

**2024**

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

**2024-25 Budget Estimates**

**OPENING STATEMENT**

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Minister for the Environment, Parks and Land Management**

I begin by acknowledging and paying my respects to the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, and to recognise the enduring connection of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the lands of the ACT and the wider region.

I extend a warm welcome to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be present with us today. We acknowledge and respect their ongoing culture and the significant contributions they make to the life of this city and its surrounding areas.

I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Committee and discuss environment matters pertaining to the recently announced budget.

As the Minister for the Environment, I am deeply passionate about the leadership, advocacy, and positive outcomes that the ACT government consistently delivers for our community in the realm of environment protection. This budget represents a continuation of the government's efforts in safeguarding, conserving, and enhancing the ACT's natural environment, cultural heritage, and ecological values. for the benefit and well-being of all Canberrans.

Despite being a relatively small jurisdiction, the ACT has consistently demonstrated leadership in various environmental areas. One recent example is our strong advocacy for the protection of the Australian Alps from the detrimental impact of feral horses, ensuring the preservation of our fragile environment and water catchments.

We know we have more work to go in order to scale up on-ground actions and positioning ourselves to effectively address the medium and long-term challenges posed by the pressures of a growing city and climate change.

The effects of climate change are becoming increasingly evident, with extreme weather events posing threats to our community. In partnership with CSIRO, the Government has established the Climate Adaptation for Nature initiative to guide our path towards facilitating nature conservation under climate change. In the first stage of this initiative, a case study focused on preparing for a long-term scenario of significantly elevated fire risk under climate change. This work presents adaptation pathways for climate-ready management and policy.

Furthermore, the proliferation of invasive pests and animals presents significant risks not only to our environment but also to the economy and the well-being of our residents. The *"Protecting Canberra's unique environment – Strengthening our biosecurity and nature conservation programs"* initiative has enhanced the ACT's biosecurity through a range of targeted activities. The urban rabbit control program has reduced rabbit numbers in priority areas, and the thermally assisted aerial control program supports the protection of our conservation areas, threatened plants and animals.

A strategic review of the ACT's biosecurity risk and capability has commenced. This will include the development of priority lists for invasive and exotic species, and the delivery of a whole of Government biosecurity exercise. In hindsight, this exercise has been timely to inform the current Avian influenza response. The strategic review will provide valuable insights into existing and future biosecurity risks, enabling informed decision-making regarding investment and resource allocation.

The development of the new Nature Conservation Strategy, which guides the ACT Conservator of Flora and Fauna in shaping the future of nature conservation in our region, will be undertaken this year. The process will employ a collaborative approach to effectively engage with both government and non-government stakeholders, and adopt a strategic, prioritised and strong outcomes-focused approach.

The *Conserving Canberra* initiative continues to support restoration activities in priority reserves, improving the condition of threatened woodland and grassland ecosystems, and is funding the development of a spatial restoration tool to guide priority actions. As part of this initiative, the Healing Country, Healing Community Project is developing meaningful engagement with the Ngunnawal community. Cultural Advisors will be contracted to provide advice on how Ngunnawal values and priorities can be incorporated into restoration. Separate from this initiative, the Aboriginal NRM program continues to provide culturally safe spaces and pathway programs for young First Nation's people from primary school age through to early adulthood.

The budget provisions will enable the Government to undertake the initial phase of critical reforms to enhance the governance and administration of heritage matters within the ACT. This includes developing a strategic business plan to guide future actions and investing in the development of the new heritage database and website. These measures will ensure the effective preservation and management of our rich cultural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations.

We are taking some important and innovative steps in the ACT to seek to limit the negative impacts of urban development on our natural environment. The Government has committed funding in the budget to undertake a regulatory impact assessment to inform the phase out of wood heaters in urban areas of the ACT by 2045. This complements the ACT's nation leading commitment to phase out fossil fuel use in the ACT. These measures seek to address the existential risk posed by climate change on our natural environment and the health and wellbeing of our communities.

A new Biodiversity-Sensitive Urban Design framework is now built into our revised Planning System. While we are in the early days of implementing this, the framework uses evidence-based approaches to maintain connectivity across the landscape, avoid loss of habitat and other natural values like mature native trees,

and address additional threats from development. This work is funded under previous ACT Government commitments that continue this year.

We are building capacity in compliance, with the continuing commitment to fund a fisheries officer, who will work closely with our angling community to promote responsible fishing and undertaking education activities. This will ensure that our native fish populations are protected and remain a sustainable natural resource into the future.

The ACT community plays a vital role in conserving, promoting, and protecting our environment. The Government continues to work in partnership with the community and invest in volunteer and community programs that support biodiversity conservation.

A range of community programs are strengthening environmental and community stewardship. These include the follow on from the Connecting Nature, Connecting People initiative and the ACT Environmental Grants Program. Through the Community Weed Control Program, the Government is supporting community groups to actively care for our environment through addressing weed issues.

Volunteers continue to play a critical role in ecological monitoring across the ACT. The 2023 Catchment Health Indicator Program reported the water quality local catchments as having the highest number of 'excellent' ratings in ten years. The 2023 Platypus Month report recorded an increase on sightings compared to 2022. Both these reports rely on the data recorded by over 200 volunteers each. Our ParkCare volunteers continue to grow and provide immense value across our parks and reserves with volunteer numbers exceeding 2000 registrants.

We will continue work closely with NatureMapr to engage and harness our community citizen scientists as they collect sightings of ACT flora and fauna species. This budget includes funding to allow necessary upgrades to NatureMapr so that even more citizen science data can be supported. We are also working to

improve quality and access of our biodiversity data. We are undertaking a major uplift of the ACT Wildlife Atlas and collaborating with the Commonwealth to improve interjurisdictional data sharing through the National Biodiversity Data Repository.

Promoting sustainable agriculture is a priority, with significant funding directed to ensuring the sustainability and productivity of food and fibre production across the territory. Funding for Bushfire Safety Risk Reduction will assist in mitigating key risks to firefighting staff through better management of smoke impacts, as well as providing additional heavy plant for maintenance of the roading network. This funding complements existing ongoing funding for the Bushfire Operations Plan which in 2023-24 delivered a comprehensive and successful prescribed burning program, among many other achievements. Environmental Values Officer training has been developed and delivered to support ecological outcomes during prescribed burning and during bushfire suppression operations.

The Government's commitment to making our parks and reserves safe, accessible, and enjoyable for the community is demonstrated through the allocation of over 3 million to works at Tidbinbilla and adjoining Woods Reserve and Gibraltar Falls. These works include significant upgrades to safety and amenities, as well as funding to remove and rehabilitate the old Tidbinbilla Visitor Centre and continue planning for a new centre.

In a similar vein, the ACT Parks and Conservation Service is leveraging the ACT Government Asset Renewal Program funding, as well as funding through insurance and the Australian Government, to progress a range of on-ground projects that will increase the quality and resilience of assets like walking trails, management roads, stream crossings and visitor facilities.

Our ongoing positive work to conserve threatened species in the ACT continues, with additional investment in emergency recovery actions for the critically endangered Canberra Grassland Earless Dragon and the continued support for

captive threatened species breeding programs at Tidbinbilla. Conservation of critical offset areas will be boosted through new funding for restoration and management of offsets at West Kenny.

After a recent independent review, which found that “...*the planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting for kangaroo management in the ACT is extremely impressive and an outstanding exemplar for adaptive management*”, work is now underway to develop a new draft Eastern Grey Kangaroo Controlled Native Species Management Plan. We will continue to roll out the GonaCon contraceptive vaccine as part of the ACT Government Kangaroo Management Program, with the aim of reducing the need for culling at sites in future.

I am excited about these budget initiatives, and the aspirational scope of delivery that they seek to undertake. Our proactive approach to conservation and restoration will lead to positive and improved outcomes for nature in the ACT.