

2024

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

TENTH ASSEMBLY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY –
REPORT 10 - INQUIRY INTO ANNUAL AND FINANCIAL REPORTS 2022-23**

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

**Presented by
Andrew Barr MLA
Chief Minister
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Introduction

On 11 February 2021, the Legislative Assembly passed an amendment to the 2 December 2020 Resolution of Establishment (clause 3) referring the Annual and Financial Reports to the relevant Standing Committee for inquiry and report by 9 April of the year after the presentation of the report to the Assembly pursuant to the *Annual Reports (Government Agencies) Act 2004*.

The 2022-2023 Annual and Financial Reports were reviewed by the relevant Standing Committees, and each Committee held hearings and reported separately. The below Government Response addresses the recommendations within the report from the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity.

The following Annual and Financial Reports or sections of annual reports, were referred to the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity:

- Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate;
- Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate; and
- Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.

Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change, and Biodiversity – Report 10 - Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2022-23

RECOMMENDATION	GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
Recommendation 1 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate increasing fuel load reduction burns in “Bushfire Prone Areas” and “Bushfire Abatement Zones”.	AGREED The ACT Government’s approach to delivering the prescribed burns in the annual Bushfire Operations Plan is flexible and adaptive to seasonal and environmental conditions. Ongoing consideration will be given to the requirement and benefit of increase fuel load reduction burns. Conditions in late summer and autumn 2024 enabled a large program of prescribed burning in Bushfire Abatement Zones and the broader non-urban “Bushfire Prone Area”.
Recommendation 2 The Committee recommends Government increase funding for urban and park rangers in the ACT.	NOTED The ACT Government notes that there are increasing pressures on the ACT’s parks and reserves due to fragmentation and loss of connectivity, climate change, visitation, natural disaster events, and invasive species. The Government has invested \$900K from FY2023/2024-FY2025 in habitat restoration on reserves (Conserving Canberra), as well as another \$1.3m in supportive nature conservation policy, science, compliance and outreach capacity. Addressing these pressures may demand additional resourcing. The ACT Government’s \$2.95m <i>Connecting Nature, Connecting People</i> initiative is restoring and protecting 20 urban open-space areas that will increase functionality and connectivity of wildlife habitat and resilience to impacts of climate change and urbanisation. Where additional resourcing needs are identified, these will be prioritised and progressed through the Government’s budget processes.

RECOMMENDATION	GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
Recommendation 3 The Committee recommends that once the burrowing animal guidelines are finalised, the ACT Government mandate in developer contracts pre-development inspections for burrowing animals.	AGREED IN-PRINCIPLE The ACT Government notes that the burrowing animal guidelines are being finalised by the Conservator of Flora and Fauna who is a statutory office holder. The guidelines will be a statutory document under the <i>Nature Conservation Act 2014</i> (the Act). Most significant developments require a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) to be submitted to and endorsed by the Territory Planning Authority (the Authority). CEMPs are implemented as part of the development application (DA) process and is in place to address a variety of matters, including minimising impacts on native animals. The Authority assesses the level of impact each proposal is likely to have on these values. Through consultation with the Conservator of Flora and Fauna, the Authority will determine the level of management required prior to any works commencing. Whilst the Government supports making pre-development inspections for burrowing animals and important conservation and animal welfare issues, the government views that the Conservator and the Territory Planning Authority are best placed to determine how to make these mandatory.
Recommendation 4 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government commit to making decisions about the management of burrowing animals found during pre-development, including relocation wherever possible.	AGREED IN-PRINCIPLE As discussed in response to recommendation three, the government notes decisions about the management of burrowing animal rests with the Conservator and the Territory Planning Authority as statutory entities.
Recommendation 5 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to invest in digital injured wildlife reporting tools through Access Canberra.	NOTED Access Canberra continues to invest in digital technologies to improve the customer experience and provide operational efficiency. However there are no plans to change the current reporting avenue for injured wildlife, which is via the Access Canberra Contact Centre (13 22 81). This is because any injured wildlife situation is a high priority call and dynamic situation that has the welfare of the animal and commonly the safety of road users as well. Having the person call means that we can ensure we have all the required information in a timely manner to be passed to the on-call ranger as well as contact details for the reporter. This also helps responders to locate the injured wildlife so that it can be quickly attended to.

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Recommendation 6 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government cease classifying dingoes as a pest species and cease describing them as wild dogs.	AGREED Recent genetic testing of 20 captured wild dogs/dingoes sampled in Namadgi National Park were 100% dingo. In consideration of this scientific evidence, the ACT Government <u>announced</u> on 5 July 2024 that it is on a pathway to formally recognise dingoes as a native animal, cease referring to them as wild dogs and cease classifying them as a pest species. Stakeholder engagement is currently underway on this issue.
Recommendation 7 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review the 1080 bait program in the management of dingoes.	NOTED Refer response to Recommendation six.
Recommendation 8 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with ACT snake catchers to improve the welfare situation for snakes currently used for educational purposes.	EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY The ACT has adopted the national <i>Animal Welfare (Australian Code for care and use of animals for scientific purposes) Code of Practice 2014</i> (The Code). This includes the use of animals for teaching. The Code focusses on strategies to minimise the impacts of keeping animals under these conditions. The government works with those keeping animals for education purposes regarding these requirements and enforces compliance where necessary. This and other codes are reviewed by the ACT's Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC) as required to ensure the ACT's animal welfare expectations are met. If there are concerns that the Code is not adequate for animal welfare, these concerns can be forwarded to AWAC to consider amendments to the Code.
Recommendation 9 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review current licensing arrangements and identify a framework for those snake handlers suitably qualified to register ownership of venomous snakes for educational and training purposes in the ACT.	NOTED The Government's position on this matter has and will continue to be addressed through its response to the Assembly motion and E-PET-00524.

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Recommendation 10 The Committee recommends the ACT Government consider making snake removal/handling work in the ACT salaried as a contracted public service that is focused on providing public education.	NOT AGREED The demand for snake catching is sporadic and seasonal in the ACT and therefore is not a cost-effective proposition for ACT Government. It is known that the Northern Territory Government has for some years paid contractors to remove snakes, however, this is being phased out by the NT government as contracts expire due to the ongoing costs of the program.
Recommendation 11 The Committee recommends that the ACT Government update the Assembly on the management of Red Gum dieback before the end of term.	AGREED Preliminary research that found that the soil around Blakely's Red Gum trees suffering from dieback contains elevated soil nitrate levels compared to healthy trees. Active management has occurred with the aim to increase soil carbon and improve tree health. This includes cool ecological burns being applied around trees suffering from dieback and testing the addition of mulch or sugar around the base of impacted trees. The Conserving Canberra Restoration Project is currently funded through a 2023-25 budget initiative. The project is delivering on-ground restoration of lowland box-gum grassy woodlands, including direct plantings of Red Gum, in the identified restoration sites that are suffering from where mature trees are affected by dieback.
Recommendation 12 The Committee recommends that all ACT Government agencies should provide reports to the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment (OSCE) within deadlines to allow OCSE to track progress on recommendations and prepare State of the Environment and other reports.	AGREED The provision of information to Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment (OCSE) in a timely manner continues to be a high priority for Government agencies.

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Recommendation 13 The Committee recommends the ACT Government update the assembly on the progress of the 'Big Canberra Battery' project before the end of term.	AGREED The Big Canberra Battery Project has delivered the PaGA commitment for 250 megawatt (MW) of battery storage, through three streams: • Stream 1: utility-scale batteries. The Territory has contracted with Evo Energy to build a 250 MW/500-megawatt hour battery in Williamsdale; • Stream 2: behind-the-meter batteries at government sites. SolarHub has delivered small batteries at nine government sites, and AGL Energy Solutions is delivering larger batteries at two sites; and • Stream 3: neighbourhood-scale batteries. The ACT government has entered into an agreement with the Commonwealth and Evo Energy to install three neighbourhood-scale batteries in the suburbs of Casey, Dickson, and Fadden.
Recommendation 14 The Committee recommends that Government increase resourcing for the Environment Protection Authority to ensure it is able to conduct sufficient inspections to protect Canberra's environment, particularly given the increased need under the new planning system.	NOTED Annual reporting data shows an increasing intensity of assessment and compliance matters faced by the Environment Protection Authority (EPA). The increases are understood to be related to development and population growth in the ACT, occurring within a more compact city. In recognition of these environmental protection challenges, and their potential significance for the health and wellbeing of our community, the Government committed to funding of \$534,000 over two years from 2022-23 for two Environment Protection Officers to support compliance monitoring and regulatory oversight activities and enabled a targeted regulatory program to ensure builders are meeting their general environmental duty under the Environment Protection Act 1997. The EPA also received funding for an additional Environment Protection Officer from the 2023/24 mid-year budget process to further support inspections, compliance and regulatory activities. Any further considerations about the resourcing needs for the EPA will be considered through the Budget process.