

**2019**

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

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE  
COMMISSIONER FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT  
REPORT  
THE HEROIC AND THE DAMMED – LOWER COTTER CATCHMENT  
RESTORATION EVALUATION – DECEMBER 2018**

**TABLING STATEMENT**

**Mr Mick Gentleman MLA  
Manager of Government Business**

Madam Speaker, I am pleased to table the Government Response to the Commissioner for Sustainability and Environment 2018 report *The Heroic and the Dammed – Lower Cotter Catchment Restoration Evaluation*. This report evaluated the effectiveness of restoration against management goals contained in the 2018 statutory management plan for the Lower Cotter Catchment.

Madame Speaker, the Commissioner's report highlights the ongoing importance of effective land management in the Lower Cotter Catchment for delivering Canberra and the region with the high-quality drinking water we take for granted. As you would be aware, these assumptions were shattered when the 2003 fires razed the area, causing severe erosion and sedimentation in the catchment and a drastic deterioration in water quality.

Since then, massive efforts have been made by our government, Icon Water and the community to stabilise and restore the catchment and increase the size of the Cotter Dam. We can—once again—enjoy clean drinking water and a reliable water source. However, restoration work is ongoing and will be for decades to come.

To give some context into the current condition of the catchment I would like to give you a very brief history of land use and the ongoing recovery of the catchment from past land uses and events. Prior to white settlement of the area in the 1820s, the area was covered in native vegetation and used by Aboriginal people for its natural resources. After settlement of the area, early pastoralists cleared the native timber for grazing stock which. Along with a plague of rabbits, this destroyed native vegetation and caused erosion. With

the decision to locate the national capital in Canberra there came the far-sighted decision to protect the entire Cotter catchment and construct the first Cotter Dam in 1915 to secure a water supply for the new city.

In 1926, pines were planted in the Lower Cotter Catchment to control erosion and provide building materials for the growing capital. Clearing of native vegetation and replacement with pine planting continued until clearing was prohibited in 1961.

The area was opened up for recreation access in the late 1960s, when the upstream dams of Corin and Bendora were constructed.

The 2003 fires burned almost all the vegetation in the catchment. The pines were more devastated than the native vegetation, which recovers better following fires. The *Shaping Our Territory* report of November 2003 investigated future land-use options for the non-urban land of the ACT and recommended that commercial pine plantations be replaced with native vegetation.

A 10-year strategic management plan was prepared in 2007 for restoration works in the Lower Cotter Catchment that would stabilise the catchment and return it to native vegetation. The Territory Plan set aside the catchment in 2008 for the primary purpose of protecting our water supply.

The Auditor-General undertook a performance audit in 2015 which reviewed the effectiveness of management strategies employed by the ACT Government and Icon Water in the Lower Cotter Catchment. The report noted that restoration efforts had been effective in steadily improving water quality and reducing turbidity and sedimentation. It required further efforts to:

- repair erosion and sediment control structures:
- improve management and coordination arrangements; and
- review the fire trail network to strike a balance between required management access and minimisation of sediment run-off.

The Auditor-General made 12 recommendations. Government agreed and allocated \$7.8 million over four years to address priority on-ground works. The Auditor-General's report was referred to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for examination. This Committee's report was tabled in July 2016 with seven recommendations.

In response to an Auditor-General recommendation, the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment evaluated the restoration of the Lower Cotter Catchment against the management goals in the 2018 statutory Lower Cotter Catchment Reserve Management Plan. The Commissioner also evaluated progress in meeting the Auditor-General's 2015 recommendations and the Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommendations.

Of the Auditor General's previous recommendations, three are not yet complete. These were combined into one new recommendation by the Commissioner—that a Code of Sustainable Land Management Practices should be completed by 30 June 2019. The government has agreed to this recommendation. When complete, the Code will guide land management activities across the whole conservation estate, the majority of which is potable water catchment.

The Commissioner's report concluded that the available range of evidence highlights the positive influence restoration works and land management activities are having on the recovering landscape of the Lower Cotter

Catchment. The evaluation also revealed some gaps in available data and that consistent and targeted data is required to fully understand the extent of pressures, the rate of change, or how emergent land use practices—including recreational activities—are likely to impact water quality and ecological values.

The Commissioner has made 14 recommendations under five main themes relating to:

1. monitoring and evaluation implementation;
2. funding and resources commitment;
3. governance improvements;
4. coordination of efforts and
5. legislative interventions.

The government has agreed, or agreed in principle, to thirteen of the fourteen recommendations made by the Commissioner, many of which are already underway. These recommendations, when implemented, will continue the important process of catchment recovery within an adaptive management framework where the land manager applies—and learns from the application of—on-ground works by monitoring and evaluating the results and making necessary adjustments.

Madame Speaker, I would like to briefly discuss the one recommendation that the government has noted rather than agreed to. The recommendation calls on the government to allocate discrete funding from the Water Abstraction Charge to catchment management for the life of the Reserve Management Plan 2018. This is in addition to existing recurrent funding. The government considers that identified priorities, such as additional funding for the life of the Reserve Management Plan, should be considered as part of the annual budget

process. This process enables all related expenditure initiatives to be assessed concurrently and, if agreed, funded on a recurrent basis through the consolidated revenue.

Madame Speaker, the government supports the intention of all the recommendations and will implement them in consideration of other management priorities for the catchment and available resourcing. Many of the recommendations relate to governance, coordination and legislative interventions. Where practical, all will be implemented.

In closing, Madame Speaker, I would like to thank the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment for a very thorough and informative report that outlines practical and achievable measures for continuing the important work of restoring the Lower Cotter Catchment and ensuring that Canberrans continue to enjoy a sustainable supply of high-quality water.