.