

CONSERVATION COUNCIL
OF THE SOUTH EAST REGION
& CANBERRA

11 October 2007

Mr John Hargreaves
Minister for Territory and Municipal Services
Legislative Assembly for the ACT
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601



Dear Mr Hargreaves,

RE ACT BUDGET 2008-2009

The Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. We represent the interests of community conservation organisations in the Canberra region.

The Conservation Council is pleased to provide you with a copy of our submission for the ACT Budget 2008-2009.

There are some key investments required to move Canberra towards greater sustainability.

As you will see we have identified key priority measures in the areas of ;

- **Biodiversity conservation and reserve management**
- **Planning**
- **Climate Change abatement**
- **Sustainable Transport**
- **Community sector**

Although these issues are managed within particular portfolios and departments , we trust that all of the matters raised within our submission will be of interest to all key ACT Government decision makers. The overwhelming majority of Canberrans are concerned about the impacts of climate change, are affected by public transport policy and want to see our environment protected for the benefit of current and future generations.

The Conservation Council would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and discuss the initiatives that we have put forward in our budget submission. Please contact Robyn Vance on 6229 3200 if you would like to arrange a meeting to discuss this submission.

Yours sincerely,

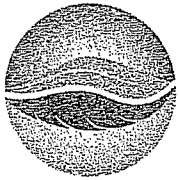
Trish Harrup
Director

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PROPOSED BUDGET MEASURES TO THE ACT GOVERNMENT FOR THE 2008-2009 BUDGET

October 2007

Key initiatives for 2008-2009

- Provide resources to the Resource and Monitoring unit of DTAMS to identify and map wildlife corridors that supports the goals of the Spatial Plan and leads to a variation to the Territory Plan: \$40,000
- Funding to establish the missing grassland reserve at Jerrabomberra East (to resume land and fence), and vary Territory Plan to establish both East and West Jerrabomberra reserves: \$50,000
- Funding for DTAMS to carry out work required to honour Stanhope Government 2004 Election commitment to protect woodlands and grasslands: \$30,000

Capital Works initiatives

- Provide capital works funding to PCL to restore the dam wall at Mulligans Flat: \$150,000
- Purchase additional buses (23) that meet disability and emissions standards - \$12 m pa

Ongoing initiatives 2008-2009 and out years

- Running costs for the predator free sanctuary at Mulligans Flat: \$250,000 pa
- Restore the two specialist rangers for grassy woodland reserves (Mulligans Flat, Gooroo, Callum Brae, Jerrabomberra Grasslands): \$200,000 pa plus vehicles
- Continue funding for Threatened species recovery research: \$155,000 pa
- Establish a new, senior position in the Planning Authority to take leadership of environmental planning: \$135,000 pa
- Fund energy audits of community sector buildings: \$ 150,000 pa for 2 years
- Funds to meet running cost of ACTION bus network (\$3.8 m) and to meet the ALP election commitment of 2004 to boost the ACTION base budget (\$4.5 m) – total \$8.3 m pa
- Include extension of the evening peak as policy direction in the ACTION bus network base funding as above (\$8.3 m).
- Purchase additional buses (23) that meet disability and emissions standards: \$12 m pa
- Funding for delivery of conservation and environment sector peak body functions – \$133,500 pa plus CPI
- Increase funding for the ACT Heritage grants program to bring it to a total of \$350,000 to \$500,000 pa.
- Increase funding for the ACT Environment grants program to bring it to a total of \$250,000 pa

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Wildlife Corridors

The aim of wildlife corridors is to maintain ecological connectivity across an increasingly fragmented landscape. All Australian jurisdictions are recognising that in order for reserves to maintain their ecological functioning (e.g. biodiversity, nutrient and energy flows), and land use planning needs to provide for space or corridors for species that must migrate or move between habitats. The importance of wildlife corridors is identified in four key ACT government documents. The *Spatial Plan* broadly identified a goal to identify wildlife corridors and committed to their protection and *Action Plans 27, 28 & 29* further clarified the role of corridors and their importance in contributing to an ecologically sustainable ACT.

Whilst ACT Government policy and documents recognise the importance of wildlife corridors there is no formal recognition of these and they are not identified with any precision in any planning documents, such as the Territory Plan. Whilst this level of vagueness continues it is not possible for planning to consider the impact of development on ecological connectivity.

To progress this issue, the Resource and Monitoring unit of DTAMS should be resourced to identify the areas that contribute to an ACT-wide connectivity system and to determine the ways this function can be maintained. This will inform a variation to the Territory Plan creating a 'wildlife corridor' zone which requires the Territory and occupiers of land in these zones to plan, use and manage the land in a manner that is consistent with its connectivity function in the landscape.

Provide resources to the Resource and Monitoring unit of DTAMS to identify and map wildlife corridors that supports the goals of the Spatial Plan and leads to a variation to the Territory Plan: \$40,000

Missing Grassland Reserve

Before European settlement a grassy woodland mosaic covered much of sub-coastal south east Australia. Now 99.5% of this grassland has been destroyed or grossly altered, rendering natural temperate grasslands probably of Australia's most threatened ecosystems. In the ACT about 1000 ha remains in moderate to good condition and provides vital habitat for several threatened species. It is vital that we conserve this remaining asset.

In the 2004-2005 Budget the ACT Government announced it would move to protect around 400 ha of natural grasslands in the Jerrabomberra Valley. This commitment was reiterated in the ALP *Our Environment* policy document prepared for the ACT Election 2004. The former Callum Brae and Woden properties have been withdrawn from lease and fenced, but the Territory Plan has yet to be amended and the area declared as nature reserve.

The area to the east of the Monaro Highway remains unprotected. Resuming all of this land, fencing it and establishing it as nature reserve will make an important contribution to conserving what little remains of the natural temperate grasslands and the threatened species that rely of this habitat.

Funding to establish the missing grassland reserve at Jerrabomberra East (to resume land and fence), and vary Territory Plan to establish both East and West Jerrabomberra reserves: \$50,000;

Reserve Systems

The ACT government's election commitment to protect woodlands and grasslands was greatly welcomed by the conservation community. The commitments included protection of: West Majura/Campbell Park Grasslands, Kinlyside Woodland, Newline Quarry area, 30 ha of very high quality woodlands at South Aranda and the woodlands in the Naas Valley.

At the time of writing none of these areas have been afforded any level of permanent conservation, thus ACT Government is completely failing to honour its environmental commitment to the Canberra public.

The Resource and Monitoring unit of DTAMS needs to be adequately resourced to carry out the work required to progress the protection of these areas. The work needs to be carried out during the 2007-2008 budget year to enable delivery prior to the October 2008 election.

Funding for DTAMS to carry out work required to honour Stanhope Government 2004 Election commitment to protect woodlands and grasslands: \$30,000

Mulligans Flat Dam

The large, shallow dam and associated wetland at Mulligans Flat has played a significant role in the diversity and abundance of birds at this important nature reserve. It provides valuable habitat for a range of species, including Latham's Snipe (protected under International treaties), and the dead trees have been used as a rookery by nesting herons and cormorants. The adjacent Yellow Box/Red Gum woodland is the last known area where Brown Treecreepers occurred at Mulligans Flat, until their local extinction several years ago. Dams like this are very important for birds during drought periods, and will be more important under climate change scenarios. There are very few places in the ACT which can provide suitable nesting habitat for a range of waterbirds.

The wall of the dam has been breached twice due to periods of heavy rain and the dam itself has held little water in the last few years as the wall has not been repaired since the last breach.

There is an urgent need to progress work on repairing the wall as a matter of priority. As well as the biodiversity function of this dam, an engineering solution is also required to protect urban areas downstream.

Provide capital works funding to PCL to restore the dam wall at Mulligans Flat: \$150,000

Mulligans Flat Sanctuary

The ACT Government is supporting an ambitious, large-scale, ecological research project in the Yellow Box—Red Gum Woodlands of Mulligans Flat and Gorooyarroo Nature Reserves. The project's aim is to learn more about enhancing woodland quality and habitat for native animals, including some threatened species. An integral part of the research and future direction is to establish a wildlife sanctuary creating the opportunity to reconstruct ecosystems by reintroducing species that have disappeared from the area. Once established this sanctuary will be a significant draw card for the public, including tourists.

As a first step, a large predator-proof fence is being constructed at Mulligans Flat. The fence will require ongoing monitoring and maintenance to ensure the integrity of the sanctuary.

Funding will need to be provided as a recurring item in the budget for DTAMS to monitor and maintain the fence. This investment will ensure the sanctuary can remain predator free which is

essential from an ethical animal welfare perspective and also critical for successful reintroduction of species.

Running costs for the predator free sanctuary at Mulligans Flat: \$250,000 pa

Grassy Woodland Reserve Management

Pre-1750 about 45% of our region supported grassy ecosystems, compared to about 13% now. Canberra holds significant patches of grassy woodlands. The Stanhope government has played a strong leadership role in the conservation of grassy woodlands through the establishment of some significant reserves, including Gorooyaroo and Cullum Brae. After reserving the areas, an ongoing commitment to good management is vital to improve their ecological condition after years of management for pastoral purposes.

When Gorooyaroo and Callum Brae reserves were announced by the Environment Minister in 2004 two specialist rangers were employed to manage them. Specialist rangers make a vital contribution to ensuring appropriate management and restoration of these special reserves. The specialist positions have since been removed and the management of the reserves absorbed into the general functions of the land management section.

Reinstating the specialist positions will improve the capacity to manage issues such as weed control, kangaroos, other grazing, prescribed burning, regeneration etc. This is critical especially in light of the research at Mulligans and Gorooyaroo, the likelihood that the Kama grassy woodland will be added to the system and the extreme pressure that grasslands reserves are experiencing with ongoing drought and grazing pressures.

Restore the two specialist rangers for grassy woodland reserves (Mulligan's Flat, Gorooy, Callum Brae, Jerrabomberra Grasslands): \$200,000 pa plus vehicles annually

Threatened species research

Twenty-nine species are listed as threatened in the ACT. The long term goal is not only to halt the decline of these species and prevent their extinction, but to actually help improve their condition and ultimate removal from the threatened species list. In order to achieve this goal we need to learn much more about these species' requirements and what management practices can be implemented to minimise threats to their ongoing survival.

In the 2004-2005 Budget the ACT Government announced funding for a 4 year program of threatened species research. This modest investment has been instrumental in leveraging substantial contributions from other funding sources. For example, the National Woodlands Initiative at the reserves in Gungahlin has attracted \$0.8m over 5 years from the Australian Research Council and Commonwealth research scholarships. Funding for the threatened species research program is due to end in June 2008.

Ongoing funding for this program is needed to support ACT Government commitments to the ANU and UCAN research programs and to provide the catalyst for further research opportunities which leverage substantial funds.

Continue funding for Threatened species recovery research: \$155,000 pa for 4 years.

Planning

Environmental Planning

We can have a level of urban development and growth while at the same time conserving our biodiversity for future generations to experience and enjoy. The acceptance that competing values should be considered and balanced is the basis for sustainability, for which the Stanhope Government has been an advocate. Sustainable development is defined in the new planning legislation as meaning the effective integration of social, economic and environmental considerations in decision-making. Sustainability decision-making means looking at these three criteria at the key decision points and all with equal weighting. This requires changing traditional ways of governing and business management to incorporate environmental, social and ethical concerns. A key area where the traditional ways of decision making must change is in planning for the future development and conservation of our territory.

It is the strong view of the conservation community that planning in the ACT is failing to achieve an appropriate balance, thus jeopardising the goal of achieving a sustainable city. Whilst there has been terrific progress made in integrating urban sustainability issues, especially around urban water design, there is insufficient knowledge of and expertise in ecology and biodiversity within the current planning agency. This dearth of knowledge is leading to poor planning decisions which fail to adequately incorporate ecological aspects, thus failing to reflect all three elements of sustainable development.

Establishing a senior position with relevant ecology and biodiversity expertise, embedded within the department, will help ensure that those concerns are considered at key decision points. The position will also help to achieve the object of the proposed new Planning and Development Act "to provide a planning and land system that contributes to the orderly and sustainable development of the ACT—(a) consistent with the social, environmental and economic aspirations of the people of the ACT".

Establish a new, senior position in the Planning Authority to take leadership of environmental planning: \$135,000 pa.

Climate Change abatement

Energy Efficiency in community facilities

Climate change is expected to bring greater climate variability, including more extreme temperatures, and also higher energy prices. Many community groups are located in ageing, poorly maintained and inefficient buildings that are already expensive to heat and cool.

The ACT Government's Climate Change Action Plan announced as Action 27 a \$1 million fund to enable grants to community and not-for-profit groups to assess and improve the energy performance of buildings they occupy. Many community organisations do not have the expertise to carry out an energy audit of their building and to identify the most appropriate improvements.

As a first step towards realising improved energy efficiency in the community sector, the ACT Government should fund energy audits of community sector buildings. The information from the audits can then be used as the basis for the allocation of the grant program.

Fund energy audits of community sector buildings: \$ 150,000 pa for 2 years

WEST Energy Audits

WEST has been a highly successful program assisting households that are experiencing extreme difficulty in meeting their utility bills. The WEST program has demonstrated that with tailored information and some assistance with minor retrofits, households can achieve a remarkable reduction in their energy use. Assisting households manage their utility bills contributes to their ability to cover other household debts including rent.

Currently WEST is funded to 30 June 2008 with no funding commitment beyond that date.

The WEST program needs a multi-year funding commitment. Some of this funding should come from the already committed funding to Housing ACT for energy efficiency improvements in their properties. The balance of approx \$30,000 is needed to pay for energy audits (currently funded by TAMS) and about \$10,000 for the WEST program in owner-occupied and private rental houses.

Provide multi-year commitment to the WEST program for energy audits and associated support: \$40,000 pa

Household Action on Climate Change

ACT householders are responsible for approximately one quarter of greenhouse emissions in the ACT. Household behaviour change will play an important role in reducing greenhouse emissions and achieving the goals of the ACT Government's climate change strategy *Weathering the Change*.

The Conservation Council's experience in delivering the national Cool Communities program demonstrates that behaviour change plays a vital role in achieving emissions abatement from the residential sector. During the program Cool Communities achieved an average reduction of 1.75 tonnes per household.

We recommend the ACT Government adopt a community engagement model working directly with householders to reduce their emissions combined with activities that take the key messages and education to the broader community. This model is more labour intensive than a broad advertising campaign but will also be more effective in engaging the community in meaningful action.

Direct engagement methods can be effectively delivered by community-based organisations that already have good contacts and networks in their local community. We propose that the Conservation Council perform this service under contract in a similar way that the community sector currently provides approx. \$70 million in services on behalf of the ACT Government.

Fund a household behavior change program, modeled on the Conservation Council's successful Cool Communities program: \$90,000 pa

Sustainable Transport

Public Transport Frequency

When seeking to improve a public transport service, frequency should be given a high priority.

"The most important factor making public transport attractive relative to car travel is the total journey time. There is no law of nature that says public transport has to be twice as slow as driving. There are many sides to the problem of reducing journey times, and so a package of solutions is required. However, each part of the solution is quite simple in itself. The most important components are high service frequency, traffic priority and timetable coordination."¹

A survey conducted by the Canberra Times (August 2005), showed 60% of bus commuters in

¹ Public Transport Users Association (PTUA) *Time to Move* Summary

Canberra ranked improving frequency their number one priority to improving the public transport service.

The Stanhope Government made an election commitment to boost ACTION's base funding by \$4.5m over 4 years. It stated: this major new investment will help ACTION to sustain and improve its service to meet continued growth of the City and the public transport needs of all Canberrans.

ACT Budgets since 2005-2006 have failed to provide additional base funds. The funding provided to ACTION has now slipped below that required to provide the existing service let alone meet the improvements which commuting Canberran are demanding.

To honour its election commitment to the people of Canberra and provide the public transport service commuters are demanding, the funding provided to run ACTION will need to be increased by \$8.3 m and this funding level (plus CPI) maintained in out years.

Funds to meet running cost of ACTION bus network (\$3.8 m) and to meet the ALP election commitment of 2004 to boost the ACTION base budget (\$4.5 m) – total \$8.3 m

Commuter peak travel

Modern work hours have changed and many people work longer hours. Whether a late evening at work is a regular or uncommon occurrence commuters need to know that they can rely on the bus system to get them home from work. In recognition of this the ALP made an election commitment in 2004 to review the timetable and provide more services earlier in the morning and later in the evening. Additional bus services, peak and off-peak, were also a commitment of the Act Government's *Sustainable Transport Plan*.

Include extension of the evening peak as policy direction in the ACTION bus network base funding as above (\$8.3 m).

Additional buses

The overall size of the Canberra bus fleet is a limiting factor in the provision of services, impacting both frequency and reliability. The ageing fleet also lags behind current disability and emissions standards.

The ACT Government had been making progress in improving the fleet through the purchase of accessible CNG buses. Replacement buses provide greater comfort for commuters, are accessible, less polluting at interchanges and emit fewer greenhouse emissions. The bus replacement program has been allowed to slow recently.

The ACTION bus fleet needs to be augmented through the purchase of additional buses over the next two years, and then an ongoing program of bus replacement undertaken to upgrade the fleet over the next 15 years.

This purchase will support the ACT Government's *Sustainable Transport Plan*, Action 3.2 Complete the conversion of the ACTION bus fleet to CNG fuel and continue to upgrade the ACTION fleet to achieve lower greenhouse gas emissions and better fuel efficiency, and Action 5.4 continue to implement the *ACT Accessible Public Transport Action Plan* to ensure the public transport system is progressively made fully accessible.

Purchase additional buses (23) that meet disability and emissions standards: \$12 m pa

Community sector

Peak Body funding

The Conservation Council provides a number of services to the ACT community as the peak environment and conservation body. The Conservation Council plays a key role in encouraging, coordinating and supporting community participation in ACT environmental issues as well as facilitating public education and sharing of information on local, regional, national and global environmental issues. Our services support the community in their actions to respect and protect their local environment.

We are a key communications link between the community and all levels of government on environmental matters

Activities undertaken by the Conservation Council include:

- awareness raising and education activities
- broad consultations with environment and conservation groups around key environmental issues
- dissemination of information about environment issues to environment groups and the general community
- environmental education
- preparation of submissions on key environmental issues
- participation in key forums
- representation of environment and conservation interests of member groups
- raising key issues affecting ACT's environment with relevant decision makers
- environmental policy development
- hosting of roundtables, working groups and public forums.

The Conservation Council is severely under funded in relation to the large number and scope of services we are required to deliver to the ACT community. We have increased our efforts towards fundraising in order to diversify our sources of income and in the longer term anticipate we will be able to establish a reliable non-government funding stream. However, over the shorter term we are facing a number of pressures which have the potential to impede our ability to continue to be a highly effective peak body.

The Commonwealth Government have withdrawn the funding that was previously provided to the Conservation Council to support our peak body functions. There is a growing awareness amongst the community of the importance of environment and sustainability issues which is translating into greater demand for the services we provide. The magnitude of environmental issues requiring attention is growing which is translating into an increased work load. The cost of service delivery is rising.

The ACT Government can assist the Conservation Council to continue to deliver a high level of services to the Canberra community through a modest increase in the annual funding agreement. This would be in line with the Stanhope Government's commitment in *The Canberra Plan* to strengthening the community sector.

Funding for delivery of conservation and environment sector peak body functions – \$133.5 pa plus CPI

Heritage Grants

The ACT Heritage grants program is a key way for the community to participate in the important work of recognising, protecting and restoring our historical, cultural and natural heritage. The ACT heritage unit is a small unit and relies heavily on the work the community undertakes as part of the grants program.

The current grants program makes approximately \$270,000 available to the community, with each grant capped at \$15,000. The limit funding associated with this grants program translates into a limited capacity for the community to support the work of the Heritage unit.

The work leverage from the community would be enhanced by expanding the overall program, enabling more groups and more projects to benefit from government support. An expanded program may also provide scope for a few more substantial grants to be made each year, providing scope for larger and more complex work to be undertaken by the community.

Increase funding for the ACT Heritage grants program to bring it to a total of \$350,000 to \$500,000 pa.

Environment Grants

The ACT Environment grants program supports community-based environmental projects in the ACT. It is the sole ACT Government sponsored environment grants program, and the only funding made available to support community led environment programs beyond those focused on natural resource management.

In 2007 Funding was awarded to 12 projects valued at a total of \$129,000. Funding for this grants program has always been small but has declined further in recent years. The limited funding associated with this grants program translates into a reduced capacity for the community to engage in projects that contribute to the ACT Government's goal to respect and protect the environment.

As with the Heritage grants program, the work leveraged from the community would be enhanced by expanding the overall program, enabling more groups and more projects to benefit from government support. An expanded program may also provide scope for a few more substantial grants to be made each year, providing support for larger and more complex work to be undertaken by the community.

Increase funding for the ACT Environment grants program to bring it to a total of \$250,000 pa