

Independent review of
the **EPBC Act**

Interim Report

June 2020

Professor Graeme Samuel AC



The review acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to their cultures and their elders past, present and emerging.

© Commonwealth of Australia 2020

Ownership of intellectual property rights

Unless otherwise noted, copyright (and any other intellectual property rights) in this publication is owned by the Commonwealth of Australia (referred to as the Commonwealth).

Creative Commons licence

All material in this publication is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) except content supplied by third parties, logos and the Commonwealth Coat of Arms.

Inquiries about the licence and any use of this document should be emailed to copyright@awe.gov.au.



Cataloguing data

This publication (and any material sourced from it) should be attributed as: Samuel, G 2020, *Independent Review of the EPBC Act—Interim Report*, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Canberra, June. CC BY 4.0.

ISBN 978-1-76003-302-6

This publication is available at <https://epbcactreview.environment.gov.au>.

Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

GPO Box 787 Canberra ACT 2601

Telephone 1800 065 823

Web awe.gov.au

The Australian Government acting through the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment has exercised due care and skill in preparing and compiling the information and data in this publication. Notwithstanding, the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, its employees and advisers disclaim all liability, including liability for negligence and for any loss, damage, injury, expense or cost incurred by any person as a result of accessing, using or relying on any of the information or data in this publication to the maximum extent permitted by law.

Front cover: iStock.com/Ingrid_Hendriksen

Foreword



I am pleased to present the Interim Report of the Independent Review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

My interim view is that the EPBC Act does not position the Commonwealth to protect the environment and Australia's iconic places in the national interest. The operation of the Act is dated and inefficient, and it is not fit to manage current or future environmental challenges, particularly in light of climate change.

The purpose of this Interim Report is to set out my preliminary views on the fundamental inadequacies of the EPBC Act and propose key reform directions that are needed to address these. It is not an exposition of all problems, nor does it reference in full depth the comprehensive information, including relevant past reviews, on which I have relied to form my view.

It is unlikely that everyone will agree on all problems or support all the proposed reform directions. Complete agreement by everyone would be a mission impossible. But I have attempted to deal with the issues that have been raised in submissions and flowing from my research in a manner that seeks to satisfy the fundamental objective of Australia having effective and efficient environment protection and biodiversity conservation.

In presenting this Interim Report, I would like to hear the views of interested stakeholders. What I have missed? How could the proposed reform directions be improved? Are there fundamental shortcomings that would require me to rethink? I will consider this feedback and other new information in the coming months.

The level of interest in the Review has been substantial, particularly given that during the course of the Review the summer bushfires and then COVID-19 have presented significant challenges for stakeholders. The Review received more than 3,000 unique submissions as well around 26,000 largely identical contributions. I would like to thank all those who have participated in the Review.

I also thank stakeholders who have been generous in sharing their knowledge of the EPBC Act—members of the Act's statutory committees, state and territory government departments, Indigenous groups and community leaders, the scientific community, environment and industry groups, and legal experts. I look forward to engaging further with stakeholders as I finalise the Review by October.

I have been greatly assisted by contributions from the Review Expert Panel—Mr Bruce Martin, Dr Erica Smyth AC, Dr Wendy Craik AM, and, until his appointment as Royal Commissioner, Professor Andrew Macintosh. I have valued their counsel, but take full responsibility for the views presented.

In closing, I acknowledge the work of the Review Secretariat. Despite the challenging times, their support to me has been unwavering.

I look forward to hearing your views.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Graeme Samuel". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Graeme" and last name "Samuel" clearly distinguishable.

Professor Graeme Samuel AC

Contents

Foreword	iii
The Review and how to have your say.....	vii
The EPBC Act Review	vii
The Interim Report.....	vii
How to have your say	vii
Summary points	1
Executive summary.....	3
Protection of Australia's environment and iconic places	3
Indigenous culture and heritage	6
Legislative complexity	7
Efficiency.....	8
Trust in the EPBC Act.....	10
Data, information and systems	12
Monitoring, evaluation and reporting	13
Restoration.....	13
Compliance, enforcement and assurance	14
The reform pathway	15
1 National level protection and conservation of the environment and iconic places	17
1.1 The environment and iconic places are in decline and under increasing threat	18
1.2 The EPBC Act does not enable the Commonwealth to play its part in managing Australia's environment	19
1.3 The EPBC Act does not enable the Commonwealth to effectively protect and conserve nationally important matters	20
1.4 Proposed key reform directions.....	22
2 Indigenous culture and heritage	30
2.1 Indigenous knowledge and views are not fully valued in decision-making	32
2.2 Proposed key reform directions.....	35
3 Legislative complexity	40
3.1 The EPBC Act covers a wide range of complex policy areas	40
3.2 Environmental impact assessment is a convoluted process based on poorly defined key terms.....	41
3.3 The construction of the EPBC Act is archaic.....	43
3.4 Proposed key reform directions.....	43
4 Efficiency	46
4.1 There is duplication with state and territory regulation.....	47
4.2 Proposed key reform directions.....	54
4.3 Commonwealth-led assessment processes are inefficient	57

4.4	Proposed key reform directions.....	61
5	Trust in the EPBC Act	63
5.1	The community does not trust that the EPBC Act is delivering for the environment.....	63
5.2	Industry perceives the EPBC Act to be cumbersome and prone to unnecessary delays .	65
5.3	Proposed key reform directions.....	67
6	Data, information and systems	71
6.1	There is no single source of truth for data and information.....	72
6.2	The right information is not available to inform decisions made under the EPBC Act.....	74
6.3	The Department's information management systems are antiquated	76
6.4	Proposed key reform directions.....	76
7	Monitoring, evaluation and reporting	80
7.1	Monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the EPBC Act is inadequate	81
7.2	Monitoring and evaluation of Australia's environmental management system is fragmented	82
7.3	Key reform directions.....	84
8	Restoration	86
8.1	Environmental offsets do not offset impacts of developments	87
8.2	Proposed key reform directions.....	89
8.3	The carbon market could be leveraged to deliver environmental restoration	89
8.4	Investments in restoration could be better coordinated to maximise outcomes	90
9	Compliance, enforcement and assurance	92
9.1	Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance approach is not forceful	93
9.2	Complexity impedes compliance, enforcement and assurance	94
9.3	Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance activities are significantly under-resourced.....	95
9.4	Proposed key reform directions.....	95
10	Proposed reform pathway	98
10.1	Phase 1—fix long-known issues and set the foundations.....	99
10.2	Phase 2—initiate complex reforms and establish mechanisms for continuous improvement.....	99
10.3	Phase 3—new law and implementation of the reformed system	100
	Appendix 1: Prototype National Environmental Standard for Matters of National Environmental Significance	101
	Overarching MNES Standards	103
	Matter-specific Standards	104
	Endnotes	111

Tables

Table 1 Example of prototype Standard for MNES	26
Table 2 Proposed adaptive planning tools	29
Table 3 Percentage of total assessment method decisions, from 2014–15 to 2018–19	58

Figures

Figure 1 Percentage of projects assessed under bilateral and accredited processes for all states and territories, 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019	48
Figure 2 Percentage of projects assessed by bilateral and accredited processes for Australian states and territories, 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019	49
Figure 3 National Environmental Standards support accreditation and devolution	56
Figure 4 Average number of days taken for approvals processes under the EPBC Act for resource projects	66

Boxes

Box 1 Trends in Australia's biodiversity, ecosystems and heritage	19
Box 2 The precautionary principle	20
Box 3 Stakeholder suggestions for changes to matters of national environmental significance	23
Box 4 International agreements relating to Indigenous peoples' rights	31
Box 5 Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into recovery plans	32
Box 6 COAGs Closing the Gap Commitments	35
Box 7 Building blocks for National Environmental Standards for Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities	37
Box 8 Intangible cultural heritage	37
Box 9 Unclear linkages between the functional parts of the EPBC Act	41
Box 10 Complexity of EIA processes	41
Box 11 The water trigger	50
Box 12 Nuclear activities	52
Box 13 The Bonn Convention	59
Box 14 Conditions for RFAs relevant to the EPBC Act	60
Box 15 Pathways for a development proposal	62
Box 16 Time frames for assessment and approval of resource projects under the EPBC Act have increased over time	66
Box 17 The Atlas of Living Australia	72
Box 18 Assessment of cumulative impacts of proposed coal seam gas or large coal mining developments	74
Box 19 Examples of environmental monitoring, evaluation and reporting	83
Box 20 Environmental economic accounting	84
Box 21 Meaning of restoration	86
Box 22 Averted loss, advanced and restoration offsets	88

The Review and how to have your say

The EPBC Act Review

The Independent Review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the Review) commenced on 29 October 2019. The Minister for the Environment appointed Professor Graeme Samuel AC to conduct the Review.

The EPBC Act requires that an independent review be undertaken at least once every ten years. This review must examine the operation of the Act and the extent to which its objects have been achieved.

Information about the Review, including the Terms of Reference, is available on the Review [website](#). This includes information about the extensive consultation that has occurred, and the thousands of submissions received on the Discussion Paper. This material has had a direct bearing on the findings of the Review.

The Final Report is due to be completed by the end of October 2020.

The Interim Report

This Interim Report sets out Professor Samuel's views on the fundamental inadequacies of the EPBC Act and proposes key reform directions to address them. It is not an exposition of all problems, nor does it reference in full depth the comprehensive information—including relevant past reviews—on which the Review has relied.

The Interim Report is structured around the key problems identified by the Reviewer and the proposed reforms to address these. Multiple issues with the way the EPBC Act operates contribute to the ultimate problems observed. The structure of the Interim Report—with summary points, an executive summary and key points at the start of each chapter—is intentionally repetitive to enable the reader to understand the overall message of the Review in as little or as much detail as they choose.

How to have your say

The Review would like to hear the views of stakeholders on the Interim Report and the key reform directions proposed. **What has been missed? How could the proposed reform directions be improved? Are there fundamental shortcomings that would require the Reviewer to rethink?**

The Review will continue to engage with stakeholders. Given the short time available, this will be done in a targeted way with the goal of testing and refining key reform proposals.

All interested parties are invited to visit the [Have Your Say](#) website to provide feedback via a survey. The survey is set out to focus your comments on the key reform directions proposed in the Interim Report. This is so the Review can quickly gauge views and target analysis to areas of critical concern. You are encouraged to complete the survey as early as possible to ensure adequate time for its consideration. Please refrain from resending material you have already provided to the Review.

To share your views about the Interim Report, please visit our [Have Your Say](#) website and complete the survey.

Summary points

Australia's natural environment and iconic places are in an overall state of decline and are under increasing threat. The current environmental trajectory is unsustainable.

The construct of Australia's federation means that the management of the environment is a shared responsibility and jurisdictions need to work effectively together, and in partnership with the community.

The EPBC Act is ineffective. It does not enable the Commonwealth to play its role in protecting and conserving environmental matters that are important for the nation. It is not fit to address current or future environmental challenges.

Fundamental reform of national environmental law is required, and new, legally enforceable National Environmental Standards should be the foundation. Standards should be granular and measurable, providing flexibility for development, without compromising environmental sustainability.

National Environmental Standards should be regulatory instruments. The Commonwealth should make National Environmental Standards, in consultation with stakeholders, including the states and territories. The law must require the Standards to be applied, unless the decision-maker can demonstrate that the public interest and the national interest is best served otherwise.

Precise, quantitative standards, underpinned by quality data and information, will support faster and lower-cost assessments and approvals, including the capacity to automate consideration and approval of low-risk proposals.

The EPBC Act has failed to fulfil its objectives as they relate to Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians' traditional knowledge and views are not fully valued in decision-making, and the Act does not meet the aspirations of Traditional Owners for managing their land. A specific Standard for best practice Indigenous engagement is needed to ensure that Indigenous Australians that speak for, and have traditional knowledge of, Country have had the proper opportunity to contribute to decision-making.

Indigenous Australians seek, and are entitled to expect, stronger national-level protection of their cultural heritage. The suite of national-level laws that protect Indigenous cultural heritage in Australia needs comprehensive review. Cultural heritage protections must work effectively with the development assessment and approval processes of the EPBC Act.

Duplication exists between the EPBC Act and state and territory regulatory frameworks for development assessment and approval. Efforts have been made to harmonise and streamline with the states and territories, but these efforts have not gone far enough.

The proposed National Environmental Standards provide a clear pathway for greater devolution. Legally enforceable Standards, transparent accreditation of state and territory arrangements, and strong assurance are essential to provide community confidence in devolved arrangements. Greater devolution will deliver more streamlined regulation for business, while ensuring that environmental outcomes in the national interest are being achieved.

The community does not trust the EPBC Act to deliver effective protection of the environment and industry view it as cumbersome, duplicative and slow. Legal review is used to discover information and object to a decision, rather than to test and improve decision-making consistent with the law. Reforms should focus on improving transparency of decision-making to reduce the need to resort to court processes to discover information. Legal challenges should be limited to matters of outcome, not process, to reduce litigation that does not have a material impact on the outcome.

Continued next page

Summary points (continued)

Decision-makers, proponents and the community do not have access to the best available data, information and knowledge. There is no single national source of truth that people can rely on. This adds cost for business and government, as they collect and recollect the information they need.

A national 'supply chain' of information is required so that the right information is delivered at the right time to those who need it. A transparent supply chain will build community confidence that decisions are made on comprehensive information and knowledge, and that decisions are contributing to intended outcomes.

A quantum shift is required in the quality of information, accessible data and information available to decision-makers so that decision-makers can comprehensively consider the environmental, economic, social and cultural factors. To apply granular standards to decision-making, stakeholders need the capability to better model the environment, including the probability of outcomes from proposals. To do this well, investment is required to improve knowledge of how ecosystems operate and develop the capability to model them.

Given the state of decline of Australia's environment, restoration is required to enable future development to be sustainable. Available habitat needs to grow to be able to support both development and a healthy environment. The EPBC Act should require proponents to exhaust all reasonable options to avoid or mitigate impacts on the environment. Where this is not feasible, the remaining impacts of the development should be offset in a way that restores the environment.

The current collaborative approach to monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance is too weak. Serious enforcement actions are rarely used, indicating a limited regard for the benefits of using the full force of the law where it is warranted. When they are issued, penalties are not commensurate with the harm of damaging a public good of national interest. They do not provide an adequate deterrent.

A strong, independent cop on the beat is required. An independent compliance and enforcement regulator, that is not subject to actual or implied political direction from the Commonwealth Minister, should be established. The regulator should be responsible for monitoring compliance, enforcement and assurance. It should be properly resourced and have available to it a full toolkit of powers.

The operation of the EPBC Act is ineffective and inefficient. Reform is long overdue. It is impossible for the Review to satisfy the aspirations of every person with an interest in the environment or in business development. The proposed reforms provide a way forward that seeks to build community trust that the national environmental laws deliver effective protections, while regulating businesses efficiently. The Act in its current form achieves neither.

The proposed reforms are substantial, but the changes are necessary to set Australia on a path of ecologically sustainable development. This path will deliver long-term economic growth, environmental improvement and the effective protection of Australia's iconic places and heritage for the benefit of current and future generations.

Executive summary

Protection of Australia's environment and iconic places

Australia's natural environment and iconic places are in an overall state of decline and are under increasing threat. The current environmental trajectory is unsustainable.

The overwhelming message received by the Review is that Australians care deeply about our iconic places and unique environment. Protecting and conserving them for the benefit of current and future generations is important for the nation.

The evidence received by the Review is compelling. Australia's natural environment and iconic places are in an overall state of decline and are under increasing threat. The pressures on the environment are significant—including land-use change, habitat loss and degradation, and feral animal and invasive plant species. The impact of climate change on the environment is building, and will exacerbate pressures, contributing to further decline. Given its current state, the environment is not sufficiently resilient to withstand these threats. The current environmental trajectory is unsustainable.

The EPBC Act is ineffective. It does not enable the Commonwealth to effectively protect environmental matters that are important for the nation. It is not fit to address current or future environmental challenges.

The way the EPBC Act operates means that good outcomes for the environment cannot be achieved under the current laws. Significant efforts are made to assess and list threatened species. However, once listed, not enough is done to deliver improved outcomes for them.

In the main, decisions that determine environmental outcomes are made on a project-by-project basis, and only when impacts exceed a certain size. This means that cumulative impacts on the environment are not systematically considered, and the overall result is net environmental decline, rather than protection and conservation.

The EPBC Act does not facilitate the restoration of the environment. Given the state of decline of Australia's environment, restoration to improve the environment is required to enable future development to be sustainable.

Key threats to the environment are not effectively addressed under the EPBC Act. There is very limited use of comprehensive plans to adaptively manage the environment on a landscape or regional scale. Coordinated national action to address key threats—such as feral animals—are ad hoc, rather than a key national priority. Addressing the challenge of adapting to climate change is an implied, rather than a central consideration.

Fundamental reform of national environmental law is required, and National Environmental Standards should be the foundation

The EPBC Act has no comprehensive mechanism to describe the environmental outcomes it is seeking to achieve, or to ensure decisions are made in a way that contributes to them. Ecologically sustainable development (ESD) should be the overall outcome the Act seeks to achieve. ESD means that development to meet today's needs is undertaken in a way that ensures the environment, natural resources and heritage are maintained for the benefit of future generations.

Legally enforceable National Environmental Standards should be made to set the foundations for effective regulation, to ensure that decisions made under the EPBC Act clearly track towards ESD.

National Environmental Standards should be binding and enforceable regulations. The Commonwealth should make them, through a formal process set out in the EPBC Act. Standards should be developed in consultation with Indigenous, science, environmental and business stakeholders, and the community. Consultation with states and territories is essential. However, the process cannot be one of negotiated agreement with rules set at the lowest bar.

National Environmental Standards should prescribe how decisions made contribute to outcomes for the environment. They should also include the fundamentally important processes for sound and efficient decision-making. Standards should be concise, specific and focused on the requisite outcomes, with compliance focused on attaining the outcome. National Environmental Standards should *not* be highly prescriptive, where compliance is achieved by ‘ticking the boxes’ to fulfil a process.

As the centrepiece of regulation, National Environmental Standards should set clear rules for decision-making. Current arrangements, buried within hundreds of statutory documents, fail to provide clearly defined and specific rules, and they enable considerable discretion in decision-making. Instead, the law must require the Standards to be applied, unless the decision-maker can demonstrate that the public interest and the national interest is best served otherwise.

National Environmental Standards will clearly demarcate the objectives in managing the environment, and the outcomes sought. This is important to help the community know what they can expect from the EPBC Act. It is also important for business, who seek clear and consistent rules.

Interim Standards are recommended as a first step, to facilitate rapid reform and streamlining. These Interim Standards will need to define clear limits of impacts to protect nationally important environmental matters. Ultimately, Standards should be granular and measurable, and provide clarity as to where and how development can occur so as not to compromise environmental sustainability. A quantum shift will be required in the quality of accessible data and information, to increase the granularity of Standards.

Precise, quantitative Standards, underpinned by quality data and information, will provide for effective environment protection and biodiversity conservation and ensure that development is sustainable in the long-term. They will also support faster and lower-cost assessments and approvals, including the capacity to automate consideration of low-risk proposals.

The EPBC Act should focus on core Commonwealth responsibilities

The focus of the EPBC Act should be the Commonwealth’s core responsibilities. The Act, and the National Environmental Standards that would underpin its operation, should focus on the places, flora and fauna that the Commonwealth is responsible for protecting and conserving in the national interest—including World and National Heritage, Ramsar wetlands, and nationally important species and ecological communities. Under the Act, these nationally important matters are called ‘Matters of National Environmental Significance’ or MNES.

Proposals have been made to remove the Commonwealth’s role on regulating water impacts from coal and coal seam gas, and for nuclear activities. The Review considers the Commonwealth should maintain an ability to intervene where developments may result in the ‘irreversible depletion or contamination’ of cross-border water resources. Similarly, for community confidence, the Commonwealth should retain the capacity to ensure nuclear (radioactive) activities are managed effectively.

The Review does not support the many proposals received to broaden the environmental matters dealt with in the EPBC Act. To do so would result in muddled responsibilities, leading to poor accountability, duplication and inefficiency.

While climate change is a significant and increasing threat to Australia’s environment, successive Commonwealth Governments have elected to adopt specific mechanisms and laws to implement their commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The EPBC Act should not duplicate the Commonwealth’s framework for regulating emissions. It should, however, require that development proposals explicitly consider the effectiveness of their actions to avoid or mitigate impacts on nationally protected matters under specified climate change scenarios.

This position is consistent with the foundational intergovernmental agreements. It was agreed that emissions would be dealt with by national-level strategies and programs, rather than the EPBC Act. The Review considers there is merit in mandating proposals required to be assessed and approved

under the Act (due to their impacts on nationally protected matters), to transparently disclose the full emissions profile of the development.

Planning at the national and regional (landscape) scale is needed to take action where it matters most and to support adaptive management

Regional (landscape) plans should be developed that support the management of threats at the right scale and to set clear rules to facilitate and manage competing land uses. These plans should prioritise investment in protection, conservation and restoration to where it is most needed, such as biodiversity hotspots, and where the environment will most benefit.

Ideally these plans would be developed in conjunction with states and territories. Where this cooperation is not possible, the Commonwealth should develop its own plans to manage threats on a landscape-scale, and cumulative impacts on MNES. The Commonwealth's regional planning efforts should be focused on those regions of highest pressure on MNES.

Strategic national plans should be developed for 'big-ticket', nationally pervasive issues such as the management of feral animals or adaptation of the environment to climate change. These plans should guide the national response and enable action and investment by all parties to be effectively targeted to where it delivers the greatest benefit. National-level plans will support a consistent approach to addressing issues in regional plans or inform activities in areas where there is no regional plan.

More needs to be done to restore the environment

The operation of the EPBC Act needs to shift from permitting gradual decline, to halting decline and restoring the environment, so that development can continue in a sustainable way. Active mechanisms are required to restore areas of degraded or lost habitat to achieve the net gain for the environment that is needed.

The proposed regional plans are key mechanisms that can set the priorities for restoration and adaptation and identify where investment will have the best returns for the environment. The Review has identified opportunities for national leadership outside the EPBC Act that should be considered. Existing markets, including the carbon market can be leveraged to help deliver restoration. There are also opportunities for greater collaboration between governments and the private sector, to invest in both in the environment directly, and in innovation to bring down the costs of environmental restoration activities.

National Environmental Standards and national and regional (landscape) plans will support greater harmonisation with the states and territories

The construct of Australia's federation means that the management of Australia's environment is a shared responsibility. The Commonwealth and states and territories need to work effectively together, and in partnership with the community, to manage Australia's environment and iconic places well.

Jurisdictions have agreed their respective roles and responsibilities for protecting the environment, and where possible, they have agreed that they will accommodate each other's laws and regulatory systems. This is a sound ambition, but more needs to be done to realise it.

The National Environmental Standards and improved planning frameworks aim to support greater cooperation and harmonisation between the Commonwealth, states and territories. Setting clear, legally enforceable rules means that decisions should be made consistently, regardless of who makes them, providing a pathway for the Commonwealth to recognise and accredit the regulatory processes of others. In pursuing greater harmonisation, the Commonwealth should retain the ability to step in to make decisions, where it is in the national interest to do so.

National Environmental Standards and national and regional plans will allow the Commonwealth to step up its focus to achieve nationally important environmental outcomes. They will also support a shift away from the current transactional focus of the EPBC Act, that can be duplicative, costly to business and result in little tangible benefit to the environment.

Indigenous culture and heritage

Indigenous knowledge and views are not fully valued in decision-making

The Review considers that the EPBC Act is not fulfilling its objectives as they relate to the role of Indigenous Australians in protecting and conserving biodiversity and heritage, and promoting the respectful use of their knowledge.

Over the last decade, there has been a significant evolution in the way Indigenous knowledge, innovations and practices are incorporated into environmental management, for example through investment in Indigenous Rangers. The EPBC Act lags well behind leading practice.

Western science is heavily prioritised in the way the EPBC Act operates. Indigenous knowledge and views are diluted in the formal provision of advice to decision-makers. This reflects an overall culture of tokenism and symbolism, rather than one of genuine inclusion of Indigenous Australians.

The operation of the EPBC Act Indigenous Advisory Committee (IAC) exemplifies the culture of tokenism. The Act does not require the IAC to provide decision-makers with advice. The IAC is reliant on the Minister inviting its views. This contrasts to other statutory committees under the Act, which have clearly defined and formal roles at key points in statutory processes.

The Department has issued guidance on best practice Indigenous engagement. This sets out expectations for applicants for EPBC Act approval, but it is not required or enforceable. It is not transparent how the Commonwealth Minister factors in Indigenous matters in decision-making for EPBC Act assessments.

The proposed National Environmental Standards should include a specific standard on best practice Indigenous engagement. The purpose of the Standard is to ensure that Indigenous Australians who speak for and have traditional knowledge of Country have had the proper opportunity to contribute to decisions made under the EPBC Act.

The role of the IAC should be substantially recast. The EPBC Act should establish an Indigenous Knowledge and Engagement Committee, responsible for providing the Commonwealth Minister with advice on a Standard for Indigenous engagement. This should include the development and application of the Standard, and ensuring its effectiveness through monitoring, evaluation and review.

Indigenous Australians seek, and are entitled to expect, stronger national-level protection of their cultural heritage

Places of natural and cultural value that are important to the world or Australia can be recognised and protected by listing them as National Heritage or World Heritage under the EPBC Act. At the national level, Indigenous cultural heritage is protected under numerous other Commonwealth laws, including the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984* (ATSIHP Act). The ATSIHP Act can be used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ask the Commonwealth Environment Minister to protect an area or object where it is under threat of injury or desecration and where state or territory law does not provide for effective protection.

Contributions to the Review have highlighted the importance of cultural heritage issues being dealt with early in a development assessment process. However, under the ATSIHP Act, the timing of a potential national intervention is late in the development assessment and approval process.

Indigenous Australians have emphasised to the Review the importance of the Commonwealth's ongoing role in Indigenous cultural heritage protection. Because the states and territories also play a key role in the legal framework for Indigenous heritage protection, the arrangements of the jurisdictions need to work well together to avoid duplication or regulatory gaps.

The current laws that protect Indigenous cultural heritage in Australia need comprehensive review. This review should explicitly consider the role of the EPBC Act in providing national-level protections. It should also consider how comprehensive national-level protections are given effect, for example how they interact with the development assessment and approval and regional planning processes of the Act.

The EPBC Act does not meet the aspirations of Traditional Owners for managing their land

The EPBC Act provides the legal framework for the joint management of three Commonwealth National Parks—Kakadu, Uluru-Kata Tjuta and Booderee. Traditional Owners lease their land to the Director of National Parks (DNP), a statutory position established under the Act. For each of these parks, a joint management board is established to work in conjunction with the DNP.

The structure of the DNP means that position is ultimately responsible for decisions made in relation to the management of national parks, and for the effective management of risks such as those relating to occupational health and safety. Given this responsibility, the DNP has made decisions contrary to the recommendations of joint boards or has made a decision when the joint board has been unable to reach a consensus view. The contributions to the Review from Traditional Owners and the Land Councils who support them, indicate that the current settings for joint management fall short of their aspirations for genuine joint decision-making or indeed sole management.

The first step is to reach consensus on the long-term goals for jointly managed parks, and the nature of the relationship between Traditional Owners and the Commonwealth. The policy, institutional and transition arrangements required to successfully achieve these goals should then be co-designed with Traditional Owners.

Reforms should be co-designed with Indigenous Australians

This Review has highlighted significant shortcomings in the way the views, aspirations, culture, values and knowledge of Indigenous Australians are supported by the EPBC Act.

The Australian Government has committed to recognising improved outcomes for Indigenous Australians through enabling co-design and policy implementation with them. This commitment is reflected in COAG's commitments in the Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019-2029. The proposed Indigenous Knowledge and Engagement committee should play a key leadership role in the co-design of reforms.

Legislative complexity

The EPBC Act is complex, its construction is archaic, and it does not meet best practice for modern regulation. Complex legislation makes it difficult, time-consuming and expensive for people to understand their legal rights and obligations. This leads to confusion and inconsistent decision-making, creating unnecessary regulatory burdens for business, and restricting access to justice.

The policy areas covered by the EPBC Act are inherently complex. The way the different areas of the Act work together to deliver environmental outcomes is not always clear and many areas operate in a largely siloed way. There is a heavy reliance on detailed prescriptive processes that are convoluted and inflexible, meaning engaging with the Act is time-consuming and costly. This is particularly the case for environmental impact assessment. Convoluted processes are made more complex by key terminology being poorly defined or not defined at all.

In the short-term, legislative amendments to the EPBC Act are required to address known inconsistencies, gaps, and conflicts in the Act. In the longer-term, comprehensive redrafting of the Act (or a new set of related Acts) is required. This should be done following the development of the key reforms proposed by this Review. During re-drafting, consideration should be given to dividing the Act, creating separate pieces of legislation for the key functional areas of the Act, or along thematic lines. This will ensure that legislation is developed in a way that supports the desired approach, rather than inadvertently hindering it.

Efficiency

A key criticism of the EPBC Act is that it duplicates state and territory regulatory frameworks for development assessment and approval. The Review has found that, with a few exceptions, this is largely true.

There is no systematic way to determine the additional environmental benefits resulting from the EPBC Act. There are examples where the Act has led to demonstrably different environmental outcomes than those arising from state and territory processes. While far from perfect, the EPBC Act requirement for 'like-for-like' offsets exceeds those in some jurisdictions and results in additional or different conditions placed on projects resulting in better outcomes than would have otherwise been the case.

Frustration rightly arises when Commonwealth regulation does not, or does not tangibly, correspond to better environmental outcomes, given the additional costs to business of dual processes.

Efforts made to harmonise and streamline with the states and territories have not gone far enough

The EPBC Act allows for the accreditation of state and territory laws and management systems for both assessments and approvals.

Under a bilateral assessment agreement, the Commonwealth retains responsibility for approvals, based on environmental impact assessments undertaken by the jurisdictions. For the 5-year period between July 2014 and June 2019, 37% of proposals under the EPBC Act were assessed (or are still being assessed) through either a bilateral assessment (25%) or accredited assessment (12%) arrangements with jurisdictions. The proportion of projects covered by an assessment bilateral agreement is limited, because not all state and territory processes can deliver an adequate assessment of matters that are protected under the EPBC Act.

Approval bilateral agreements have never been implemented. Under this type of agreement, the Commonwealth would devolve its approval decision-making powers to a state or territory decision-maker. Under the current settings, the mechanism to devolve approval decisions is inherently fragile. Particularly important amendments are needed to:

- enable the Commonwealth to complete an assessment and approval if a state or territory is unable to
- ensure agreements can endure minor amendments to state and territory settings, rather than requiring the bilateral agreement to be remade (and consequently be subject to disallowance by the Australian Parliament on each occasion).

These and other necessary amendments have failed to garner support in the Australian Parliament. In 2015 the Parliament did not support these amendments, in response to significant community concerns about the ability of states and territories to uphold the national interest when applying discretion in approval decisions.

Legally enforceable National Environmental Standards provide a clear pathway for greater devolution

The foundational intergovernmental agreements on the environment envisaged that jurisdictions would accommodate their respective responsibilities in each other's laws and regulatory systems, where possible. This is a sound ambition, and one that governments should continue to pursue.

The National Environmental Standards proposed by the Review would provide a legally binding mechanism to provide confidence to support greater devolution. Accrediting an alternative regulator would be on an 'opt-in' basis, and they would need to demonstrate that their system can achieve the National Environmental Standard. This may require states and territories to adapt their regulations to meet National Environmental Standards and to satisfy accreditation requirements.

The proposed devolution model involves 5 key steps:

- 1) National Environmental Standards—to set the benchmark for protecting the environment in the national interest and provide the ability to measure the outcomes of decisions.
- 2) State or territory or other suitable authority to demonstrate that their systems meet National Environmental Standards—this element includes a formal check to give confidence that arrangements are sound.
- 3) Formal accreditation by the Commonwealth Minister—this element is intended to provide accountability and legal certainty, and the Commonwealth Minister should seek the advice of the proposed Ecologically Sustainable Development Committee prior to an accreditation decision.
- 4) A transparent assurance framework—this element provides confidence that parties are implementing the processes and policies as agreed. It should include the mechanisms for the Commonwealth to step in when it is in the national interest to do so.
- 5) Regular review and adaptive management—this ensures decision-making contributes to the objectives established in the Standards.

Pursuing greater devolution does not mean that the Commonwealth ‘gets out of the business’ of environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. Rather, the reform directions proposed would result in a shift with a greater focus on accrediting and providing assurance oversight of the activities of other regulators, and in ensuring national interest environmental outcomes are being achieved.

Commonwealth-led assessments and approvals should be further streamlined

The Commonwealth should retain its capability to assess and approve projects. Commonwealth assessments and approvals will be required where:

- accredited arrangements are not in place or cannot be used
- at the request of a jurisdiction
- when the Commonwealth exercises its ability to step in on national interest grounds
- when the activity occurs on Commonwealth land, or
- when the activity is undertaken by a Commonwealth agency outside a state's jurisdiction.

The Review has identified opportunities to streamline environmental impact assessments and approvals conducted by the Commonwealth. The most significant gains will be realised by fundamental changes to the way the EPBC Act works. Reform proposals including the development of National Environmental Standards and regional plans, and improvements in the data, information and regulatory systems discussed further in this report are central to improving the quality and efficiency of Commonwealth-led processes.

Streamlining the assessment pathways available under the EPBC Act will reduce the complexity of and efficiencies in the current process. The first step in all assessment pathways is known as ‘referral’, where the decision-maker determines whether a proposal requires more detailed assessment. For proposals where the need for detailed assessment and the relevant environmental matters are obvious, the referral creates an additional, pointless step in the process.

For other proposals, the lack of clarity on the requirements of the EPBC Act means that proponents refer proposals for legal certainty. More than half of all referrals result in a decision that detailed assessment and approval is not required, or not required so long as it is carried out in a particular manner. National Environmental Standards and regional plans will provide clarity on impacts that are acceptable, and those which will require assessment and approval, enabling the referral step to be avoided.

Other Commonwealth environmental management laws interact with the EPBC Act

The EPBC Act operates in a way that seeks to recognise other environmental regulatory and management frameworks, including the management of Commonwealth fisheries, Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) and offshore petroleum activities. The interplay between the Act and these other frameworks is often more onerous than it needs to be.

The Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) is responsible for the day-to-day management and compliance of Commonwealth fisheries. Assessments under the EPBC Act are conducted on the environmental performance of all export fisheries and all Commonwealth-managed fisheries to ensure that fisheries are managed in an ecologically sustainable way. There are opportunities to streamline the multiple assessment and permitting processes needed to undertake commercial fishing operations in Commonwealth waters or jointly managed fisheries. Given the maturity of the fisheries management framework administered by AFMA, and the improvement in environmental outcomes that have resulted, the Review is confident that further streamlining can be achieved while maintaining assurance in the outcomes.

An RFA is a regional plan, agreed between a state and the Commonwealth for management of native forests. RFAs balance economic, social and environmental demands on forests and seek to deliver ecologically sustainable forest management, certainty of resource access for the forest industry and protection of native forests as part of Australia's national reserve system. The EPBC Act recognises the *Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002* (RFA Act), and EPBC Act assessment and approvals are not required for forestry activities conducted in accordance with an RFA (except where forestry operations are in a World Heritage property or a Ramsar wetland).

During the course of this Review, the Federal Court found that an operator had breached the terms of an RFA and should therefore be subject to the ordinary controlling provisions of the EPBC Act. Legal ambiguities in the relationship between EPBC Act and the RFA Act should be clarified, so that the Commonwealth's interests in protecting the environment interact with the RFA framework in a streamlined way.

Increase the efficiency of the regulation of wildlife trade

The EPBC Act gives effect to Australia's obligations as a member of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), including the international movement of wildlife specimens. The requirements of the Act exceed Australia's obligations under CITES. Aspects of wildlife trade provisions in the Act result in administrative process and costs for individuals, business and government, while affording no additional protection to endangered species. The Act should be amended to align its requirements with CITES and to provide for a more efficient permitting process.

Trust in the EPBC Act

The community and industry distrust the EPBC Act, and there is merit in their concerns

The community and industry do not trust the EPBC Act and the regulatory system that underpins its implementation.

A dominant theme in the 30,000 contributions received by the Review is that many in the community do not trust the EPBC Act to deliver for the environment. Limited access to information about decisions and the lack of opportunity to substantively engage in decision-making under the Act further erodes trust.

The EPBC Act and its processes focus on the provision of environmental information, yet the Commonwealth Minister can and should consider social and economic factors when making an approval decision. The community can't see how these factors are weighed in EPBC Act decisions. Under the current arrangements, this leads to concern that the environment loses out to other considerations as proponents have undue influence on decision-makers.

The EPBC Act is also not trusted by industry. They generally view it as cumbersome, pointing to duplication, slow decision-making, and legal challenges being used as a tool to delay projects and drive up costs for business (often called 'lawfare').

An underlying theme of industry distrust in the EPBC Act relates to perceived duplication with state and territory processes and the length of time it takes to receive an approval. On average, complex resource sector projects can take nearly 3 years, or 1,013 days to assess and approve, and this is too long. Recent provision of additional resources has improved on-time approval decisions from 19% to 87% of key decisions made on time.

Lengthy assessment and approval processes are not all the result of a slow Commonwealth regulator. On average, the process is under the management of the proponent for more than three quarters of the total assessment time, indicative of the time taken to navigate current requirements and collect the necessary information for assessment documentation. For business, time is money. Delays, regardless of when they occur, can result in significant additional costs, particularly on large projects.

Legal standing and review

The Review has received highly conflicting evidence and viewpoints about the appeal mechanisms under the EPBC Act. Where concerns arise about environmental outcomes associated with a decision, public focus turns to challenging high profile decisions. Legal review is used to discover information and object to a decision, rather than its proper purpose to test and improve decision-making consistent with the law. Industry is very concerned about the delay to projects that can arise from politically-motivated legal challenges.

The public discourse on legal challenges is focused on large projects, with considerable economic benefits that are in highly valued environmental areas. Pro-development groups argue that the extended standing provisions (standing beyond a person directly affected by a decision) should be removed from the Act.

The Review is not yet convinced that extended standing should be curtailed. Broad standing remains an important feature of environmental legislation, particularly given the presence of collective harm resulting from damage to environmental or heritage values. The evidence suggests that standing has not been interpreted broadly by the courts. The courts have the capacity to deal with baseless or vexatious litigation and litigation with no reasonable prospect of success can be dismissed in the first instance. It may though be beneficial for the EPBC Act to require an applicant seeking to rely on the extended standing provisions to demonstrate that they have an arguable case, or that the case raises matters of exceptional public importance before the matter can proceed.

In a mature regulatory framework, judicial and merits review operate in concert. Judicial review helps ensure legal processes are followed, complemented by merits review to ensure decisions are meeting the intent of the legislation, not simply following processes.

Full merits review is not advised. Opening decisions on appeal or review to the admission of new documentation or materials for consideration delays decisions without necessarily improving outcomes. It also promotes forum shopping.

Reforms to the EPBC Act should focus on improving transparency of decision-making, to reduce the need to resort to court processes to discover information. Legal challenges should be limited to matters of outcome, not process, to reduce litigation that does not have a material impact on the outcome.

Adjustments to legal review provisions should be made to provide for limited merits review 'on the papers'. This form of review limits the considerations to those matters that were raised and maintained by the applicant during the due course of the regulatory decision or matters arising from a demonstrable material change in circumstances.

Transparent independent advice can improve trust in the EPBC Act

Low levels of trust are an underlying driver behind calls for independent institutions to be established to make decisions under the EPBC Act. This solution is not supported by the Review. It is entirely appropriate that elected representatives (and their delegates) make decisions that require competing values to be weighed and competing national objectives to be balanced.

Community confidence and trust in the process could be enhanced by the provision of transparent, independent advice on the adequacy of information provided to a decision-maker.

The statutory advisory committee structures in the EPBC Act should be recast. An Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Committee should be established, comprising an independent chair and the chairs of these committees:

- Information and Knowledge (to advise on science, social impacts, economics and traditional knowledge)
- Indigenous Knowledge and Engagement (to advise on the co-design of reforms and the National Environmental Standard for Indigenous engagement)
- Threatened Species Science (to advise on the status of threatened species and ecological communities and actions needed to improve their condition in regional recovery plans)
- Australian Heritage Council (as established under the *Australian Heritage Council Act 2003*—to advise on heritage matters)
- A committee with water resources expertise (to advise on the impacts of projects subject to the water trigger).

The ESD Committee should provide transparent advice to the Minister to inform decisions on the making of National Environmental Standards, regional plans, and the accreditation of arrangements for devolving decision-making. The Commonwealth Minister could ask for their advice on other decisions, where they had relevant expertise.

Data, information and systems

Decision-makers, proponents and the community do not have access to the best available data, information and science. This results in sub-optimal decision-making, inefficiency and additional cost for business, and poor transparency to the community. The Department's systems for information analysis and sharing are antiquated. Cases cannot be managed effectively across the full lifecycle of a project, and the user experience is clunky and cumbersome for both proponents and members of the community interested in a project.

The collection of data and information is fragmented and disparate. There is no single national source of truth that people can rely on. This adds cost for business and government, as they collect and recollect the information they need. It also results in lower community trust in the process, as they question the quality of information on which decisions are made, and the outcomes that result from them.

A national 'supply chain' of information is required so that the right information is delivered at the right time to those who need it. This supply chain should be an easily accessible 'single source of truth' on which the public, proponents and governments can rely. A custodian for the national environmental information supply chain is needed, and the Commonwealth should clearly assign responsibility for national level leadership and coordination. Adequate resources should be provided to develop the systems and capability that are needed to deliver the evidence base for Australia's national system of environmental management. The recent financial commitment from the Australian Government and the Western Australian Government to the collaborative Digital Environmental Assessment Program is a good first step in this direction. The program will deliver a single online portal for assessments and biodiversity databases.

In the short-term, the granularity of National Environmental Standards is limited by the information available to define and apply them to decision-making. A quantum shift in the quality of information is required to transform standards from qualitative indicators of outcomes to quantified measures of outcomes. To apply granular standards to decision-making, governments need the capability to model the environment, including the probability of outcomes from proposals. To do this well, investment is required to improve knowledge of how ecosystems operate and to develop the capability to model them. This requires a complete overhaul of the systems to enable improved information to be captured and incorporated into decision-making.

Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

There is no effective framework to support a comprehensive, data-based evaluation of the EPBC Act, its effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes, and the efficiency of implementation activities. The Act includes some requirements for monitoring and reporting. These are not comprehensive, and follow-through is largely focused on bare minimum administrative reporting, rather than genuine monitoring and evaluation of outcomes to learn lessons, adapt and improve.

The development of a coherent framework to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the EPBC Act in achieving its outcomes and the efficiency of its implementation is needed. Key reforms proposed by this Review, particularly the establishment of National Environmental Standards and regional plans, provide a solid foundation for the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Act as a whole. The framework must be backed in by commitment to its implementation.

The national State of the Environment (SoE) report is the established mechanism that seeks to ‘tell the national story’ on Australia’s system of environmental management. While providing an important point in time overview, the report is an amalgam of insights and information, and does not generate a consistent data series across reports. It lacks a clear purpose and intent. There is no feedback loop, and as a nation there is no requirement to stop, review, and where necessary change course.

A revamp of SoE reporting is required. The national SoE report should examine the state and trends of Australia’s environment, and the underlying drivers of these trends, including interventions that have been made. National environmental economic accounts will be a useful tool for tracking Australia’s progress to achieve ESD. The SoE report should provide an outlook and the government should be required to formally respond, identifying priority areas for action, and the levers that will be used to act.

Efforts to finalise the development of these accounts should be accelerated, so that in time they can be a core input to SoE reporting.

Restoration

Given the state of decline of Australia’s environment, restoration and adaptation are required to enable future development to be sustainable. Available habitat needs to grow to be able to support both development and a healthy environment.

Environmental offsets do not offset the impacts of developments

Under the current arrangements, as a condition of approval, developers can be required to protect areas similar to that which has been destroyed or damaged. This is known as an environmental offset.

Environmental offsets are often poorly designed and implemented, delivering an overall net loss for the environment. The stated intent of the offsets policy is to encourage proponents to exhaust reasonable options to avoid or mitigate impacts. In practice, offsets have become the default negotiating position, and a standard condition of approval, rather than only used to address residual impacts.

Offsets do not offset the impact of development, and overall there is a net loss of habitat. Proponents are permitted to clear habitat in return for protecting other areas of the same habitat from future development. It is generally not clear if the area set aside for the offset is at risk from future development.

Offsets need to include a greater focus on restoration and should be enshrined in the law. The EPBC Act should require that offsets only be considered when options to avoid and then mitigate impacts have been demonstrably exhausted. Where applied, offsets should deliver genuine restoration, avoiding a net loss of habitat.

There is an opportunity to incentivise early investment in restoration. If offsets were to be supported with greater certainty under the EPBC Act, then this could be the catalyst for a market response. Proponents are generally not in the business of managing habitats as their core business. There are, however, expert land managers and specialist project managers who deliver these services. The right policy and legal settings would provide certainty for these players to invest in landscapes, confident that proponents will be in the market to purchase offsets based on these investments down the track.

There are opportunities for restoration beyond the EPBC Act

There are opportunities beyond the EPBC Act that should be explored to accelerate investment in restoration.

The carbon market, which already delivers restoration, could be better leveraged to deliver improved biodiversity outcomes. The Australian Government has recently agreed to carbon market reforms that will increase the competitiveness of carbon-farming when compared to other land uses. More could be done if credit for biodiversity outcomes could be 'stacked' on top of carbon credits, with one area of land delivering both carbon and biodiversity outcomes.

There is an opportunity to provide the policy settings to better leverage private interest in investing in the environment as well as drive down the cost of restoration. Globally, there is growing interest from the philanthropic and private sectors to invest in a way that improves environmental outcomes. A biodiversity market is one destination for this capital, another is co-investment to bring down the cost of environmental restoration, growing the habitat available to support healthy systems. The merits of the application of these types of models for investing in environmental improvement will be further explored prior to the finalisation of the Review.

Compliance, enforcement and assurance

Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance under the EPBC Act is ineffective

There has been limited activity to enforce the EPBC Act over the 20-year period it has been in effect, and the transparency of what has been done is low.

While the Department has improved its regulatory compliance and enforcement functions in recent years, it still relies on a collaborative approach to compliance and enforcement. This is too weak.

Serious enforcement actions are rarely used, indicating a limited regard for the benefits of using the full force of the law where it is warranted. When issued, penalties are not commensurate with the harm of damaging a public good of national interest. Since 2010, a total of 22 infringements have been issued for breaches of conditions of approval, with total fines less than \$230,000. By way of contrast, individual local governments frequently issue more than this amount in paid parking fines annually.

The compliance and enforcement powers in the EPBC Act are outdated. Powers are restrictive and can only be applied in a piecemeal way across different parts of the Act due to the way it is constructed. The complexity of the legislation, impenetrable terminology and the infrequency with which many interact with the law, make both voluntary compliance and the pursuit of enforcement action difficult.

A strong, independent cop on the beat for monitoring, compliance and enforcement is required

An independent compliance and enforcement regulator that is not subject to actual or implied direction from the Commonwealth Minister should be established. The regulator should be responsible for monitoring compliance, enforcement, monitoring and assurance. It should be properly resourced and have available to it a full toolkit of powers.

Penalties and other remedies for non-compliance and breaches of the EPBC Act and the National Environmental Standards need to be adequate to ensure that compliance is regarded as mandatory not optional. The costs of non-compliance should not be regarded as simply a cost of doing business.

The Commonwealth Minister must retain responsibility for setting the rules (including making decisions and setting conditions for development approvals), but the regulator should be responsible for enforcing them.

The compliance and enforcement regulator must have a clear and strong regulatory stance. It remains important to be proportional, and to work with people where inadvertent non-compliance has occurred. However, the regulator needs to establish a culture that does not shy from firm action where needed.

An independent compliance and enforcement regulator will build public trust in the ability of the law to deliver environmental outcomes and that breaches of the law will be fairly, proactively and transparently managed. Strong compliance and enforcement activities protect the integrity of most of the regulated community—who spend time and money to comply with the law—with those who break the rules facing appropriate consequences.

Devolved decision-making needs strong assurance

The Review proposes reforms that will support greater devolution in decision-making. Clear, legally enforceable National Environmental Standards combined with strong assurance are essential to community confidence in these arrangements. The independent compliance and enforcement regulator should play a key role in providing assurance of devolved arrangements.

This will require a focus on oversight of these devolved and strategic arrangements, including auditing the performance of devolved decision-makers. The devolved decision-maker should remain primarily responsible for project-level monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance, and transparently report actions taken. The Commonwealth should also retain the ability to intervene in project-level compliance and enforcement, where egregious breaches are not being effectively enforced by the state or territory regulator.

The reform pathway

The EPBC Act is ineffective, and reform is long overdue. Past attempts at reform have been largely unsuccessful. Commitment to a clear pathway for reform is required. The reform agenda proposed is not one to ‘set and forget’. Settings should be monitored and evaluated, and the path forward adjusted as lessons are learnt and new information and ways of doing things emerge.

Effective administration of a regulatory system is not cost free. The reforms proposed seek to improve the overall efficiency of the system. It is important to consider how to best fund the implementation of a reformed system, including the fair costs that should be recovered from proponents. In principle, government should pay for elements that are substantially public benefits (for example, the development of standards), while business should pay for those elements of the regulatory system required because they derive private benefits by impacting the environment (for example, approvals and monitoring, compliance and enforcement). There are elements of the regulatory system that have mixed benefits where costs should be shared (for example, data and information).

Immediate steps to start reform should be taken. In the first instance, amendments should be made to:

- fix duplication, inconsistencies, gaps and conflicts
- enable National Environmental Standards to be made
- improve the durability of the settings for devolved decision-making.

Interim National Environmental Standards should be made, to set clear rules for decision-making and to support greater devolution in decision-making.

Similarly, in the short-term, the conversation should focus on delivering complex reforms and the mechanisms to underpin continuous improvement so that the policy development and implementation plans can be finalised and resourcing commitments made. These reforms include:

- reforms to establish the framework for monitoring, reporting and evaluating the performance of the EPBC Act, with a key focus on the arrangements for National Environmental Standards
- starting the conversation with the states and territories about state and territory-led regional planning priorities and priorities for strategic national plans
- committing to sustained engagement with Indigenous Australians, to co-design reforms that are important to them—the culturally respectful use of their knowledge, effective national protections for their culture and heritage, and working with them to meet their aspirations to manage their land in partnership with the Commonwealth
- appointing a national data and information custodian, responsible for delivering an information supply chain and overhauling the systems needed to capture value from the supply chain
- establishing the mechanisms to better leverage investment, to deliver the scale of restoration required for future development in Australia to be sustainable.

Once the policy direction is settled, and key initiatives are underway, the final phase of reform should involve complete legislative overhaul to establish the remaining elements of reform and to focus on implementing the reformed system.

The proposed reforms seek to build community trust that the national environmental laws deliver effective protections and regulate businesses efficiently. It is impossible for the Review to satisfy the aspirations of every person with an interest in the environment or in business development. Rather, the Review has attempted to provide a way forward, to ensure effective environment protection and biodiversity conservation and efficient regulation of business. The EPBC Act in its current form achieves neither.

The proposed reforms are substantial, but the changes are necessary to set Australia on a path of ESD. This path will deliver long-term economic growth, environmental improvement and the effective protection of Australia's iconic places and heritage for the benefit of current and future generations.

1 National level protection and conservation of the environment and iconic places

Key points

The environment and our iconic places are in decline and under increasing threat. The EPBC Act does not enable the Commonwealth to effectively protect and conserve nationally important environmental matters. It is not fit for current or future environmental challenges.

The key reasons the operation of the EPBC Act does not effectively protect the environment are:

- The Act lacks clear national outcomes and effective mechanisms to address environmental decline. Ecologically sustainable development is a key principle of the Act, but it is not being applied or achieved.
- Decision-making is focused on processes and individual projects and does not adequately address cumulative impacts or emerging threats. Environmental offsets have serious shortcomings. They have become the default, rather than the exception after all practical options to avoid or mitigate impacts have been exhausted.
- The Act does not facilitate the restoration of the environment. The current settings cannot halt the trajectory of environmental decline, let alone reverse it. There is no comprehensive planning to manage key threats to the environment on a national or regional (landscape) scale.
- Opportunities for coordinated national action to address key environmental challenges—such as feral animals, habitat restoration and adapting to climate change—are ad hoc, rather than a key national priority.

The key reform directions proposed by the Review are:

- Legally enforceable National Environmental Standards should be the foundation for effective regulation. The Standards should focus on outcomes for matters of national environmental significance, and the fundamentally important processes for sound and efficient decision-making. Standards will provide certainty—in terms of the environmental outcomes the community can expect from the law, and the legal obligations of proponents.
- The goal of the EPBC Act should be to deliver ecologically sustainable development. The Act should require that National Environmental Standards are set and decisions are made in a way that ensures it is achieved. The Act should support a focus on protecting (avoiding impact), conserving (minimising impact) and restoring the environment.
- A greater focus on adaptive planning is required to deliver environmental outcomes. Regional plans should be developed that support the management of cumulative threats and set clear rules to manage competing land uses at the right scale.
- Strategic national plans should be developed for big-ticket, nationally pervasive issues such as the management of feral animals or adaptation of the environment to climate change. These plans should guide the national response and enable action and investment by all parties to be effectively targeted and efficient.

These proposed reforms, along with others presented in this Interim Report, combine to provide a more effective and efficient regime to protect Australia's unique environment and iconic places. They aim to foster greater cooperation and harmonisation between the Commonwealth, states and territories.

Protecting the environment and iconic places in the national interest is important for all Australians. Australia is recognised as a global biodiversity hotspot, with unique plants and animals found nowhere else in the world. Indigenous Australians have a deep connection to and knowledge of Country. They are the custodians of the oldest continuous culture in the world. As the nation's central piece of environmental law, the EPBC Act must ensure the environment, natural resources and Australia's rich heritage is maintained for the benefit of future generations.

A healthy environment is important to the quality of life and health and wellbeing of all Australians. The recent bushfire season provided us with a stark reminder of this. For Indigenous Australians, connection to healthy Country is their expression of culture. Many industries are reliant on the sustainable use of Australia's vast natural resource base. Their long-term productivity and profitability contribute to the continued vibrancy of regional areas and the nation. Many contributions to the Review have presented a strong view that nature has a right to exist for its intrinsic value, rather than simply being viewed as a resource.

The overwhelming message received from contributions to the Review is that Australians care immensely about the state, and future, of our unique and inspiring environment. They highlight a strong community expectation that the Commonwealth plays a key role in managing Australia's environment and maintaining effective national environment laws.

1.1 The environment and iconic places are in decline and under increasing threat

The evidence on the state of Australia's environment put forward by the scientific community to this Review is compelling. Overall, Australia's environment is in a state of decline and under increasing pressure. There are localised examples of good outcomes; however, the national outlook is one of decline and increasing threat to the quality of the environment. At best, the operation of the EPBC Act has contributed to slowing the overall rate of decline (see Box 1).

In contrast to the outcomes for biodiversity, contributions to the Review present a mixed view in relation to heritage. While the EPBC Act has strengthened Commonwealth obligations and enabled resources to be targeted towards protecting Australia's significant and outstanding heritage places, the World Heritage and National Heritage values of some iconic places have diminished, and the recognition of and funding for community and historic heritage has reduced¹.

Box 1 Trends in Australia's biodiversity, ecosystems and heritage

It is not the role of the Review to provide a comprehensive summary of the state of the environment. This Box provides a synopsis of the latest national State of the Environment report (2016)² and contributions to the Review from a range of experts³.

Threatened species and biodiversity—Australia is losing biodiversity at an alarming rate and has one of the highest rates of extinction in the world. More than 10% of Australia's land mammals are now extinct, and another 21% are threatened and declining⁴. Populations of threatened birds, plants, fish and invertebrates are also continuing to decrease, and the list of threatened species is growing. Although there is evidence of population increases where targeted management actions are undertaken (such as controlling or excluding feral animals or implementing ecological fire management techniques), these are exceptions rather than a broad trend.

Since the EPBC Act was introduced, the threat status of species has deteriorated. Approximately 4 times more species have been listed as threatened than those that have shown an improvement. Over its 20-year operation, only 13 animal species have been removed from the Act's threatened species lists, and only one of these (Muir's Corella) is generally considered a case of genuine improvement⁵.

Protected areas—The area of Australia that is protected from competing land uses, for example through national parks, marine reserves and Indigenous Protected Areas, has expanded. However, not all ecosystems or habitats are well represented, and their management is not delivering strong outcomes for threatened species. Consideration of future scenarios indicates that the reserve system is unlikely to provide adequate protection for species and communities in the face of future pressures such as climate change.

Oceans and marine—Aspects of Australia's marine environment are in good condition and there have been some management successes, but our oceans face significant current and future threats from climate change and human activity.

There have been some modest environmental successes such as an increase in humpback whale populations. However, submissions pointed to recent evidence of steep declines in habitats across Australia's marine ecosystems—including coral reefs in the Great Barrier Reef, saltmarshes on the east coast, mangroves in northern Australia, and kelp forests in Tasmania⁶.

Heritage—The 2016 national State of the Environment report found that '*Australia's extraordinary and diverse natural and cultural heritage generally remains in good condition, despite some deterioration and emerging challenges since 2011*'. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)⁷ has indicated it has specific concerns for 3 of Australia's 20 World Heritage places. The loss of heritage values since the last EPBC Act Review is due to a range of factors, most recently the impact of the 2019/2020 bushfire events on World Heritage properties and National Heritage places.

The Australian environment faces significant future pressures, including land-use change, habitat fragmentation and degradation, and invasive species. Climate change continues to build as a pressure that will exacerbate these impacts and contribute to ongoing decline.

The current state of the environment means that it is unlikely to be sufficiently resilient to increasing future threats. The lack of long-term monitoring data limits the ability to understand the pace and extent of environmental decline, which actions to prioritise and whether previous interventions have been successful.

1.2 The EPBC Act does not enable the Commonwealth to play its part in managing Australia's environment

1.2.1 Managing Australia's environment is a shared responsibility

The construct of Australia's federation means that the management of Australia's environment is a shared responsibility, and jurisdictions need to work effectively together and in partnership with the community.

The Commonwealth, on behalf of the nation, has signed up to international agreements on the environment and has a responsibility to ensure they are implemented⁸. The Commonwealth's

responsibilities in managing the environment have been confirmed by High Court decisions over time and agreed in foundational intergovernmental agreements on the environment⁹. These agreements reflect the respective constitutional responsibilities of the Commonwealth and states and territories. The Commonwealth's interests are known as 'matters of national environmental significance' (MNES).

The EPBC Act implements the Commonwealth's responsibility for key MNES¹⁰. Changes over time, including to MNES, have contributed to a drift in the Commonwealth's role and introduced duplication with the role of the states and territories. This is particularly the case for MNES that focus on activities that give rise to threats or risks to the environment, rather than protection of the environmental matter itself.

Ultimately, Australia's system of environment and heritage protection management must recognise the respective roles of the Commonwealth and states and territories, and jurisdictions need to work together effectively. This was acknowledged in the foundational intergovernmental agreements, which committed to an intent of harmonised laws and regulatory systems, based on clear interests and where possible accommodating their respective responsibilities. This direction was embedded in the original design of the EPBC Act, but the implementation of the Act has failed to fulfil this ambition.

The EPBC Act is also the mechanism for the Commonwealth to regulate the environment on Commonwealth land and waters, and the environmental activities undertaken by the Commonwealth.

1.3 The EPBC Act does not enable the Commonwealth to effectively protect and conserve nationally important matters

1.3.1 The EPBC Act lacks clear outcomes for MNES

The EPBC Act is not clear on what environmental outcomes it seeks to achieve for MNES. The objects of the Act are written broadly which is appropriate for national legislation. However, the Act does not provide specific framing for how these objectives are to be interpreted and applied.

MNES underpin the implementation of environmental regulation in the EPBC Act, but this is not done in a consistent way across the Act. The Act lacks effective mechanisms to describe or measure the environmental outcomes it is seeking to achieve and to ensure decisions are made in a way that contributes to these outcomes. Key plans (such as recovery plans) and other management documents do not clearly link to national outcomes.

Ecologically sustainable development (ESD) is a key principle of the EPBC Act¹¹ is not being applied or achieved. ESD should be the overall outcome the Act seeks to achieve. ESD means that development to meet the needs of Australians today should be done in way that ensures the environment, natural resources and heritage are maintained for the benefit of future generations.

Although decisions under the EPBC Act are required to *consider* key principles like ESD and the precautionary principle (see Box 2), these are not given sufficient weight or prominence, particularly in development approvals. These principles underpin good environmental decision-making frameworks around the world and were agreed to by the Commonwealth and all states and territories in the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment in 1992¹².

Box 2 The precautionary principle

The precautionary principle reminds us that if the impacts of a decision are not fully understood, then we should err on the side of caution, to avoid serious and irreversible consequences. Lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.

1.3.2 The way the EPBC Act operates facilitates ongoing decline

Almost all of the ecological focus in environmental impact assessments is on specific, listed individual species and communities. Species and ecological communities are listed using a complex scientific

assessment based on internationally determined scientific criteria. After listing, a conservation advice is prepared for each listed species or community. The Environment Minister may also decide that a more comprehensive recovery plan is required.

Currently, there are 719 recovery plans in place for species and 27 in place for ecological communities (of 1,890 listed species and 84 listed communities)¹³. There is no requirement to implement a recovery plan, or report on progress or the outcomes achieved. Plans that are made are generally not backed by the necessary action to implement them. The way the EPBC Act currently operates implies that the goal is to list a species and prepare a plan, rather than achieve environmental outcomes. Under these arrangements it is not surprising that the list of threatened species and communities has increased over time and there have been very few species that have recovered to the point that they can be removed from the list.

Cumulative impacts on and threats to the environment are often not well managed under the current settings. Assessment and approval decisions are largely made on a project-by-project basis, with the assessment of impacts largely done in isolation of other current or anticipated projects. This approach underestimates the broadscale cumulative impacts that development can have on a species, ecosystem or region. Each individual development may have minimal impact on the national environment, but their combined impact can result in significant long-term damage.

Submissions to the Review have further pointed to the missed opportunity to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, including holistic land management practices, to protect the environment¹⁴. In its submission to the Review, the Central Land Council¹⁵ state:

‘The knowledge and understanding held by Indigenous peoples, accrued over tens of thousands of years, provides rich expertise that should be more appropriately valued and engaged in protecting and managing Australia’s environment’.

Although the objects of the EPBC Act include an intent to recognise the role of Indigenous people and promote the use of traditional knowledge, in practice this rarely occurs (see [Chapter 2](#)).

Provisions for more strategic approaches that can consider cumulative impacts, such as bioregional plans and strategic assessments, have a history of limited use. Administration of the EPBC Act has contracted to focus on core statutory requirements, such as approving projects.

This focus on project-based assessment and approvals sets the EPBC Act up to deliver managed decline, not sustainable maintenance or recovery. The impacts of development are not counter balanced with legislated recovery processes. This is exacerbated by an ineffective offsets policy. The decision-making hierarchy of ‘avoid, minimise, and only then offset’ is not being applied, with offsets too often used as a default measure not as a last resort (see [Chapter 8](#)).

The EPBC Act itself does little if anything to support environmental restoration. Stabilisation of decline let alone a net improvement in the state of the environment cannot be achieved under the current system. Given the state of decline of Australia’s environment, restoration is required to enable future development to be sustainable.

1.3.3 Strategic, national-level opportunities are either poorly implemented or missed

When the EPBC Act was introduced it was intended to be part of a comprehensive package of initiatives, including the Natural Heritage Trust Reserve, which has a main objective ‘to conserve, repair and replenish Australia’s natural capital infrastructure’¹⁶. The Act is limited in its ability to strategically conserve biodiversity, manage key threats or quickly respond to emerging threats such as bushfires, biosecurity incursions or other natural disasters.

Each MNES is separately described and managed through individual species or community recovery plans, and opportunities for more coordinated action are missed. MNES influence funding programs that encourage restoration and threat abatement (such the National Landcare Program or the Threatened Species Recovery Fund). However, funding is often scattergun, unreliable and short-term and funding cycles do not support an enduring, focused or prioritised approach.

Provision in the EPBC Act for managing threats—such as the listing of key threatening processes (KTPs) and the development and implementation of threat abatement plans—were designed to support a coordinated and strategic approach to dealing with the major threats that cause the majority of extinctions and declines in Australia. However, these mechanisms are not achieving their intent and many threats in Australia are worsening¹⁷.

The current list of 21 KTPs is not comprehensive, as the process largely relies on the receipt of nominations from the public. The listing process is slow and subject to ministerial discretion. No new KTPs have been listed since 2014, and several major threats—such as inappropriate fire regimes—are not listed. There is a tendency to focus on immediate or existing threats where strong evidence is available, rather than emerging threats. This is despite evidence that early intervention on emerging threats is more cost effective and achieves better outcomes than responding to entrenched threats¹⁸. Persistent and emerging threats can have devastating impact on threatened species and can also lead to more common species becoming rarer.

Even once a KTP is listed, action to address the threat is not required. The decision to make and implement a threat abatement plan is discretionary. The Threatened Species Scientific Committee¹⁹ noted in their submission to the Review:

‘A Key Threatening Process listing has no statutory obligations. Thus, a listing is ineffectual unless a Threat Abatement Plan is made or adopted. This constraint means that Key Threatening Processes are not prioritised in a resource-constrained environment.’

The threat abatement planning process is only up-to-date for 6 of the listed KTPs. The remainder are either not required, an alternative, non-statutory approach is used, or the plans have exceeded or are about to exceed the statutory 5-year review deadline²⁰.

The EPBC Act does not refer to climate change or explicitly require consideration of future pressures. There is no avenue for an emergency listing of newly threatened species in response to natural disasters such as the 2019/20 bushfires.

The administration of the EPBC Act has contracted to focus on core requirements. Pursuing strategic opportunities to improve outcomes in the national interest have become discretionary, particularly when resources are constrained. The Commonwealth has retreated to transactions, rather than ‘leading’ strategically in the national interest.

1.4 Proposed key reform directions

1.4.1 The EPBC Act should focus on Commonwealth responsibilities

The Review has received a wide range of views on the MNES that should be included in the EPBC Act (see Box 3). Many, including scientific stakeholders and environmental non-government organisations (ENGOS) express a view that triggers should be more expansive, extending the reach of the Commonwealth to deliver greater environmental protections. Others, particularly industry groups and advocates of streamlined and efficient regulation, argue that current triggers result in duplication with other regulators and should be removed (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Box 3 Stakeholder suggestions for changes to matters of national environmental significance²¹

Ecosystems, biodiversity and habitat—National Reserve System (national parks, marine protected areas, covenanted private lands and Indigenous Protected Areas); vulnerable ecological communities: ecosystems of national importance; areas of outstanding biodiversity value (e.g. climate refuges, biodiversity hotspots, critical habitats); wetlands of national significance and native vegetation.

Threats—Key threatening processes (e.g. significant land clearing, invasive species or disaster-related impacts).

Cultural—Mechanisms for including Indigenous values, priorities and places, or entities of particular significance and concern (e.g. species, populations, ecological communities, ecosystems, stories, songlines); tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Climate Change—Significant greenhouse gas emissions; protection of the environment from climate change impacts (see section 1.4.1).

Water—Significant water resources (including surface and groundwater, rivers, wetlands, aquifers and their associated values); an expanded water trigger beyond coal seam gas and large coal mining; nationally significant river systems; ground water dependent ecosystems. Other stakeholders suggest removing or reducing the scope of the water trigger to remove duplication with state and territory regulations.

Nuclear—Expand limitations contained in s140A of the EPBC Act on approval of certain nuclear installations to include all uranium mining and milling actions. Other stakeholders suggest reducing the scope of the nuclear trigger to remove duplication with state, territory and other Commonwealth regulations.

Contributions to the Review have suggested that the EPBC Act should be expanded to include a climate trigger, which would seek to solve 2 apparent problems. The first view presented is that Australia's current emissions reduction policy settings are insufficient to meet our international commitments and more needs to be done. Advocates for a climate trigger suggest it would contribute to reducing Australia's emissions profile by reducing land clearing and regulating projects with large emission profiles. Successive Australian Governments have elected to adopt specific policy mechanisms to implement their commitments to reduce emissions. The Review agrees that these mechanisms, not the Act, are the appropriate vehicle for addressing greenhouse gas emissions. The Review considers there is merit in mandating proposals required to be assessed and approved under the Act (due to their impacts on nationally protected matters) to transparently disclose the full emissions profile of the development.

The second view is that the EPBC Act does not effectively support adaptive management that uses best available climate modelling and scenario forecasting to ensure the actions we take to protect matters are effective in a climate-changed world.

The EPBC Act should, however, require that development proposals explicitly consider the effectiveness of their actions to avoid or mitigate impacts on nationally protected matters under specified climate change scenarios. Many of the suggestions about the Commonwealth taking on a broader role reflect a lack of trust that states and territories will manage these elements well. The Review does not agree with suggestions that the environmental matters the Act deals with should be broadened. The remit of the Act should not be expanded to cover environmental matters that are state and territory responsibilities. To do so would result in muddled responsibilities, further duplication and inefficiency. Unclear responsibilities mean that the community is less able to hold governments to account.

The EPBC Act should focus on the places, flora and fauna that the Commonwealth is responsible for protecting and conserving in the national interest. This includes World and National Heritage, internationally important wetlands, migratory species and threatened species and ecological communities, as well as the environment of Commonwealth areas and actions by the Commonwealth.

The Review considers that the Commonwealth must maintain the ability to intervene where a project may result in the '*irreversible depletion or contamination*' of cross-border water resources. Similarly,

for community confidence, the Commonwealth should retain the capacity to ensure radioactive activities are managed effectively (see [Chapter 4](#)).

1.4.2 The EPBC Act should apply and deliver ecologically sustainable development

The objects of the EPBC Act are sufficiently broad to enable the Commonwealth to fulfil its role. The range of views on the objects of the Act received by the Review span from full support to a complete revamp. The broadness of the objects has been applauded for flexibility, criticised for carrying little clout and being ‘uninspiring and perfunctory’²².

The Review considers that amending the objects of the EPBC Act will not ‘provide more clout’ or deliver better outcomes unless other issues that diminish the effectiveness of the Act to protect the environment are addressed.

A fundamental shortcoming in the EPBC Act is that it does not clearly outline the outcomes it aims to achieve. Ecologically sustainable development (ESD) should remain the overall outcome that the Act seeks to achieve. To do this, the concept needs to be hardwired into the Act and the basis of the operation of the Act. This means that:

- the Act must require the Environment Minister to apply and deliver ESD, rather than just consider it
- decisions must be based on a comprehensive assessment of ESD, including transparent environmental, social, economic and cultural information (see [Chapter 6](#)).

Ideally, achieving ESD is a systems-based outcome rather than the outcome of every decision made. To support further development, the system needs flexibility to balance out impacts across landscapes space and timescales. This can be best achieved by adopting a regional planning approach.

To deliver ESD, the EPBC Act should support a focus on protecting (avoiding impact), conserving (minimising impact) and restoring the environment. Given the state of decline of Australia’s environment, restoration is required to enable future development to be sustainable.

Key mechanisms are required to support restoration including regional plans to identify priorities (see 1.4.3) and investment in restoration through markets and direct investments (see [Chapter 7](#)).

1.4.3 Legally enforceable National Environmental Standards should be the foundation for effective regulation

National Environmental Standards

Legally enforceable National Environmental Standards (in the form of a regulatory instrument) are required to underpin the effective operation of the EPBC Act. The law must require that these Standards are applied, unless the decision-maker can demonstrate that the public interest and the national interest is best served otherwise.

National Environmental Standards serve 2 fundamental purposes: to improve the effectiveness and the efficiency of Australia’s national environmental law. Strong, clear and nationally consistent Standards will improve outcomes for Australia’s biodiversity and heritage, and ensure development is ecologically sustainable over the long-term. Improved certainty for all stakeholders will lead to a more efficient, accessible and transparent regulatory system, and enable faster and lower cost development assessments and approvals (see [Chapter 4](#)).

Biodiversity and environmental protection standards are increasingly used internationally, including to set sustainability targets for internationally traded commodities such as coffee, banana, cocoa and cotton²³. There is strong support for National Environmental Standards amongst submitters—including the 10 Deserts Project²⁴, Australian Conservation Foundation²⁵, the Business Council of Australia²⁶, the Minerals Council of Australia²⁷, the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists²⁸ and the Western Australian Government²⁹.

The suite of National Environmental Standards should set the requirements for decision-making to deliver outcomes for the environment and clearly define the fundamental processes that ensure sound and effective decision-making. As a starting point, the suite of National Environmental Standards should include requirements relating to:

- ecologically sustainable development
- matters of national environmental significance
- transparent processes and robust decisions, including:
 - judicial review
 - community consultation
 - adequate assessment of impacts—including climate change impacts—on MNES
 - emissions-profile disclosure
- Indigenous engagement and involvement in environmental decision-making
- monitoring, compliance and enforcement
- data and information
- environmental monitoring and evaluation of outcomes
- restoration and recovery
- wildlife permits and trade.

The development of National Environmental Standards

The process for making National Environmental Standards should be set out in the EPBC Act. The Act should include requirements for regular monitoring and reporting, and periodic review and amendment as required, so that Standards remain contemporary and effectively deliver environmental outcomes.

The Environment Minister should set the National Environmental Standards. It cannot be a process of negotiation with the states and territories that ends in agreement on a 'lowest common denominator'.

Standards should be developed in consultation with science, Indigenous, environmental and business stakeholders, and the community. Although consultation with states and territories is essential, the process cannot be one of negotiated agreement between governments, with rules set at the lowest bar. It is important that this process not be unnecessarily drawn out or arduous. Stakeholders from these key groups should come together at an early stage to work on developing the suite of Standards, building on the constructive contributions that have already been provided to the Review.

Interim Standards are recommended as a first step, to facilitate rapid reform and streamlining. These Interim Standards will need to set out environmental outcomes in terms of clear limits that define acceptable impacts on nationally important environmental matters. They can and should evolve as soon as practicable into more specific, definitive and data-based Standards as information improves. As granularity in Standards is improved, more precise Standards will provide increased certainty for all stakeholders. Improvements in Standards will drive faster and lower-cost development assessments and approvals.

Ultimately, Standards should be granular and measurable—with targets that specify the intended outcomes—but without being overly prescriptive. This will provide flexibility without compromising the environment. A key problem with the administration of the current EPBC Act is that rules are buried in thousands of pages of hundreds of statutory documents that collectively fail to provide clear and specific guidance for decision-making.

A granular Standard for threatened species should be expressed in quantitative measures to support recovery over a specific time frame. Measures such as population size and trends, and the area and quality of habitat available across a landscape type (i.e. population numbers, hectares, threat management and years) should be developed. In time, and with better information and the capability to model ecosystem outcomes, these Standards could shift to measures of probable outcomes for species (such as the likelihood of survival or recovery).

The specification of standards for pollutants under the [National Environment Protection \(Ambient Air Quality\) Measure](#), is an example of a granular standard that has been adopted across Australia.

In the short-term, the granularity of National Environmental Standards is limited by the information available to define them with certainty and effectively apply them to decision-making. A quantum shift will be required in the quality of accessible data and information to increase the granularity of Standards (see [Chapter 6](#)).

The Commonwealth has made past attempts to define some standards for the EPBC Act³⁰. These attempts focused on clarifying important processes that were already set out in the Act and provide a useful foundation to build on in developing the full suite of National Environmental Standards. A key shortcoming of these is the absence of any clear articulation of the intended outcomes for, and acceptable impacts on, MNES. As a priority, an Interim Standard for MNES is needed to address ongoing environmental decline and to provide clear, consistent rules for decision-making.

A prototype Standard for MNES is provided in [Appendix 1](#). An extract from this prototype is set out in Table 1. The prototype is a starting point to stimulate discussion. The Review acknowledges that further work is needed to test and refine the Standard. It is based on key principles such as prevention of environmental harm and non-regression, and has been developed using existing policy documents and legal requirements. The prototype shows that an Interim National Environmental Standard for MNES could be developed quickly and would immediately provide greater clarity and consistency for decision-making.

Table 1 Example of prototype Standard for MNES

Matter	Prototype standard
World and National Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No development incursion into a World or National Heritage area, unless it promotes the management and values of the property or place. Actions must not cause or contribute to a detrimental change to the World or National Heritage values of a property or place. Management arrangements must ensure World and National Heritage values are protected and conserved.
Threatened species and communities	<p>For vulnerable species:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No net loss for vulnerable species habitat. Actions must manage onsite impacts and threats, where these are not managed through alternative frameworks. <p>For endangered species and communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No net loss for endangered species habitat and ecological community distribution. No detrimental change to the listed critical habitat of a species or ecological community. Actions must manage onsite impacts and threats, where these are not managed through alternative frameworks. <p>For critically endangered species and communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actions must deliver a net gain for critically endangered species habitat and ecological community distribution. No detrimental change to listed critical habitat of a species or ecological community. Actions must manage onsite impacts and threats, where these are not managed through alternative frameworks. <p>Additional requirements in Commonwealth areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actions must not kill, injure or take a listed threatened species or ecological community, except where an EPBC Act permit is issued.

Note: See [Appendix 1](#) for further details.

1.4.4 Greater focus on adaptive planning required to deliver environmental outcomes

Adaptive regional planning approaches that reflect National Environmental Standards

To support decision-making, and to encourage greater cooperation between jurisdictions, the Commonwealth should adopt adaptive regional planning approaches that reflect National Environmental Standards.

Regional plans would take into account cumulative impacts, key threats and build environmental resilience in a changing climate by addressing cumulative risks at the landscape scale. Managing these threats to MNES at the regional scale will have flow-on benefits for more common species and biodiversity more broadly.

Regional plans should be developed that support the management of threats at the right scale, and to set clear rules to manage competing land uses. These plans should prioritise investment in protection, conservation and restoration to where it is most needed, and where the environment will most benefit.

Ideally, these plans would be developed in conjunction with states and territories and community organisations. However, where this is not possible, the Commonwealth should develop its own plans to manage threats and cumulative impacts on MNES. The regional planning efforts should be focused on those regions of highest pressure on MNES.

Three regional planning tools are proposed:

- 1) Regional recovery plans—developed by the Commonwealth for MNES
- 2) Bioregional plans—developed collaboratively between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments.
- 3) Strategic assessments—developed at the request of a proponent, in partnership with the Commonwealth and the relevant state or territory government.

Commonwealth-led regional recovery plans

A shift is required from recovery planning for an individual listed species or community, to the landscape scale with a focus on biodiversity conservation outcomes for listed threatened species and ecological communities. This drives efficiency, because many listed species in a region rely on the same habitat and suffer from the same threats. New listings in a region can be more easily incorporated, reducing the need for individual plans. Such landscape scale planning would also have benefits for more common species and contribute better to arresting the overall decline of the environment. Initial focus should be on Australia's unique biodiversity hotspots.

Regional recovery plans should provide for coordinated management of threats to listed species and communities in a region, and to consider the cumulative impacts of these threats. They should identify important populations or areas of critical habitat.

Regional recovery plans should incorporate local ecological knowledge including Indigenous knowledge and could draw from regional-scale plans that are already in place, including Healthy Country Plans or plans prepared by natural resource management groups.

Importantly, regional recovery plans should provide the basis for prioritising Commonwealth action and investment, including the direction of offset obligations arising from development. These plans should identify areas where protection, conservation and restoration are needed, and areas for investment that will deliver the greatest environmental benefit.

Bioregional plans developed in collaboration with states and territories

Ideally, the Commonwealth would work with the states and territories to develop and agree bioregional plans that accommodate their respective interests in the environment. These plans would be developed consistent with the National Environmental Standards (and, where in place, regional recovery plans) and address environmental, economic, cultural and social values.

Bioregional plans should be developed in collaboration with a state or territory, or a jurisdiction could propose its own plan to be considered and accepted by the Commonwealth as a bioregional plan.

Bioregional plans would set the clear rules to manage competing land uses to support regulatory streamlining. They would identify areas where development may be of lower or higher risk to the environment, including those areas where development assessment and approval is not required. The Environment Minister (or delegated decision-maker) should make decisions on development approvals in a way that is consistent with the provisions of the bioregional plan.

Strategic assessments

Part 10 of the EPBC Act already provides for landscape-scale assessments in the form of strategic assessments. The legal arrangements for strategic assessments are complex (see [Chapter 3](#)), but the strategic assessments that have been conducted have led to more streamlined regulatory arrangements. However, some have been criticised for not achieving their intended environmental outcomes³¹.

The EPBC Act should continue to enable jurisdictions and/or proponents to enter into a strategic assessment with the Commonwealth for developments not covered by a bioregional plan. As is the case now, a strategic assessment would provide a single approval for a broad range of actions covering multiple projects to provide up-front certainty of permissible development areas and environmental outcomes.

A strategic assessment should be required to be developed in a manner that is consistent with the National Environmental Standards, and regional recovery plans where they are in place.

Strategic national plans

Not all issues or threats have a spatial lens. There are nationally pervasive issues that would benefit from strategic coordination.

Strategic plans for big-ticket items can provide a national framework to guide a national response, direct research (for example feral animal control methods), support prioritisation of investment (public and private) and enable shared goals and implementation across jurisdictions. National level plans can achieve efficiencies and provide a consistent approach that can be reflected in regional plans. They can also inform activities in those areas where a regional plan is not in place.

Specific opportunities that lend themselves to national strategic planning include:

- the delivery of a comprehensive, adequate and representative National Reserve System
- high-level and cross-border threats, such as biosecurity or feral animals
- the consideration of pressures and risks through forecasting and scenarios—for example how climate change scenarios should be used to support planning and decisions.

Table 2 provides a summary of the proposed adaptive planning tools.

Table 2 Proposed adaptive planning tools

Adaptive planning tool	Leadership, collaboration and approval	Scope	Intent	Spatial coverage
Regional recovery plans	Led by Commonwealth, approved by Commonwealth	Listed threatened species and ecological communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinated threat management, consideration of cumulative impacts Support prioritisation of Commonwealth action 	Priority regions in the first instance
Bioregional plans	Collaborative process led by jurisdictions or jointly between jurisdictions and the Commonwealth. Approved or accredited by the Commonwealth	Biodiversity, economic, cultural and social values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent with the National Environmental Standards and regional recovery plans Set clear rules to manage competing land uses 	Priority regions in the first instance, or where proposed by a jurisdiction for accreditation
Strategic assessments	Led by proponents and approved by the Commonwealth	Biodiversity, economic, cultural and social values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent with the National Environmental Standards and regional recovery plans Provide a single approval for a broad range of actions 	Where instigated by proponent
Strategic national plans	Led by Commonwealth, approved by Commonwealth	Nationally pervasive issues such as high-level and cross-border threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a national framework to guide a national response, direct research and support prioritisation Enable shared goals and implementation across jurisdictions 	Not spatially focused

1.4.5 Clear outcomes, National Environmental Standards and regional plans need to be underpinned by fundamental changes to the way the EPBC Act operates

Core reforms proposed by the Review, including National Environmental Standards and improved planning frameworks, aim to support greater cooperation and harmonisation between the Commonwealth, states and territories (see [Chapter 4](#)).

The proposed reforms will enable the Commonwealth to protect the environment in the national interest, rather than focus its efforts on transactional elements that can be duplicative, costly to business and result in little tangible benefit to the environment.

To achieve this, a quantum change in the sophistication of the information, data and regulatory systems (see [Chapter 6](#)) is required. Active mechanisms to restore areas of degraded or lost habitat are also needed to ensure Australia's environment is conserved for the future (see [Chapter 7](#)).

This must be accompanied by transparency, fundamental improvements in monitoring and evaluation ([Chapter 8](#)) and strong monitoring, compliance, enforcement, and assurance ([Chapter 9](#)).

The key reform directions proposed by the Review seek to build community trust that the national environmental law is effectively protecting our extraordinary environment and heritage in the national interest for future generations.

2 Indigenous culture and heritage

Key points

The Review considers that the EPBC Act is not fulfilling its objectives as they relate to the role of Indigenous Australians in protecting and conserving biodiversity, working in partnership with and promoting the respectful use of their knowledge.

The key reasons why the EPBC Act is not fulfilling its objectives are:

- There is a culture of tokenism and symbolism. Indigenous knowledge or views are not fully valued in decision-making. The EPBC Act prioritises the views of western science, and Indigenous knowledge and views are diluted in the formal provision of advice to decision-makers.
- Indigenous Australians are seeking stronger national protection of their cultural heritage. The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984* (ATSHP Act) provides last-minute intervention and does not work effectively with the development assessment and approval processes of the EPBC Act. The national level arrangements are unsatisfactory.
- The EPBC Act does not meet the aspirations of Traditional Owners for managing their land. The settings for the Director of National Parks and the joint boards means that ultimately, decisions are made by the Director.

The key reform directions proposed by the Review are:

- The National Environmental Standards should include specific requirements relating to best practice Indigenous engagement, to enable Indigenous views and knowledge to be incorporated into regulatory processes.
- The national level settings for Indigenous cultural heritage protection need comprehensive review. This should explicitly consider the role of the EPBC Act in providing protections. It should also consider how comprehensive national level protections are given effect, including how they interact with the development assessment and approval process of the Act.
- Indigenous knowledge and western science should be considered on an equal footing in the provision of formal advice to the Environment Minister. The proposed Science and Information Committee should be responsible for ensuring advice incorporates the culturally appropriate use of Indigenous knowledge.
- Where aligned with their aspirations, transition to Traditional Owners having more responsibility for decision-making in jointly managed parks. For this to be successful in the long term there is a need to build capacity and capability, so that joint-boards can make decisions that effectively manage risks and discharge responsibilities.
- Improved outcomes for Indigenous Australians will be achieved by enabling co-design and policy implementation.
- The role of the Indigenous Advisory Committee should be substantially recast as the Indigenous Knowledge and Engagement Committee, whose role is to provide leadership in the co-design of reforms and advise the Environment Minister on the development and application of the National Environmental Standard for Indigenous engagement.

Over the last decade, there has been increased recognition of the value of incorporating Indigenous knowledge, innovations and practices into environmental management to deliver positive outcomes for the Australian environment. Indigenous Australians play a significant role in direct land and sea protection and management throughout Australia. These activities are supported by the Australian Government, but most support mechanisms sit outside the operation of the EPBC Act such as:

- Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs), Indigenous ranger programs, Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and savanna burning carbon farming projects
- national investment in environmental research—for example through the National Environmental Science Program (NESP)—which also supports and facilitates the participation of Indigenous Australians in research and environmental management activities.

Within the operation of the EPBC Act, the participation of Indigenous Australians is formally focused on:

- an Indigenous Advisory Committee, whose remit is a broad advisory function and is not linked to specific decisions that are made
- the arrangements for joint management of Commonwealth reserves on land owned by Indigenous Australians
- the protection of some Indigenous heritage, including requirements for the Australian Heritage Council to consult with Indigenous people who have 'rights or interests' in the places that it is considering.

While world leading when first legislated, the EPBC Act is now dated and does not support leading practice for incorporating the rights of Indigenous people in decision-making processes. It lags behind leading practice within Australia, and furthermore, lags behind key international commitments Australia has signed (Box 4).

Box 4 International agreements relating to Indigenous peoples' rights

The **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)** 'affirms the minimum standards for the survival, dignity, security and well-being of Indigenous peoples worldwide and enshrines Indigenous peoples' right to be different'³². It emphasises the right of Indigenous peoples to participate in the decision-making process for matters that affect them, the need for mechanisms for redress, and obliges signatory states to obtain free, prior and informed consent before taking actions that may impact Indigenous peoples, such as making laws or approving projects on Indigenous lands.

The **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)**³³ provides for the recognition of Indigenous peoples' inherent ecological knowledge and, with the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous knowledge holders, promotion of the wider application of such knowledge. It requires signatories, subject to their national legislation, to respect, preserve and maintain Indigenous peoples' ecological knowledge and practices with respect to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

The **Aichi Biodiversity Targets** agreed under the CBD, include a specific target (Target 18) that 'by 2020, the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and their customary use of biological resources, are respected, subject to national legislation and relevant international obligations, and fully integrated and reflected in the implementation of the Convention with the full and effective participation of Indigenous and local communities, at all relevant levels.'³⁴

The **Nagoya Protocol**³⁵ on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization (the Nagoya Protocol) is a global agreement that implements the access and benefit-sharing obligations of the CBD. The Nagoya Protocol establishes a framework that ensures the fair and equitable sharing of benefits that arise from the use of genetic resources. Indigenous communities may receive benefits through associated frameworks that ensure respect for the value of traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources.

2.1 Indigenous knowledge and views are not fully valued in decision-making

2.1.1 There is a culture of tokenism and symbolism

The EPBC Act heavily prioritises the views of western science, and Indigenous knowledge and views are diluted in the formal provision of advice to decision-makers. This reflects an overall culture of tokenism and symbolism, rather than one of genuine inclusion of Indigenous Australians.

While individuals may have good intentions, the settings of the EPBC Act and the resources afforded to implementation are insufficient to support effective inclusion of Indigenous Australians. The cultural issues are compounded because the Act does not have the mechanisms to require explicit consideration of Indigenous community values and Indigenous knowledge in environmental and heritage management decisions. Although protocols and guidelines for involving Indigenous Australians have been developed³⁶, resourcing to implement them is insufficient, and they are not a requirement.

However, there are examples of species recovery being led by Indigenous communities for culturally important species using recovery planning tools within the EPBC Act (Box 5). In its submission to the Review, the Indigenous Advisory Committee noted that:

*'The inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge in other management instruments designed to inform the conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity (species and ecological community recovery plans, conservation advisories, research and monitoring plans) are not as numerous (as management plans) although they do exist.'*³⁷

These examples are therefore the exception rather than the rule.

Box 5 Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into recovery plans

Draft Recovery Plan for the Greater Bilby³⁸

Over 70% of naturally occurring bilby populations occur on Aboriginal lands, and the species continues to be culturally significant for many Indigenous people even in areas where bilbies are locally extinct. The collaborative approach that was taken between Indigenous community groups and western scientists to develop the draft recovery plan for the Greater Bilby ensured that ongoing recovery efforts for the species incorporated traditional and contemporary knowledge.

As a result, the draft plan includes actions that will ensure:

- the cultural knowledge of the Greater Bilby is kept alive and strong
- community awareness of the Greater Bilby increases, both locally and more broadly
- Indigenous Ranger support and activities are strengthened and increased
- management efforts are increased
- bilby distribution and abundance, threats, and management effectiveness are monitored and mapped.

Saving Alwal, the Golden-shouldered Parrot, Cape York

The Golden-shouldered Parrot Recovery Plan (2003 – 2007)³⁹ demonstrates the value of Indigenous knowledge in recovering species, with the Olkola Aboriginal Corporation partnering with landholders, government and environment organisations to deliver the recovery actions. The Golden-shouldered Parrot Recovery Plan recognises the parrot, or Alwal, as a culturally significant species to Olkola people and outlines Traditional Owners as critical partners for landscape-scale recovery actions through fire management. A key recovery action is using traditional fire regimes on properties to reduce woody shrubs that threaten the seed grasses the parrots feed on.

The Department has issued guidance *Engage Early – Guidance for proponents on best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)*⁴⁰. This sets out expectations for applicants for EPBC Act approval, it is not an enforceable standard or requirement. Furthermore, it is not transparent how the Environment Minister addresses Indigenous matters in decision-making for Act assessments.

The operation of the EPBC Act Indigenous Advisory Committee (IAC) exemplifies the culture of tokenism. The Act does not require the IAC to provide decision-makers with advice. The IAC is reliant on the Environment Minister inviting its views. This is in contrast to other statutory committees, which have clearly defined and formal roles at key points in statutory processes.

For example, the IAC does not provide independent advice on the adequacy of the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge in key decision-making processes (such as listings, recovery plans and conservation advices, or environmental impact assessments).

While the IAC and other statutory committees have established dialogues and ad hoc interactions, this has been informal and lacks structured intent. Indigenous input to the deliberations of other committees has been tokenistic and representative. Representatives of Indigenous Australians on certain, but not all committees is further accepted as satisfying the mandate to involve Indigenous Australians. But this involvement pays lip service to the ethic of involvement and respectful integration of Indigenous knowledge and culture into environment protection and biodiversity conservation. This lack of genuine involvement in committees and decision-making processes has been raised in submissions to the Review including those from the IAC⁴¹ and Indigenous Land Councils⁴².

The IAC's operating practice is to avoid cutting-across the roles of other statutory committees. The effective operation of the IAC is further limited by the lack of adequate funding.

2.1.2 Indigenous Australians seek, and are entitled to expect, stronger national-level protection of their cultural heritage

Places of natural and cultural value that are important to the world or Australia can be recognised and protected by listing them as National Heritage, Commonwealth Heritage or World Heritage under the EPBC Act.

These include places that hold particular cultural importance for Indigenous people. For example, Kakadu National Park, Tasmanian Wilderness, Uluru-Kata Tjuta and Willandra Lakes Region, Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, Brewarrina Aboriginal Fish Traps (Baiaime's Ngunnhu), and the Myall Creek Massacre and Memorial Site are all places protected under the EPBC Act for their natural and/or Indigenous cultural values.

At the national level Indigenous cultural heritage is protected under numerous other Commonwealth laws, including the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984* (ATSIHP Act). The ATSIHP Act can be used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ask the Environment Minister to protect an area or object where it is under threat of injury or desecration and where state or territory law does not provide for effective protection.

At the Commonwealth level, cultural heritage is also protected under the *Copyright Act 1968* (for some intangible heritage) and the *Moveable Cultural Heritage Act 1986* (for tangible, moveable heritage).

The states and territories also play a role in Indigenous heritage protection and submissions including from the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council⁴³, have highlighted the potential for duplication. Others, such as the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre⁴⁴, have noted the importance of the Commonwealth playing a role, where state and territory-based arrangements, in their view, provide insufficient protections.

The ATSIHP Act does not align with the development assessment and approval processes of the EPBC Act. Cultural heritage matters are not required to be broadly or specifically considered by the Commonwealth in conjunction with assessment and approval processes under Part 9 of the Act. Interventions through the ATSIHP Act occur after the development assessment and approval process has been completed.

Contributions to the Review have highlighted the importance of considering cultural heritage issues early in a development assessment process, rather than Traditional Owners relying on a last minute ATSIHP Act intervention⁴⁵. The misalignment of the operation of the EPBC Act and the ATSIHP Act promotes uncertainty for Traditional Owners, the community and for proponents.

In their submissions, stakeholders have raised their concerns that the Commonwealth does not provide sufficient protection of Indigenous heritage and that fundamental reform is both required and long overdue⁴⁶. For example, the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council submission highlighted:

‘... significant improvements are needed to protect and promote Aboriginal cultural heritage. Successive ‘State of the Environment’ reports have highlighted the widespread destruction of Aboriginal cultural heritage and have observed that “approved destruction” and “economic imperatives” are key risks. Fundamentally, reforms are needed to ensure Aboriginal people are empowered to protect and promote Aboriginal heritage, make decisions, and are resourced to lead this work.’⁴⁷

These submissions identify opportunities for the EPBC Act to play a more expansive role in Indigenous heritage protection at the national level.

2.1.3 The EPBC Act does not meet the aspirations of Traditional Owners for managing their land

Joint management arrangements for Commonwealth reserves (Chapter 5, Part 15, Division 4 subdivision F of the EPBC Act) are in place for three parks – Kakadu, Uluru-Kata Tjuta and Booderee. In these areas, Traditional Owners lease their land to the Director of National Parks (DNP). The DNP is a statutory position, established under Part 19 Division 5 of the EPBC Act. For each jointly managed park, a Board of management has been established.

The governance framework for jointly managed parks is shaped by the provisions of:

- the EPBC Act
- the lease agreements between Traditional Owners and the DNP
- relevant Commonwealth Land Rights legislation – the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* and *Aboriginal Land Grant (Jervis Bay Territory) Act 1986*.

The construct of the position of the DNP as a corporation sole under the EPBC Act means that ultimately, that position is responsible for decisions made in relation to the management of national parks and for the effective management of risks such as those relating to occupational health and safety. As a corporation sole, the DNP relies on resources provided to it by the Department to execute its functions. Employees in national parks are employed by the Department, consistent with Australian Public Service (APS) requirements, and resourcing levels are subject to usual government budgetary processes.

Previous reports⁴⁸ have highlighted shortcomings in the structure of the relationship between the Department and the DNP. This Review has not sought to revisit these issues given the comprehensive recent assessment.

The contributions of Traditional Owners of Kakadu, Uluru-Kata Tjuta and Booderee National Parks, as well as the Land Councils that support them, have indicated that the current settings in the EPBC Act for joint-management of Commonwealth parks fall short of their aspirations. Examples⁴⁹ of this include:

- the inability for Traditional Owners of Booderee National Park to exercise functions, rights and powers under the relevant land rights law within the park
- limits on the number of Traditional Owners on boards, means that for parks that comprise of many Traditional Owner groups, some groups are left out of decision-making
- lease agreements stipulate that the DNP should actively seek that the majority of permanent employed positions be held by suitably qualified Indigenous staff members. APS-wide employment conditions mean career progression is limited to lower levels of the public service

- Traditional Owners feel that important opportunities for employment that support connection to Country (such as through ‘day labour’) have diminished over time
- Traditional Owners feel they don’t have recourse if the DNP fails to implement park management plans, decisions of joint management boards, or lease obligations
- Traditional Owners perceive that their views on restricting public access to particular areas of a park that have cultural significance or at particular times are not respected.

Decisions made by the Board can be overturned by the DNP. The ultimate decision-making position of the DNP does not empower Traditional Owners to make genuine joint management decisions. There are examples where joint-boards have had the opportunity to participate in decision-making, but have been unable to effectively do so. They are either reluctant to accept the responsibilities associated with decisions or are unable to draw together disparate community interests and aspirations.

The contributions received from Traditional Owners to the Review indicate that they seek a real partnership and more responsibility to make decisions.

Some contributors to the Review seek a broader application of joint management settings⁵⁰.

2.2 Proposed key reform directions

2.2.1 Reforms should be pursued through co-designed policy-making and implementation

The Australian Government is recognising improved outcomes for Indigenous Australians through enabling co-design and policy implementation with Indigenous people. It is important that any reform to the EPBC Act be conducted in a way that is consistent with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Commitments in the Partnership Agreement for Closing the Gap and supporting processes (see Box 6).

The pursuit of reforms would occur alongside other Australian Government initiatives, including those related to an Indigenous Voice, the Northern Australian economy, the protection of Indigenous intellectual property and development of a government-wide Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities often engage with multiple departments and organisations across all levels of government. It is a busy space and activities should seek to align with or complement other work, while maintaining relevance to the environment portfolio.

Box 6 COAGs Closing the Gap Commitments

Key excerpts from the Agreement⁵¹

- Priority Action 1—developing and strengthening structures so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share in decision-making with governments on closing the gap.
- Priority Action 2—building formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sectors to deliver closing the gap services.
- Priority Action 3—ensuring mainstream government agencies and institutions that deliver services and programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertake systemic and structural transformation to contribute to closing the gap.

Excerpts from a ‘New Way of Working’ Coalition of the Peaks document⁵²

- When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are included and have a real say in the design and delivery of services that impact on them, the outcomes are far better.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be at the centre of Closing the Gap policy: the gap won’t close without our full involvement.
- COAG cannot expect us to take responsibility for outcomes or to be able to work constructively with them if we are excluded from decision-making.

The practice of co-design should relate to both progressing the agreed recommendations from this Review and how the approach is embedded into policy, procedures and behaviours going forward.

The role and membership of the IAC should be substantially recast, to form the Indigenous Knowledge and Engagement Committee (see [Chapter 5](#)). The role of this Committee would be to:

- support the co-design of reforms (and the participation of Indigenous Australians in this process)
- oversee the development of, and monitor and advise on, the application of the proposed National Environmental Standard for Indigenous engagement.

The philosophy adopted by the co-design process could include:

- genuinely demonstrate respect for Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, culture and ongoing custodianship
- acknowledge and redress perceived imbalances of power
- promote transparency, open communication and two-way knowledge sharing
- be flexible in what engagement approaches could look like outside of traditional written and face to face consultations and in how the Commonwealth receives feedback and advice
- support two-way communication and initiation of co-design, where all parties have equal rights and opportunities to initiate engagement and discussion
- acknowledge the value of Indigenous knowledge across a diverse range of issues, which may extend beyond what has traditionally been determined issues of interest or significance for Indigenous peoples
- support a continual process of monitoring, revision and review of approaches, that actively involve Indigenous peoples
- link to support more coordinated and consistent efforts at the Commonwealth level with respect to Indigenous engagement.

2.2.2 Best practice engagement to embed Indigenous knowledge and views in regulatory processes

Contributors to the Review⁵³ highlighted that the EPBC Act should more actively facilitate Indigenous participation in decision-making processes. Specifically, contributors called for normalisation of incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge in environmental management planning and environmental impact assessment through culturally appropriate engagement.

Contributions have all highlighted the importance of the underpinning concept of free prior and informed consent. A range of views have been presented to the Review on how this could be achieved, including:

- specific regulatory requirements or standards expected in decision-making processes (for example, standards for proponents in conducting environmental impact assessment) or binding standards for consultation with Indigenous Australians⁵⁴
- requirements for the participation of Indigenous Australians in regional planning activities, so their knowledge and values can be incorporated into decision-making (such as strategic assessments or bioregional plans)
- greater investment in scientific research, where Indigenous Australians are co-researchers alongside western science⁵⁵.

A National Environmental Standard for best-practice Indigenous engagement is required to ensure that Indigenous Australians that speak for Country have had the proper opportunity to do so, and for their views to be explicitly considered in decisions. The proposed National Environmental Standard for best practice Indigenous engagement should be developed in close collaboration with Indigenous Australians. Specifically, an Indigenous Knowledge and Engagement Committee (see [Chapter 5](#)) should be responsible for leading the co-design process.

The Standard would be applied to all aspects of decision-making under the EPBC Act, including the development of regional plans and environmental impact assessment and approval decisions. Existing relevant Australian Government and key agency guidelines including *Engage Early – Guidance for proponents on best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)*⁵⁶ could be used as a starting point for the development of the Standards (Box 7).

Box 7 Building blocks for National Environmental Standards for Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities

Two Commonwealth Government guidelines have been developed to assist stakeholders of the EPBC Act to understand their obligations for engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on Indigenous heritage matters, Native title agreements and other relevant considerations. These guidelines provide a starting point for reforms on Indigenous engagement under the Act and the development of National Environmental Standards:

- *Engage Early – Guidance for proponents on best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the EPBC Act*⁵⁷ aims to improve how proponents engage and consult Indigenous peoples during the environmental assessment process under the EPBC Act. The guidance encourages proponents to think more broadly than just matters that impact Indigenous heritage, including interactions with the *Native Title Act 1993* and engaging Indigenous Australians to manage offsets. The guidance outlines some specific considerations for parties, including allowing additional time before statutory processes to engage and seek consent, establishing meaningful relationships with communities, and identifying any Native title agreements in place on the land.
- *Ask First: A guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values*⁵⁸ was developed by the Australian Heritage Council (then Commission) soon after the EPBC Act was written to address 'lack of familiarity or awareness in the wider community' in Indigenous heritage matters. It identifies the links between the landscape as a whole and Indigenous heritage values and outlines that Indigenous Australians need to give their consent at most stages before activities that involve Indigenous heritage proceeds. The guidelines established early that 'consultation and negotiation with Indigenous stakeholders' is not only best practice, but essential for strengthening the protection of Indigenous heritage values. The document clearly outlines actions that professionals and organisations should take and offers additional, non-mandatory guidance.

2.2.3 National-level cultural heritage protections need comprehensive review

The current laws that protect Indigenous cultural heritage at the national level need comprehensive review. This review should consider both tangible and intangible cultural heritage (see Box 8).

Box 8 Intangible cultural heritage

The concept of intangible cultural heritage relates to knowledge of or expressions of traditions. Intangible Indigenous cultural heritage is defined in various Commonwealth and state and territory laws in Australia

Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006

'Aboriginal intangible heritage means any knowledge of or expression of Aboriginal tradition ... and includes oral traditions, performing arts, stories, rituals, festivals, social practices, craft, visual arts, and environmental and ecological knowledge, but does not include anything that is widely known to the public.'⁵⁹

Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act 1989

'Aboriginal tradition means the body of traditions, observances, customs and beliefs of Aboriginals or of a community or group of Aboriginals, and includes those traditions, observances, customs and beliefs as applied in relation to particular persons, sites, areas of land, things or relationships.'

Continued next page

Box 8 (continued)

A sacred site means a site that is sacred to Aboriginals or is otherwise of significance according to Aboriginal tradition, and includes any land that, under a law of the Northern Territory, is declared to be sacred to Aboriginals or of significance according to Aboriginal tradition.⁶⁰

ATSIHP Act

‘...the body of traditions, observances, customs and beliefs of Aboriginals generally or of a particular community or group of Aboriginals, and includes any such traditions, observances, customs or beliefs relating to particular persons, areas, objects or relationships.’⁶¹

Contributors to this Review ⁶² have emphasised the intrinsic link between Indigenous peoples, land and water and their culture and wellbeing.

‘For Indigenous Australians, Country owns people and every aspect of life is connected to it, it is much more than just a place. Inherent to Country are vistas, landforms, plants, animals, waterways, and humans. Country is loved, needed and cared for and Country loves, needs and cares for people. Country is family, culture and identity, Country is self.’ Indigenous Working Group, Threatened Species Recovery Hub⁶³

These contributors have suggested that the EPBC Act could have a more expansive role to protect culturally important species, important cultural places that have intangible, ecological, environmental, and physical cultural assets.

There is a need for comprehensive review of national-level Indigenous cultural heritage protection legislation. Reform should consider processes currently underway that are looking to improve Indigenous cultural heritage protection outcomes.

The Heritage Chairs and Officials of Australia and New Zealand (HCOANZ) has been working since 2018 to develop 'Best Practice Standards in Indigenous Cultural Heritage Management and Legislation'. This work is being done in partnership with Indigenous heritage leaders. When finalised, the framework will provide a basis on which to comprehensively review how Indigenous heritage is protected by national laws in Australia, and how national laws should interact with state-based arrangements.

The goal of a national review would be to ensure that national laws provide best-practice protection of cultural heritage—tangible and intangible—and work in concert with protections afforded under state and territory laws.

Given the intrinsic links between the environment, culture and wellbeing, and the objects of the EPBC Act, the Act could play a significant role in delivering more effective protections. This includes how Indigenous heritage is protected under the Act (for example places or culturally important, but common species) and how protections are given effect (for example in regional planning processes, protected area management, or development assessment and approval processes).

However, the EPBC Act may not be best placed to protect all Indigenous cultural heritage (such as language and crafts). Other laws or processes will need to work in concert with national environmental law to provide comprehensive, national-level protections.

2.2.4 Combine Indigenous knowledge and western science in statutory advisory committees

The structure of the statutory advisory committees in the EPBC Act, and the lack of interaction between them, engrains the cultural primacy of western science in the way that the Act operates.

The National Environmental Standard for best-practice Indigenous engagement is one mechanism to ensure that Indigenous Australians that speak for and have traditional knowledge of Country have had the proper opportunity to contribute to decisions made under the Act.

In addition to a substantial re-casting of the role of the Indigenous Advisory Committee, more needs to be done to enhance how Indigenous knowledge is considered alongside western science and information. This includes:

- proposed reforms to the statutory advisory committees of the EPBC Act (see [Chapter 5](#))
- the establishment of an Information and Knowledge Committee—the remit of this committee should include the culturally appropriate use of Indigenous knowledge in decision-making
- the composition of the Information and Knowledge Committee should be such that the scientific, economic, social and traditional knowledge required to underpin the operation of the EPBC Act are balanced.

2.2.5 Transition to Traditional Owners having more responsibility for managing their land

Traditional Owners of jointly managed parks have expressed their aspiration to have more responsibility and control over the management of their land and waters. Submissions received by the Review have highlighted opportunities to better support these aspirations. These include:

- improved monitoring, compliance and review of joint management arrangements, to ensure the Director of National Parks (DNP) implements management activities in a manner consistent with agreed plans
- aspirations of genuine joint decision-making, meaning that Boards accept the responsibilities and risks that are currently borne by the DNP
- improved employment opportunities, and through employment the opportunity to work on Country and share knowledge of Country
- changes to the relationships between laws, to provide for greater local management and control.

The shared vision between Traditional Owners and the Commonwealth on what they seek to achieve from their partnership in joint management, and how this builds toward the longer-term aspirations of Traditional Owners is unclear.

A shared vision is essential for success. Without one, any change is likely to deliver unintended outcomes, diluted focus, or underinvestment in the transition needed to meet the aspirations of Traditional Owners. The first step is to reach consensus on the shared vision and then co-design the policy, governance and transition arrangements needed to achieve it.

Any transition to greater responsibility for decision-making by Traditional Owners will require support for owners to develop the capabilities to execute the legal and administrative responsibilities associated with managing national parks. This includes responsibility for effective health and safety risks to park staff and visitors, accountability for expending operating costs (between \$7 million and \$20 million per year) and for the effective management of capital works budgets⁶⁴. The magnitude and significance of a transition to greater decision-making for Traditional Owners should not be underestimated.

3 Legislative complexity

Key points

The EPBC Act is complex. Complex legislation makes it difficult, time-consuming and expensive for people to understand their legal rights and obligations. This leads to confusion and inconsistent decision-making, creating unnecessary regulatory burden for business, and restricts access to justice.

The key reasons the EPBC Act is complex are:

- The policy areas covered by the Act are inherently complex. Environmental approvals, Commonwealth reserves, wildlife trade, and the conservation and recovery of threatened species are all complex. The way the different areas work together to deliver environmental outcomes is not always clear, and many areas operate in a largely siloed way.
- The EPBC Act relies heavily on detailed prescriptive processes that are convoluted and inflexible, meaning engaging with it is time consuming and costly. This is particularly the case for environmental impact assessment (EIA). Convoluted processes are made more complex by important terminology being poorly defined or not defined at all.
- The construction of the EPBC Act is archaic, and it does not meet best practice for modern regulation.

The key reform directions proposed by the Review are:

- In the short-term, legislative amendments to the EPBC Act are required to address known inconsistencies, gaps, and conflicts in the Act.
- In the longer-term, a comprehensive redrafting of the Act (or related Acts) is required. This should be done following the development of the key reforms proposed by this Review. This sequencing will ensure that legislation is developed in a way that supports the desired approach, rather than inadvertently hindering it.
- Redrafting could include consideration of dividing the Act—such as creating separate pieces of legislation for its key functional areas.

3.1 The EPBC Act covers a wide range of complex policy areas

The original ambition of the EPBC Act for a ‘joined up’, comprehensive environmental framework—one that combined 5 pieces of legislation into one—has not been realised.

The complexity in the EPBC Act is in part driven by underlying policy complexity. The broad policy areas covered by the Act—environmental approvals, Commonwealth reserves, wildlife trade, and threatened species conservation and recovery—are complex in their own right.

Having multiple policy functions in the one Act makes it very challenging to understand how the requirements for these areas operate separately or together. This creates confusion and inconsistency in decisions, and limits the effectiveness of the compliance and enforcement function (see Box 9). The inter-relationships between the different parts of the EPBC Act are often not clear, and there can be ambiguity when different parts of the Act are in operation.

Box 9 Unclear linkages between the functional parts of the EPBC Act**Example 1: The link between recovery plans (Part 13) and approval decisions (Part 9)**

It is administratively difficult to apply the current legislative requirement to 'not act inconsistently with a recovery plan' made under Part 13 and an approval decision made under Part 9. There are commonly different opinions as to what practically amounts to an inconsistency. Recovery plans are written with a focus on protecting and enhancing species' survival. Decisions made under Part 9 are generally applied in a way that minimises harm to the environment while facilitating development but do not aim to enhance species survival.

Example 2: The link between permits (Part 13) and approvals (Part 9) in a Commonwealth area

A Part 13 permit (to kill, injure, take, trade, keep or move a member of a listed species or ecological community in or on a Commonwealth area) is not required for actions that are covered by a Part 9 approval. However, where a Part 9 approval has not been granted (for example, where a 'not controlled action' decision or a 'particular manner' decision is made) a Part 13 permit is still required. This means that even when the same action is found not to have a significant impact on an MNES under one part of the Act, it could still be an offence under another (see [Chapter 1](#)).

3.2 Environmental impact assessment is a convoluted process based on poorly defined key terms

The EPBC Act uses overly prescriptive processes. This means the effort of the regulator and the proponent is often focused on completing the process as quickly as possible rather than achieving the outcome intended.

This is most visible for environmental impact assessment (EIA), where the EPBC Act prescribes the:

- required, detailed steps for preparing content of relevant documents
- documents that must be provided
- way they must be considered by the decision-maker (see Box 10).

Box 10 Complexity of EIA processes**Example 1: Part 9 decisions – approval of actions**

The EPBC Act does not currently set out a clear standard for deciding whether to approve an action based on the acceptability or otherwise of the impacts (see [Chapter 1](#)).

The focus on process is at the expense of outcomes. The administrative overhead to manage the technicalities of prescriptive processes is significant and adds to delay and cost with no additional environmental benefit.

A decision-maker may approve an action if they follow the correct legal processes and have regard to all the relevant statutory considerations.

The statutory considerations a decision-maker is required to apply differ depending on which information and documents need to be considered. For example, a decision-maker may have to: 'have regard to', 'take into account', 'consider', 'not act inconsistently with', or 'not contravene', the relevant information or statutory document.

This complexity must be reflected in the recommendation report and decision brief to meet all the requirements of the EPBC Act. Approval decisions have been overturned on technical grounds then remade with no change to the environmental outcomes.

This has practical consequences. Where there is community concern arising from a decision, that decision is contested on technical grounds about the process rather than the environmental outcome (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Continued next page

Box 10 (continued)**Example 2: Poorly defined terms**

Key terms in the EPBC Act lack clarity, which leads to confusion about obligations and inconsistent interpretation.

Terminology such as ‘significant’ (impact), ‘action’ or ‘continuing use’ means people, including departmental staff, aren’t sure how the EPBC Act should apply.

Poorly defined terminology also leads to uncertainty about how to undertake self-assessment to determine if a referral is needed. This drives unnecessary referrals as proponents seek to manage risk by requesting a referral decision even if they don’t think their action would trigger the EPBC Act.

The Department has been inconsistent in its application and guidance about requirements under the EPBC Act, which has added to confusion and uncertainty. For example, whether to refer or not to refer, or whether something is a controlled action.

Example 3: There is uncertainty about the concept of ‘controlled actions’ and the ‘controlling provisions’ in Part 3

The concept of ‘controlled actions’ and ‘controlling provisions’ is central to the referral and subsequent assessment and approval of an action but is unclear.

Before an assessment is carried out there is often insufficient information on matters of national environmental significance (MNES). At the referral stage, it is difficult for an assessment officer to identify all species by level of endangerment in order to identify with certainty which controlling provisions apply. If a controlling provision is not specified at the referral stage but is identified as relevant during the course of the assessment, the EPBC Act requires a reconsideration of the initial controlled action decision and the assessment process would need to begin again.

Example 4: There are legal uncertainties relating to condition-making powers

Usually, EIA approval decisions have conditions applied to them. There are uncertainties about how conditions are to be applied and what happens to them over time. For example, consent of an approval holder is required to apply conditions that are not ‘reasonably related to an action’, but it is unclear what this means.

Conditions relating to management plans are usually set early in the life of a project before impacts are fully understood making implementation and enforcement difficult. Changes in circumstances are also not well accommodated, meaning some conditions can cease to be appropriate or relevant but remain in force unless actively removed.

Example 5: There are inconsistent interactions between EIA and other parts of the EPBC Act

The EPBC Act seeks to simplify the operation of Part 10 (strategic assessments) by applying the Part 9 approval and post-approval processes to a strategic assessment approval. If a strategic assessment approval is in force, the Act applies several of the provisions of Part 9 to that approval (section 146D). This leads to potential legal inconsistencies as a Part 10 approval is quite different in practice to a Part 9 approval.

3.3 The construction of the EPBC Act is archaic

The EPBC Act does not meet Commonwealth Government best practice guidance on minimising legislative complexity. The EPBC Act was drafted 20 years ago, and best practice legislative drafting has evolved since this time.

There is a general need to remove duplication, apply consistency and simplify the law where possible. An example of this is the distributed nature of compliance and enforcement provisions throughout the EPBC Act, rather than a broad set of compliance and enforcement tools that can be applied across it (see [Chapter 9](#)).

Many clauses in the EPBC Act are unnecessarily wordy and verbose, which makes them hard to read. For example, section 133(1):

‘After receiving the assessment documentation relating to a controlled action, or the report of a commission that has conducted an inquiry relating to a controlled action, the Minister may approve for the purposes of a controlling provision the taking of the action by a person’.

The inter-relationships between the EPBC Act and other laws (for example, the *Native Title Act 1993* and the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984*) are not clear. This arises because definitions of terms, processes and outcomes set out in the Act do not always align or operate in conjunction with other legislation.

The level of detailed prescription in the EPBC Act is not consistent with the *Legislation Act 2003* or the *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*. Examples of this include:

- The level of prescription in the Act on how an instrument is revoked or amended makes it difficult to amend that instrument where it is redundant or no longer has the intended effect.
- Instruments made under the Act can be amended by other instruments, leading to legal questions about its status. For example, heritage lists are published on the Department’s website, but can be amended by gazette notices (for inclusion), notifiable instruments or legislative instruments (for removal of places, depending on the reason for removal).

3.4 Proposed key reform directions

Complexity of a policy area necessitates a degree of complexity in legislation. There is general acceptance that the core functions of the EPBC Act are all necessary to implement Australia’s international obligations and to achieve national interest outcomes.

The key reform directions proposed by this Review, particularly those related to the hardwiring of the requirement for ecologically sustainable development (ESD), the establishment of National Environmental Standards, and pursuing a regional planning approach, will all reduce the need for complexity in the law.

The controversial and contentious nature of some parts of the EPBC Act result in political sensitivity about the Act as a whole. Making administrative amendments or amendments to less controversial parts of the Act has proven difficult. Successive governments have been reluctant to propose amendments unless absolutely unavoidable, leading to a hesitation even within the Department to recommend amendments. Such opportunities are seen as out of reach, when they should be a matter of routine. Largely uncontested changes to less-controversial parts of the Act (such as some related to wildlife trade or the management of Commonwealth reserves) have suffered from this unwillingness to amend the Act.

3.4.1 Make known improvements to the EPBC Act in its current form

Key problems with the EPBC Act, and the potential solutions for them, have been long-known. In the short-term, legislative amendments to the Act are required to address known inconsistencies, gaps, and conflicts in the Act. Submissions to the Review have indicated this to be a priority⁶⁵.

Opportunities to reduce process prescription

Process prescription must be addressed both in how the EPBC Act is constructed as well as how it is implemented. Opportunities to reduce prescription include:

- reducing the number of statutory tests—many different statutory tests apply to a decision. For example, a decision-maker may have to ‘take into account’, ‘have regard to’ and ‘consider’ different documents or requirements.
- clarifying the information that must be before the decision-maker as part of a briefing (and the form in which it should be provided).
- removal of requirements for publication of notices in newspapers—these and similar reductions in process prescriptions affecting transparency should be offset by corresponding improvements in the accessibility of information and the use of alternative media to ensure the overall transparency of the Act is increased.

Resolving the connection between Part 9 and Part 10

Long-standing problems relating to the connection between approvals (Part 9) and strategic assessments (Part 10) should be addressed:

- The inability to vary a program once endorsed makes a Part 10 approval frozen in time and unable to respond to changes in information and circumstances. For example, strategic assessments are unable to deal with new listings. This means assessments that operate for long periods of time are unable to make adjustments to achieve the environmental outcomes envisaged.
- Where an agreed strategic assessment relies on an endorsed statutory regime (as is the case with the National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority) and these regimes are amended, there is a risk that future actions conducted consistent with the amended regime differ from those endorsed by the strategic assessment.
- Strategic assessments are made on a ‘policy, plan or program’, which commonly include commitments that must be fulfilled by different people. The consequences of a failure to implement a commitment in an endorsed ‘policy, plan or program’ are unclear. For example, it is unclear whether a person can rely on a strategic assessment approval if a commitment has not been fulfilled.
- Strategic assessments give approval for many unidentified persons to undertake the approved action(s) or class of action. In most cases, there is no identified ‘approval holder’ for a Part 10 approval. This makes it difficult to vary the conditions of the strategic assessment approval where the consent of the approval holder is required, or to revoke or suspend a Part 10 approval because there are legal difficulties in providing procedural fairness.

Other areas of amendment

Other chapters of this interim report highlight opportunities for amendments to the EPBC Act. These include:

- the need for a complete set of compliance and enforcement tools across the Act to harmonise monitoring, investigation, and enforcement powers (see [Chapter 9](#)). This could be done by referencing the *Regulatory Powers (Standard Provisions) Act 2014* (Cwlth) and providing necessary additional powers.

- amendments to align the Act with Australia's international obligations in relation to the protection of migratory species under the Bonn Convention and permits for wildlife trade to meet Australia's obligations under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (see [Chapter 4](#)).

3.4.2 Simplify the law

Simplifying the legislation should follow the establishment of the proposed reforms to the regulatory system identified in this report (see [Chapter 6](#)). This includes the development of National Environmental Standards, regional planning, and improved data, information, and monitoring. This will ensure the legislation is developed in a way that supports the desired approach, rather than acting against it.

In the long-term, comprehensive redrafting of the EPBC Act (or related Acts) is required. Redrafting should be framed around core principles for legislative drafting. For example, the *Fair Work Act 2009* was drafted using principles including⁶⁶:

- Policy simplification (where possible) should be carried out first.
- Material of most relevance to the reader should be placed upfront.
- Important concepts should be clearly defined.
- Language and sentence structure should follow guidance to reduce complexity.
- The overall structure of legislation and its provisions should be carefully constructed for readability.
- Only necessary detail should be included, and detail should be in the right place.

Plain English guidance material should also accompany legislation to aid interpretation and use and should be easily accessible and updated regularly.

3.4.3 Split the EPBC Act into logical categories

When simplifying the legislation, it may be prudent to consider dividing the EPBC Act (or redo how the parts of the Act are separated and relate to each other) along functional or operational lines by creating separate legislation for some or all of the Act's functions:

- biodiversity and ecosystem management, to regulate the recovery of natural systems and nationally important biota (via national standards and regional planning)
- environment and heritage protection, to regulate EIA decision-making in relation to MNES
- wildlife trade restrictions to meet international obligations
- protected areas management, to regulate Commonwealth reserves and heritage places and to administer Commonwealth reserves
- environmental data and reporting, to administer data coordination, and national and international reporting
- institutional arrangements, including those for monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance
- national biodiversity markets.

Any legislatively separate areas should be clearly integrated by:

- requiring decision-making across relevant Acts to accord with regional planning requirements and national standards
- ensuring consistent data and reporting requirements, in line with proposed reforms for the monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the national system for environmental management.

4 Efficiency

Key points

The EPBC Act is duplicative, inefficient and costly for the environment, business and the community.

The interaction between Commonwealth and state and territory laws and regulations leads to duplication. Despite efforts to streamline, significant overlap remains.

Past attempts to devolve decision-making have been unsuccessful due to lack of defined outcomes and concerns that decisions would be inconsistent with the national interest.

The key reform directions proposed by the Review to remove duplication between the EPBC Act and state and territory systems are:

- devolve decisions to other jurisdictions, where they demonstrate National Environmental Standards can be met
- to base devolution on sound accreditation, quality assurance and compliance, escalation (including step-in capability) and regular review.

The reform directions proposed (National Environmental Standards, regional plans, information and data, modern regulatory systems) provide confidence for devolution, and will improve interoperability between the Commonwealth and jurisdictions.

Even with greater devolution, the Commonwealth is likely to have an ongoing role in directly assessing and approving some developments. Therefore, it is also important to address inefficiencies in Commonwealth-led project assessment and approval processes.

There is duplication with other Commonwealth regulations, and some activities are effectively regulated by others. The interplay between regulations is often more onerous than it needs to be.

The laws for permitting wildlife trade exceed international obligations, are inflexible and unnecessarily burdensome.

Proposed key reform directions to further streamline the EPBC Act are:

- Assessment pathways should be rationalised and implemented with clear guidance, modern systems and appropriate cost recovery. Small investments can dramatically reduce cost and uncertainty and improve decision-making.
- These, and other reform directions proposed (National Environmental Standards, regional plans, information and data, modern regulatory systems) create opportunities for significant streamlining and efficiency, including where low risk actions will not require approval.
- Streamline provisions for permitting of wildlife trade and interactions with other environmental frameworks.

Australians reasonably expect regulation that protects the environment in the national interest. The way the EPBC Act operates does not effectively protect the environment in the national interest (see [Chapter 1](#)), and there is a high degree of mistrust in the community (see [Chapter 5](#)).

It is reasonable for industry to expect governments to regulate efficiently and, wherever possible, harmonise regulation and ensure its interoperability. This reduces the costs of regulation to businesses that must comply with the law, and governments who administer it. The Review does not support suggested expansions to the remit of EPBC Act that intersect with state and territory responsibilities or other Commonwealth regulation (see [Chapter 1](#)).

4.1 There is duplication with state and territory regulation

4.1.1 There have been efforts to streamline with the states and territories

The EPBC Act was drafted to include several tools to achieve streamlining and harmonisation between the Commonwealth and states and territories. Strategic assessments (see [Chapter 1](#)) have been one mechanism to do this. Others, including a common assessment method for listing threatened species, and bilateral assessment and approval agreements are explored further in this section.

The water trigger (see Box 11) and nuclear trigger (see Box 12) matters of national environmental significance (MNES) are often cited as areas where streamlining is incomplete. The evidence presented to the Review suggests these areas have significant potential to be further streamlined, while ensuring that the national interests continues to be upheld.

Common assessment methods for threatened species listing

The Commonwealth and all state and territory governments have been working since 2015 to implement a common assessment method for listing threatened species and ecological communities. This work is formally underpinned by an intergovernmental memorandum of understanding.

Any jurisdiction can undertake a national assessment using the common assessment method, the outcome of which will be adopted by other jurisdictions where that species occurs, as well as the Commonwealth (under the EPBC Act). This means that a species is only assessed once and is listed in the same threatened category across all relevant jurisdictions.

This work is supported by the states and territories⁶⁷ and supports regulatory harmonisation by aligning lists and providing consistent protections across jurisdictions, which reduces confusion. Rather than a species being assessed numerous times, it can be considered once, which leads to corresponding improvements in efficiency.

To date 100 species listing decisions have been made under the EPBC Act based on state and territory-led assessments and a further 47 are in progress. Consideration should be given to the benefits of moving to a single list of nationally protected matters. The Commonwealth could maintain this list on behalf of all jurisdictions.

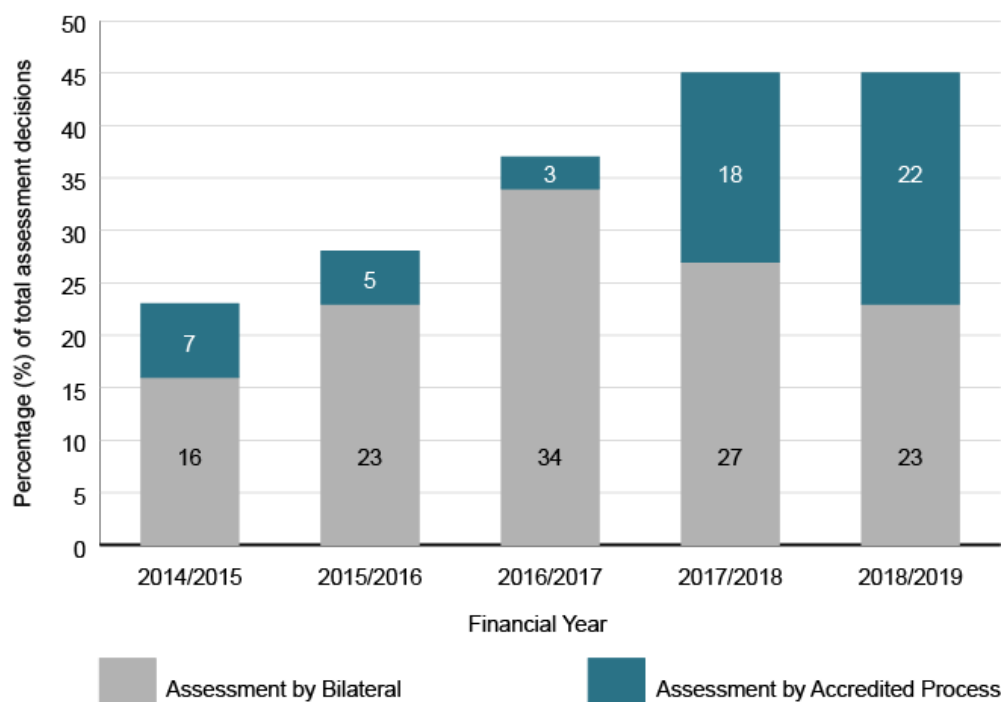
Bilateral assessment agreements

The EPBC Act allows for the accreditation of state laws and management systems where they provide appropriate protections for nationally protected matters. Under a bilateral assessment agreement, the Commonwealth retains responsibility for approvals, based on environmental impact assessments undertaken by the jurisdictions on nationally protected matters.

Assessment bilateral agreements are in place in all 8 jurisdictions. However, recent changes to state and territory laws mean that some of these agreements are being re-made to make them fully operational. Where agreements are not fully operational, individual assessments are often undertaken jointly (known as accredited assessments) which has the same effect as if a bilateral assessment agreement was in place. This ensures continued streamlining and reduced impact on projects but highlights the inherent fragility of the agreements.

Between July 2014 and June 2019, 37% of proposals under the EPBC Act were assessed (or were being assessed) through either a bilateral assessment (25%) or accredited assessment (12%) arrangement with states and territories. Figure 1 shows the breakdown over this period.

Figure 1 Percentage of projects assessed under bilateral and accredited processes for all states and territories, 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019

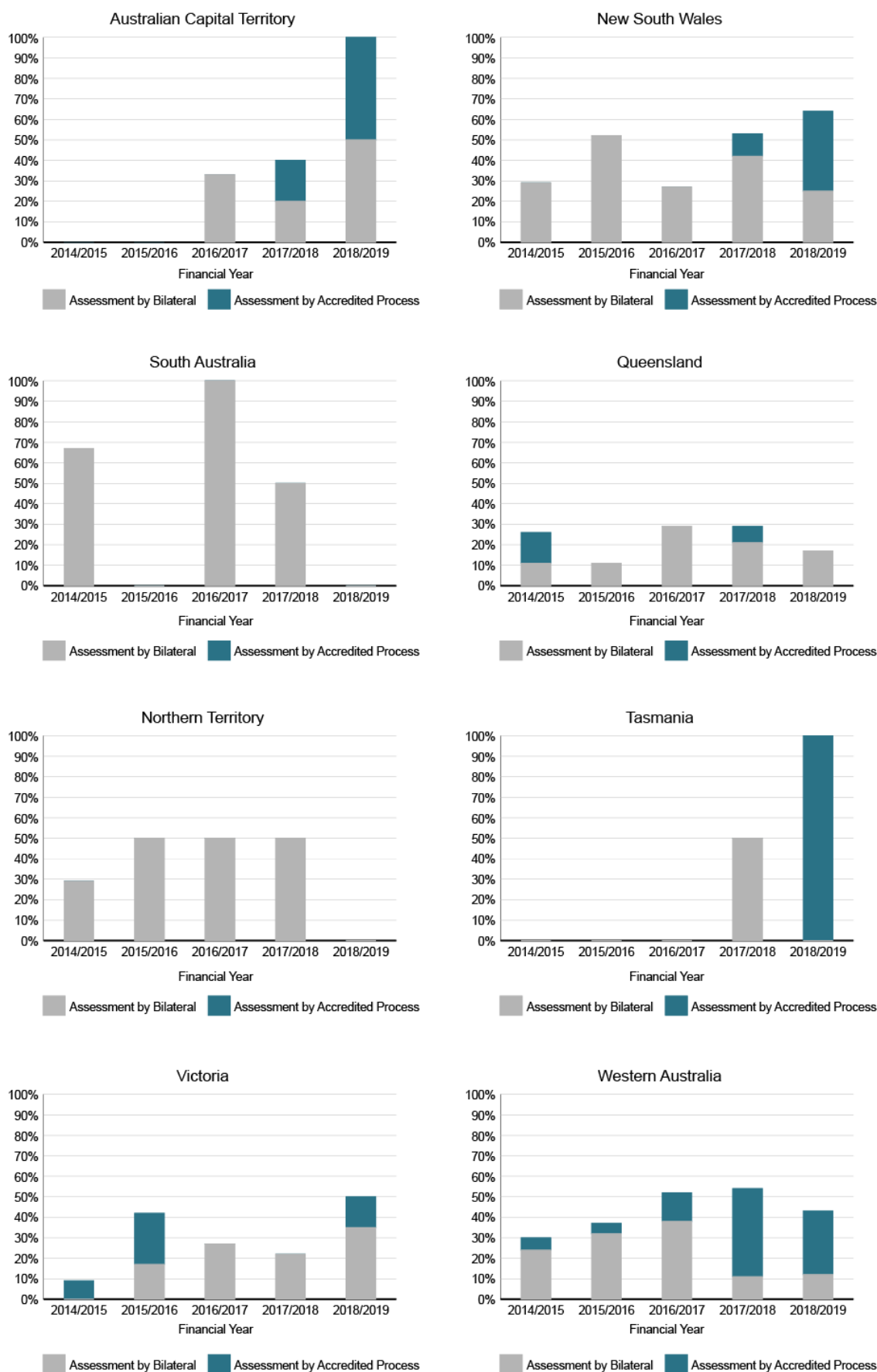


Source: Unpublished data, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

There are significant shortcomings in the current arrangements. The requirements of the EPBC Act mean that even where they are in place, bilateral assessment agreements do not cover all development types. For example, where states and territories do not actively assess certain development types (for example, code-based developments) or where approvals are given by local councils under local planning laws, these activities are unable to be accredited under the current inflexible bilateral provisions. For a single project, bilateral agreements may cover some aspects of the project, but not all. For example, not all clearing of habitat of nationally threatened species can be accredited due to the way state and territory land clearing laws are constructed⁶⁸.

Figure 2 provides the breakdown by jurisdictions and shows that approaches to streamline arrangements have had varied success between jurisdictions.

Figure 2 Percentage of projects assessed by bilateral and accredited processes for Australian states and territories, 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2019



Source: Unpublished data, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.

Both proponents and regulators are supportive of bilateral assessment agreements and acknowledge the benefits they provide⁶⁹. Benefits for proponents include⁷⁰:

- better communication between the parties, which translates to greater clarity for proponents
- cost savings for industry and government
- reduced administrative overheads, through production of a single set of assessment documentation
- greater alignment of approval conditions, including offsetting arrangements
- broader landscape scale benefits for the environment, as individual MNES are considered in the landscape context required by state and territory arrangements.

Similarly, as co-regulators with the Commonwealth, the states and territories support effective bilateral assessment agreements⁷¹. The benefits they see from harmonised assessments include:

- increased cooperation, understanding and collaboration between assessment teams and proponents
- reduced regulatory duplication in the assessment of proposals, including aligning conditions of approval where appropriate
- reduced timeframes for project assessments.

For example, the NSW Government advises in their submission to the Review that since the commencement of the agreement in February 2015:

*'6 projects (with a combined Capital Investment Value of \$6.4 billion and the creation of up to 5,150 jobs) have been assessed through the streamlined process and has led to an overall reduction in time frames for project assessments'*⁷².

Access to the same data and information is also important to promote efficiency in the conduct of joint assessments (see [Chapter 6](#)).

Box 11 The water trigger

The water trigger (section 24D) requires proposed coal seam gas and large coal mining developments likely to significantly impact on a water resource to be assessed and approved by the Commonwealth. The Australian Parliament amended the EPBC Act in 2013 to include the water trigger, responding to community concern at the time of the perceived inadequacy of state-based water regulation of these types of activities. The 2013 Act amendments prohibit the Commonwealth from devolving responsibility for water trigger approval decisions to the state or territory.

Stakeholders have presented highly polarised views to the Review about the operation of the water trigger. Industry stakeholders argue that it duplicates state-based water regulatory frameworks and should be removed⁷³. Others call for an expansion of the trigger to cover activities such as shale or tight gas extraction, all hard rock mining, or indeed any action that may have a material impact on water resources⁷⁴.

The operation of the water trigger suffers from insufficient definition of the water resources covered, or the scale of significance of the impact on these resources it is seeking to regulate. Further, it targets the activity of part of a specific sector, which seems to result in regulatory inconsistency. Only large coal mining and coal seam gas projects are regulated under the water trigger, when other activities may conceivably pose the same or greater risk of irreversible damage. Finally, the current construct of the water trigger is inconsistent with the Commonwealth's agreed role in environmental and water resources management.

The states and territories have constitutional responsibility for managing their water resources, and this responsibility is reflected in the National Water Initiative, the intergovernmental agreement that sets out the respective roles of jurisdictions in water management, and the water reform agenda they have collectively agreed to pursue.

Continued next page

Box 11 (continued)

The Review considers that it is not the role of the EPBC Act to regulate impacts of projects on water resources more generally including impacts on other water users such as towns or agricultural users. This is the responsibility of the states and territories, and they should be clearly accountable for the decisions they make. In its leadership role, the Commonwealth should continue to transparently report on the progress made by jurisdictions in advancing commitments to manage water under the National Water Initiative.

That said, the Commonwealth does have responsibility for protecting listed threatened or migratory species, wetlands of international importance (Ramsar wetlands), World Heritage sites and for leadership on cross-border issues. Proposals with the potential to impact protected matters as a result of direct or indirect changes to the water resources on which they rely have always triggered the EPBC Act and should continue to do so.

The Commonwealth should have the capacity to step in to protect water resources to adjudicate cross-border matters (for example on a water resource that spans jurisdictions, such as the Great Artesian Basin). One state or territory should not be able to unilaterally approve a project that risks irreversible damage or contamination to a water resource that the environment of another relies on. The capacity to step in should be clearly linked to processes for development assessments and approvals.

The Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Developments (IESC) was established in part to provide technical advice to the Commonwealth and state and territory decision-makers. The IESC has improved decision-making and led to increased transparency and community confidence that cumulative impacts of proposals are assessed.

The Review proposes that the water trigger and IESC be retained but modified:

- The trigger should be limited to consideration of any project that risks *irreversible depletion or contamination* of cross-border water resources only. The argument that the trigger not be limited to large coal and coal seam gas projects is compelling, but any potential expansion of scope would require careful consideration to avoid duplication with other Commonwealth and state and territory regulatory requirements.
- If state and territory laws meet Commonwealth Standards, then they should be able to be accredited.
- The National Environment Standard for MNES should explicitly define key terms, including a cross-border water resource and *irreversible depletion or contamination* of the resource.
- If the water trigger is changed, the name and remit of the IESC should be adjusted to reflect any altered focus. The Commonwealth Environment Minister (or devolved decision-maker) must seek the advice of this Committee when considering a proposal against the National Environmental Standard. The expertise and advice of the Committee should also be available to the states and territories at their request, subject to the capacity and priorities of the Committee.

Box 12 Nuclear activities

Nuclear activities are regulated under the EPBC Act in 2 ways. The first is section 140A, which prohibits the Environment Minister from approving specific nuclear installations. This section reflects a policy choice of elected parliaments to ban specific nuclear activities in Australia, and any change in scope is similarly a policy choice of elected parliaments. That said, should Australia's policy shift in relation to these types of nuclear activities, changes to s140A would be required.

The second way nuclear activities are regulated under the EPBC Act is the so-called 'nuclear trigger' (section 22(1)), whereby 'nuclear actions' that are likely to have a significant impact on the environment need to be assessed and approved by the Commonwealth. In practice, this trigger primarily captures:

- mining projects, including uranium mining, and rare earth and mineral sand mining, transport and milling activities that result in radioactive by-products that exceed the certain thresholds, and
- Commonwealth agencies undertaking nuclear transport, research or waste treatment.

For Commonwealth agencies, most referrals received do not require approval because activities are conducted in accordance with the regulatory guidelines and protocols under the *Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Act 1998* (ARPANS Act) and regulated by the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Authority (ARPANSA).

Uranium and other projects assessed under the 'nuclear trigger' require a whole-of-environment assessment. These expanded assessments cover impacts that the states and territories already regulate (such as air, noise and water quality), as well as duplicating state and territory regulation of mining projects. ARPANSA⁷⁵ highlighted in its submission that if jurisdictions adopt relevant national codes developed under the ARPANS Act, then EPBC Act assessments can lead to 'substantially the same assessment activities being undertaken across multiple jurisdictions creating duplicative regulatory processes'.

To be able to ensure community confidence in these 'nuclear' activities, the Commonwealth should maintain the capacity to intervene. To achieve this, the key reform directions proposed by the Review are:

- The National Environmental Standards for MNES should include one for nuclear actions. To provide community confidence, the Standard should reflect the regulatory guidelines and protocols of all relevant national laws and requirements.
- Where states and territories can demonstrate their laws and management practices meet the National Environmental Standard, their arrangements should be able to be accredited under the proposed devolution model.
- Where arrangements are not accredited, projects should be assessed by the Commonwealth in accordance with the Standard.

Approval bilateral agreements

Despite attempts by successive Australian Governments, approval bilateral agreements have never been implemented. Under such an agreement, the Commonwealth would not apply the EPBC Act; instead relying on the state or territory decision to achieve an acceptable environmental outcome. At the time of its introduction the water trigger was prevented from being included in approval bilateral agreements (see Box 11).

Under the current settings, devolution is inherently fragile and amendments to the EPBC Act are required to make them stable and to work efficiently in practice. A suite of amendments⁷⁶ were pursued by the then Australian Government in 2014 to support the implementation of its 'One Stop Shop' policy and to provide a more enduring framework for devolution. Particularly important amendments are needed to:

- enable the Commonwealth to complete assessments and approvals if a state or territory is unable to
- ensure agreements can endure minor amendments to state and territory settings, rather than requiring the bilateral agreement to be remade (and consequently be subject to disallowance by the Australian Parliament on each occasion).

In 2014 the then Australian Government was unable to secure the necessary parliamentary support for the legislative changes required. There was considerable community and stakeholder concern that environmental outcomes were not clearly defined and the states and territories would not be able to uphold the national interest in protecting the environment. A lack of clear environmental (as opposed to process) standards fuelled political differences at the time.

This community concern remains. Submissions to the Review highlighted ongoing concern about the adequacy of state and territory laws, their ability to manage conflicts of interest, and increased environmental risks if the Commonwealth steps away⁷⁷.

In their submissions to the Review, jurisdictions expressed a range of views on this, including both an ongoing desire to pursue the devolution of approvals powers (for example, WA Government⁷⁸ and SA Government⁷⁹) as well as continue to improve existing arrangements (for example, ACT Government⁸⁰, NSW Government⁸¹ and NT Government⁸²).

4.1.2 Duplication with states and territories remains

Despite efforts to streamline, a key criticism of the EPBC Act from many proponents and their representatives is that the Act duplicates state and territory regulatory frameworks for development assessment and approval⁸³. The Review has found that with a few exceptions, this is largely true.

The duplication that is evident does not mean, as suggested by some, that the EPBC Act is unnecessary and the Commonwealth should step out of the way. The Commonwealth has a clear role in Australia's system of environmental management (see [Chapter 1](#)). However, as the regulatory systems of the states and territories have changed over time, and with increasing jurisdictional cooperation, the regulatory gap filled by the Act has reduced, resulting in duplication. For example:

- Most states and territories have made changes to their environmental or planning laws to improve environmental impact assessment processes and laws to enable accreditation for bilateral agreements.
- Joined-up assessments mean that many Act project approvals mirror those given by the relevant state or territory. The Act Condition-setting Policy⁸⁴ currently aims to streamline approval conditions between jurisdictions in circumstances where state or territory conditions are adequate to protect MNES.

There is no systematic way to determine the additional environmental benefits resulting from the EPBC Act. There are examples where the operation of the Act has led to demonstrably different environmental outcomes than those arising from state and territory processes. In some cases, states have used powers for state-significant developments that effectively circumvent their environmental impact assessment requirements, while the Commonwealth has maintained the importance of due process and undertaken assessment and approval. Submitters point to examples such as the rejection of the state sponsored Traveston Dam in Queensland in 2009, and fast-tracked processes for state Significant Development in NSW as evidence of this⁸⁵.

While far from perfect (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 8](#)) the EPBC Act policy for 'like for like' offsets exceeds requirements in some jurisdictions. This results in additional or different conditions placed on projects that have better outcomes than would have otherwise been the case.

Contributions to the Review have highlighted that Commonwealth involvement should set the tone and provide leadership, as the Commonwealth is more at arms-length from the benefits that would arise from the project⁸⁶. There is anecdotal evidence of this, but there are also cases where the regulatory requirements of states and territories are more stringent than those of the EPBC Act (for example, Indigenous engagement requirements of Victoria and the Northern Territory⁸⁷).

Frustration rightly arises when regulation under the EPBC Act does not, or does not tangibly, correspond to better environmental outcomes, given the additional costs to business of dual processes. Various estimates of the costs to industry and business of dual assessment and approval systems have been provided to the Review, including:

- the Minerals Council of Australia⁸⁸ estimated delays can increase the cost up to \$46 million per month for a major greenfield mining project (worth \$3–4 billion) in Australia
- the Property Council of Australia⁸⁹ estimated that delays in assessments can add up to \$36,800 to the cost of new homes in some greenfield sites
- the 2017 Independent Review of the Water Trigger Legislation⁹⁰ estimated costs to industry of around \$46.8 million per year.

Estimates of costs will invariably depend on the underpinning data, assumptions and the cost structures of projects. As the additional costs to business arising from the EPBC Act cannot always be clearly delineated from the impositions of other processes (such as costs associated with complying with state-based regulations), caution should be exercised. Nevertheless, the essential argument put forward by industry is undisputed—a reduction in time taken will reduce the cost of regulation.

As others have also done (for example, Productivity Commission⁹¹), the Review finds there is regulatory duplication that should be addressed. There is a clear case for greater harmonisation, but to achieve this, states and territories must demonstrate they can effectively accommodate the national interest. The process should not be one of negotiated agreement.

4.2 Proposed key reform directions

The foundational intergovernmental agreements on the environment envisaged that jurisdictions would accommodate their respective responsibilities in each other's laws and regulatory systems, where possible. This is a sound ambition, and one the governments should continue to pursue.

Previous attempts to devolve decision-making focused too heavily on prescriptive processes and lacked clear expectations and thresholds for protecting the environment in the national interest. The National Environmental Standards proposed by this Review provide a legally binding pathway for greater devolution, while ensuring the national interest is upheld (see [Chapter 1](#)).

Pursuing greater devolution does not mean that the Commonwealth 'gets out of the business' of environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. Rather, the reform directions proposed would result in a shift with a greater focus on accrediting and providing assurance oversight of the activities of other regulators and in ensuring national interest environmental outcomes are being achieved.

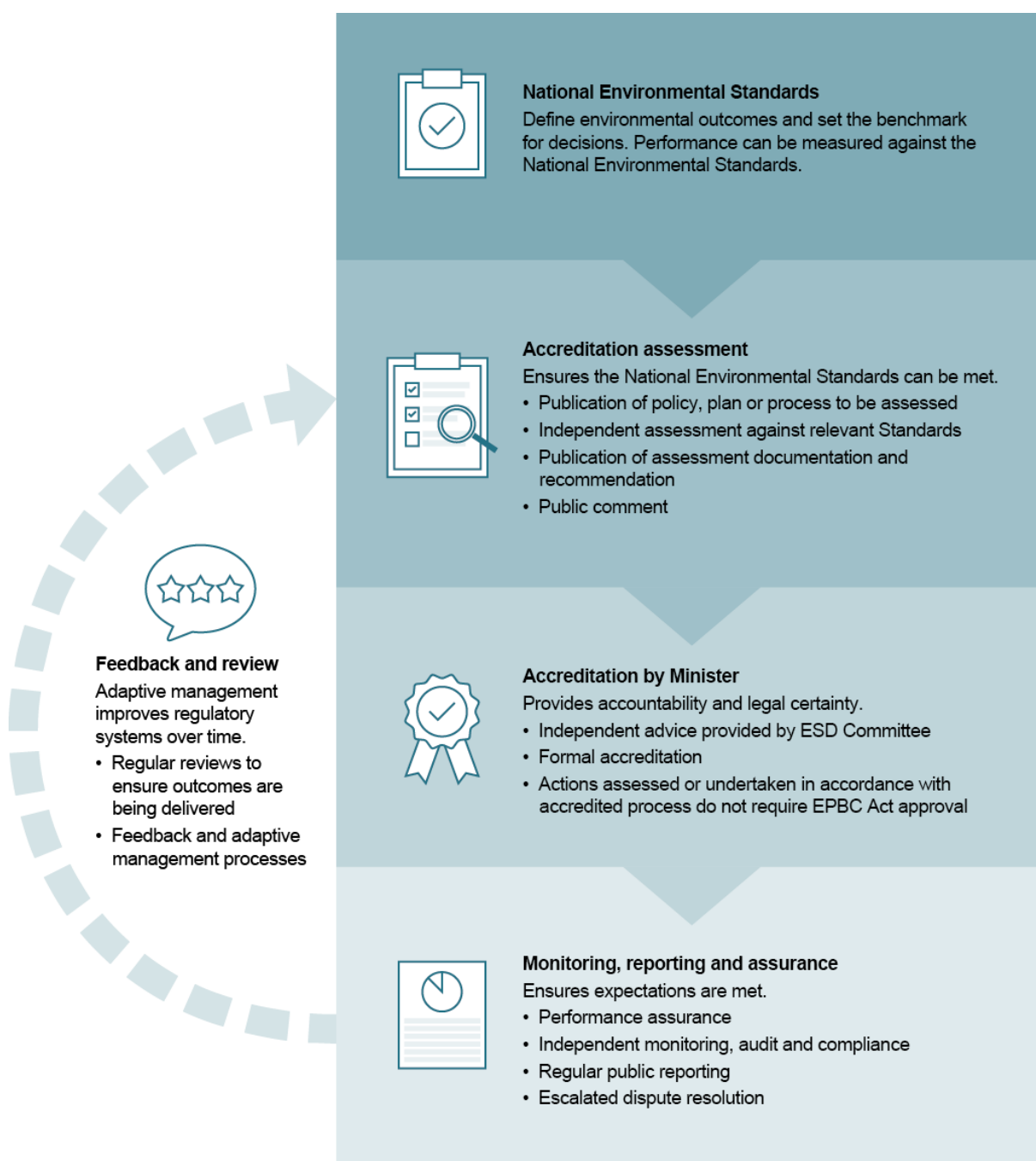
The devolution model proposed is not an all or nothing concept. The Commonwealth would need to retain its capability to conduct assessments and approvals where the Commonwealth provides sole jurisdiction, where accredited arrangements are not in place (or cannot be used), at the request of a jurisdiction, or when the Commonwealth exercises its ability to step in on national interest grounds. Such capability is essential to ensure that EPBC Act requirements can continue to be upheld in circumstances where other regulators are, for whatever reason, unable to accommodate Act requirements in their processes. To weaken this capability would risk unnecessary delay for projects.

The Commonwealth could:

- accredit state and territory (and other regulatory) systems to assess and approve projects, where they can demonstrate they meet National Environmental Standards—this may require states and territories to adapt their regulations to meet National Environmental Standards and to satisfy accreditation requirements
- approve projects that have been assessed by the states and territories under accredited assessment processes
- accredit activities on a regional basis, for example where a regional plan is in place
- accredit particular types of activities that are appropriately regulated by others (such as fisheries, see [section 4.3.4](#)).

For projects approved under accredited arrangements, the accredited regulator would be responsible for ensuring that projects comply with requirements, across the whole project cycle including transparent post-approval monitoring, compliance and enforcement. The Commonwealth should retain the ability to intervene in project-level compliance and enforcement where egregious breaches are not being effectively enforced by the accredited party.

The devolution model proposed by this Review is shown in Figure 3 National Environmental Standards support accreditation and devolution Figure 3.

Figure 3 National Environmental Standards support accreditation and devolution

The proposed devolution model involves 5 key elements:

- 1) *National Environmental Standards* to set the benchmark for protecting the environment in the national interest and provide the ability to measure the outcomes of decisions.
- 2) *State or territory to demonstrate that their systems meet National Environmental Standards*. This element should include transparent assessment of the jurisdiction policy, plan or regulatory process against National Environmental Standards. It should include a formal check by the independent monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance regulator, to give confidence that arrangements for monitoring and assurance of accredited arrangements are sound.
- 3) *Formal accreditation by the Commonwealth Environment Minister*. This element provides accountability and legal certainty. The Minister should be required to seek the advice of the proposed Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Committee (see [Chapter 5](#)), and this advice transparently provided as part of the accreditation process.

- 4) *A transparent assurance framework.* This element provides confidence that parties are implementing the processes and policies as agreed. It should include the mechanisms for the Commonwealth to step in when it is in the national interest to do so. The assurance framework should include:
 - a) governance, reporting and assurance arrangements
 - b) independent monitoring, audit and compliance, to support public reporting on the operational and administrative performance of an accredited systems
 - c) triggers for dispute resolution to enable the Commonwealth to step in. These triggers should avoid any opportunity for gaming and unnecessary disruption to the whole regulatory system. Triggers could include:
 - i) where the Environment Minister deems a matter of such environmental significance that the Commonwealth should deal with it
 - ii) in an individual case if the National Environmental Standards are demonstrated not to have been met by the accredited party
 - iii) where there is a systemic failure to meet National Environmental Standards leading to suspension (or ultimately revocation) of accreditation.
- 5) *Regular review and adaptive management* that ensures decision-making contributes to the objectives established in the National Environmental Standards, including
 - a) regular scheduled reviews of the accreditation system and whether the National Environmental Standards are delivering the outcomes intended
 - b) adaptive management over time, as data, information and knowledge improve, and regulatory systems mature.

As is the case now, where formal accreditation arrangements are not in place, Commonwealth and state or territory collaboration (for example, through the conduct of joint assessments) should continue to be pursued to facilitate streamlining and harmonisation.

4.3 Commonwealth-led assessment processes are inefficient

Assessment pathways provided by the EPBC Act are complex, inefficient and not supported by robust systems and processes. There is also duplication between the Act and the activities regulated by other Commonwealth laws and agencies. Strategic assessments and other approaches have resulted in some streamlining, but there are opportunities for further efficiency gains.

4.3.1 Multiple environmental assessment pathways create unnecessary complexity and inefficiency

When a proposal is referred under the EPBC Act, the Commonwealth Environment Minister determines if an action will, or is likely to have a significant impact. For those proponents where it is clear they will need to be assessed in detail, it creates an additional and time-consuming step in the process.

For some proponents, the lack of clarity on the requirements of the EPBC Act (for example, key terms like 'significant impact') means that they refer proposed actions for legal certainty. More than half of all referrals result in a decision that detailed assessment and approval is not required, or not required as long as it is carried out in a particular manner. Better guidance and clarity upfront on which impacts are acceptable, and those which will require assessment and approval, will enable the referral step to be avoided.

The EPBC Act contains 5 environmental assessment pathways:

- 6) Assessment on Referral Information
- 7) Preliminary Documentation, with or without further information

- 8) Public Environment Report
- 9) Environmental Impact Statement
- 10) Public Inquiry

Each environmental assessment pathway has its own specific set of requirements, timeframes and processes set out in the EPBC Act. This increases the complexity of the regulatory framework, and the ability of the Department to clearly communicate regulatory requirements (see [Chapter 8](#)). The multiple pathways do not result in any additional environmental benefit or significantly change the assessment timeframes for the regulated community.

In practice the Assessment on Referral Information, Public Environment Report and Environmental Impact Statement environmental assessment pathways are rarely used, and the Public Inquiry pathway has never been used (see Table 3).

Table 3 Percentage of total assessment method decisions, from 2014–15 to 2018–19⁹²

Assessment approach	Per cent of total assessment method decisions
Accredited Process	25 %
Bilateral Process	12 %
Preliminary Documentation, with further information	58 %
Public Environment Report	2 %
Environmental Impact Statement	2 %
Assessment on Referral Information	1 %
Preliminary Documentation, without further information	1 %
Public Inquiry	0 %

4.3.2 Systems that support environment impact assessment are inefficient

The business and information systems that the Department uses for conducting assessments are antiquated and inefficient. File management systems used by assessment officers are cumbersome, and information is handled and handled again throughout the process (see [Chapter 6](#)). Steps are missed or duplicated, interactions with proponents are not easily recorded, and project tracking is difficult, and often out of date.

There are inefficiencies arising from the way information is received from proponents. To determine if a valid referral has been received, the Department conducts manual checks, rather than a system identifying that a referral isn't valid and not allowing a proponent to submit it. The environmental impact assessment documentation provided by proponents are voluminous and can extend to more than 10,000 pages. These are provided in a form that is not word-searchable and with data that cannot be interrogated.

There are inefficiencies in the Department's procedures for conducting assessments. Documentation from past decisions are not maintained and are not used to provide guidance to proponents about what they can expect, or to support consistent assessment and decision-making. Relevant projects from past decisions are difficult to identify, and even if found, it is difficult to extract this information in a way that aids decision-making. Where there is deviation from past decisions, this is often not well explained.

4.3.3 Wildlife trade and permitting functions are unnecessarily prescriptive

The take, trade and movement of wildlife products (including live animals, plants and products) are regulated under Parts 13 and 13A of the EPBC Act. Part 13 includes permits to take, injure or kill protected matters in Commonwealth areas, including in Commonwealth waters. Part 13A is dedicated solely to the international movement of wildlife specimens and gives effect to Australia's obligations as a member of the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora* (CITES) and the *Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species* (Bonn Convention).

The EPBC Act goes beyond Australia's obligations under these international conventions. For example, the Act requires import permits to be issued for Appendix II CITES listed species, even though the exporting country has already conducted a sustainability assessment. This results in around 2,000 additional permits being issued each year, with costs to individuals, companies and the Department but no appreciable conservation benefit. Similarly, the movement of personal and household effects is overregulated. Australia requires permits for personal low-risk trade items such as tourist souvenirs, exceeding CITES requirements.

Prescription in these parts prevents flexibility and discretion, where this is warranted. Compliance breaches cannot be enforced in a proportionate manner. For example, the Environment Minister must revoke an approval if a condition of a wildlife trade operation is not met, potentially resulting in businesses being shut down for months even for minor breaches.

Settings for the permitting of wildlife trade are inefficient and unnecessarily prescriptive. Long-overdue amendments are required to reduce complexity and regulatory burden, without compromising environmental or international standards.

4.3.4 Efforts to recognise other environmental management frameworks have led to complexity and overlap

The EPBC Act operates in a way that seeks to recognise other environmental regulatory and management frameworks, including the management of Commonwealth fisheries, Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs), offshore petroleum activities, and frameworks that regulate activities on Commonwealth land. Each of these are explored in this section.

Commonwealth fisheries

The Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) is responsible for the day-to-day management and compliance of Commonwealth fisheries. Assessments under the EPBC Act are conducted on the environmental performance of all export fisheries (Part 13A Assessments) and all Commonwealth managed fisheries (Part 10 Strategic Assessments). These assessments ensure that, over time, fisheries are managed in an ecologically sustainable way.

EPBC Act assessments of fisheries are conducted against well established guidelines that assess the ecological sustainability of management arrangements⁹³. Lower-risk fisheries are now assessed on a 10 yearly rolling basis. Higher-risk fisheries, including those that interact with protected species such as dolphins, dugongs and sea lions are generally assessed every 3 years.

Parts 13 and 13A of the EPBC Act provide processes to assess impacts to protected marine species (including those protected under the Bonn Convention, see Box 13) and ensure compliance with export controls and international wildlife trade rules. These permitting processes are generally undertaken in parallel for Commonwealth managed fisheries and all export fisheries.

Box 13 The Bonn Convention

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (Bonn Convention) provides a global platform for the conservation and sustainable use of migratory animals and their habitats.

Under the Convention, only species listed under Appendix I need be afforded protected status. For species listed under Appendix II, the Convention encourages range states to enter into regional or global agreements to improve these species' conservation status.

Currently the EPBC Act requires the inclusion as a listed migratory species under the Act of any species listed under either of the Appendices to the Convention, making it an offence to catch, kill, injure, take, or move the species in Commonwealth waters without a permit issued under Part 13.

Listing is automatic and occurs without regard to the species' conservation status in Australia. For example, for some species included under Appendix II of the Convention, the Australian population is distinct from the global one and is sustainably harvested within Australia. Automatic inclusion under the provisions of the EPBC Act affords such species greater protection than is required under the Convention and is counter to the Convention's intent.

There are opportunities to streamline the multiple assessment and permitting processes needed to undertake commercial fishing operations in Commonwealth waters or jointly managed fisheries. Given the maturity of the fisheries management framework administered by AFMA, the Review is confident that further streamlining can be achieved while maintaining assurance in the outcomes. Opportunities for a more streamlined approach could include refining the process for strategic assessments of individual Commonwealth fisheries or developing specific National Environmental Standards for marine areas and accrediting AFMA's regulatory framework against these Standards.

Regional Forest Agreements

A Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) is a regional plan, agreed between a state and the Commonwealth for management of native forests. RFAs balance economic, social and environmental demands on forests and seek to deliver ecologically sustainable forest management, certainty of resource access for the forest industry and protection of native forests as part of Australia's national reserve system.

The *Regional Forestry Agreement Act 2002* (RFA Act) is Commonwealth legislation under which RFAs are made. RFAs must have regard to a range of conditions, including those relevant to MNES protected by the EPBC Act, such as endangered species and World Heritage values (see Box 14).

Box 14 Conditions for RFAs relevant to the EPBC Act

A Regional Forest Agreement must have regard to assessments of the following matters, as they are relevant to the region or regions⁹⁴:

- environmental values, including old growth, wilderness, endangered species, national estate values and World Heritage values
- Indigenous heritage values
- economic values of forested areas and forest industries
- social values (including community needs)
- principles of ecologically sustainable management
- the agreement provides for a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system
- the agreement provides for the ecologically sustainable management and use of forested areas in the region or regions.

The EPBC Act recognises the RFA Act, and additional assessment and approvals are not required for forestry activities conducted in accordance with an RFA (except where forestry operations are in a World Heritage property or a Ramsar wetland). These settings are colloquially referred to as the 'RFA exemption', which is somewhat of a misnomer.

The Review has received submissions from stakeholders concerned that the requirements of the EPBC Act are not sufficiently addressed in RFAs, and that monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance activities are inadequate. During the course of this Review, the Federal Court found that an operator had breached the terms of the RFA and would be subject to the ordinary controlling provisions of the Act.

Legal ambiguities in the relationship between the EPBC Act and the RFA Act should be clarified so that the Commonwealth's interests in protecting the environment interact with the RFA framework in a streamlined way.

Offshore Petroleum

The National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority (NOPSEMA) is the Commonwealth regulator for offshore energy activities in Commonwealth waters. Since 2014 significant streamlining of the environmental regulation of offshore energy activities has been achieved by using a strategic assessment made under Part 10 of the EPBC Act.

The strategic assessment endorsed NOPSEMA's environmental management authorisation process. Activities undertaken in a way that is consistent with the authorisation process do not need to be separately referred, assessed and approved under the EPBC Act.

The current settings for strategic assessments have significant limitations (see [Chapter 3](#)), resulting in inflexibility in the streamlining arrangements in place with NOPSEMA. The strategic assessment endorsed NOPSEMA's arrangements that were in place at the time of the agreement. This in effect froze them in time and has invariably stifled continuous improvement and further streamlining where there are opportunities to do so that do not lower environmental protections.

Activities on Commonwealth land

The EPBC Act provides for streamlined assessments with other Commonwealth agencies in relation to airspace, airports, and foreign aid. Section 160 provides an alternative pathway for managing the environmental impacts of projects managed by other Commonwealth agencies (for example, under the *Airports Act 1996*), based on advice from the Commonwealth Environment Minister.

While a relatively small component of the broader regulatory system, the proposed National Environmental Standards (see [Chapter 1](#)) provide further opportunity to streamline processes within the Commonwealth. It is important that conflicts of interest be managed and situations of unconstrained self-regulation be avoided.

4.4 Proposed key reform directions

4.4.1 Streamline environmental impact assessments conducted by the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth will continue to have a role undertaking environmental impact assessments and approvals for individual projects (see Box 15). To reduce the complexity of the regulatory process, the pathways for assessing proposals should be rationalised. Separate pathways should be provided for high-impact and lower-impact developments, so that the assessment is proportionate to the level of impact on MNES.

It is anticipated that with the proposed reform directions of this Review, the overall caseload of the Department will be reduced over time. National Environmental Standards and regional plans will set clear rules, meaning that proponents will be incentivised to develop projects with acceptable impacts. This will streamline, or indeed avoid the need for any interaction with, the regulatory process. Lower-risk projects that still require assessment could receive approval with standard conditions (see [Chapter 3](#)), which would provide proponents with greater certainty.

Similarly, the proposed devolution model incentivises the states and territories to enter into accredited arrangements with the Commonwealth because the overall time frame for project assessment and approval would be expedited.

Proposed reforms to information, data and regulatory systems will deliver further streamlining, by providing a single source of truth for environmental information, a modern interface for interactions on the EPBC Act, and an efficient system for case management (see [Chapter 6](#)).

Box 15 Pathways for a development proposal**No Commonwealth assessment or approval required—if:**

- 1) A project can demonstrate that it meets the National Environmental Standards. These projects should be registered and include sufficient information to demonstrate due diligence that the scope and impacts of the project are consistent with the Standard.
- 2) A project can demonstrate that it is consistent with an approved regional plan. These projects should be registered and include sufficient information to demonstrate due diligence that the scope and impacts of the project are consistent with the Standard.
- 3) A project is assessed and/or approved under an accredited state or territory system.

Commonwealth assessment and approval required—if:

- 1) A state or territory system is not accredited (or a project is not assessed under an accredited system).
- 2) A project cannot demonstrate that it meets the National Environmental Standards.
- 3) A project occurs on Commonwealth land (and cannot demonstrate that it meets National Environmental Standards).
- 4) A project is 'called in' by the Commonwealth Environment Minister for assessment and approval.
- 5) A project is referred to the Commonwealth Environment Minister for a decision by state, territory or another Commonwealth agency.

Note: State or territory approval may still be required in some of these cases.

4.4.2 Improving the efficiency of wildlife permits and trade

The EPBC Act should be amended to clearly delineate between different international obligations arising from Appendix I and II of the *Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species* listings. This would allow Australia to meet its international obligations under the Bonn Convention and continue to manage and protect migratory species domestically. To do this, Part 13 of the Act could be modified to allow the take of Appendix II listed species subject to all relevant management arrangements demonstrating that the take would not be detrimental to the survival of the species.

In the short-term, the Review proposes that reforms to wildlife trade permitting arrangements should be made to align the EPBC Act with current CITES requirements. Long-overdue amendments to streamline permitting processes should also be pursued. In the longer-term wildlife trade provisions should be reformed to align regulatory effort proportionate to risk and conservation benefit.

5 Trust in the EPBC Act

Key points

The community and industry do not trust the EPBC Act and the regulatory system that underpins its implementation. A dominant theme in the 30,000 contributions received by the Review is that many in the community do not trust the Act to deliver for the environment.

The avenues for the community to substantively engage in decision-making are limited. Poor transparency further erodes trust.

The lack of trust is evident in high community interest in development applications, high-profile public campaigns, legal challenges to EPBC Act decisions, and a growing rate of both Freedom of Information (FOI) applications and requests for statements of reasons.

The EPBC Act is not trusted by industry. They generally view it as cumbersome, pointing to duplication, slow decision-making, and legal challenges being used as a tool to delay projects and drive up costs for business (often called 'lawfare').

The key reform directions proposed by the Review are:

- improve community participation in decision-making processes, and the transparency of both the information used and the reasons for decisions
- provide confidence that decision-makers have access to the best available environmental, cultural, social and economic information
- amend the settings for legal review. While retaining extended standing, provide for limited merits review for development approvals. Legal challenges should be limited to matters of outcome, not process, to reduce litigation that does not have a material impact on the outcome.

5.1 The community does not trust that the EPBC Act is delivering for the environment

The EPBC Act is broadly perceived as ineffective at protecting the environment. The lack of clear outcomes ([Chapter 1](#)), weak monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance ([Chapter 9](#)), and ineffective environmental monitoring and evaluation ([Chapter 7](#)) drive mistrust.

Limited access to information about decisions and the lack of opportunity to substantively engage in decision-making under the EPBC Act adds to this mistrust. This drives the use of legal review to discover information, rather than its proper purpose to test and improve decision-making.

5.1.1 Community participation is limited to process—they do not feel heard

The processes of the EPBC Act limit avenues for community participation in decision-making. For example, participation in the process for listing species is largely limited to matters of scientific fact. There is no avenue in the process to raise concerns about the potential social and economic implications of listing additional species or ecological communities.

The experts who lead community engagement processes in environmental impact assessments (EIA) highlight that 'the levels of community outrage...increasingly reflect a greater community intolerance of proponents who disregard community values...key stakeholders and communities are losing, or have lost, confidence in project development and government approval processes.'⁹⁵

The growth in community interest in environmental decisions is indicative of the degree of mistrust. People want to know why decisions are made and want to contribute to decisions that affect them and Australia's environment, especially when they believe those decisions are having negative consequences.

With limited trust in the effectiveness of the EPBC Act and no alternative avenue to participate, the community seeks information or influence through whatever means possible. The formal access options for both business and the community under the current arrangements are:

- FOI applications
- requesting statements of reasons
- judicial review
- merits review for Part 13A wildlife trade permit decisions (noting that merits review is not available for EIA decisions)
- public comment processes.

5.1.2 There is little transparency of information and advice provided to decision-makers and how it is considered in decisions

A key theme in submissions is the lack of transparency of how information is collected and incorporated into decision-making processes. The public don't trust claims made by advocates or governments on the costs or benefits of a proposal, and they don't trust the effectiveness of compliance and enforcement activities. There are concerns that proponents themselves commission environmental consultants in the EIA process, but there are no professional standards or accreditation for these consultants, which further erodes trust in decision-making.

Low transparency and a lack of early public engagement by some proponents means that it is often late in decision-making processes that community concerns are heightened, such as when a specific development application is being considered. This is the most likely point they will engage with the project impacts and the process.

Poor transparency encourages challenges to decisions. The growth in FOI requests is indicative of the degree of mistrust and the perceived lack of transparency and accountability for decision-makers. People cannot understand how decisions to approve developments can be consistent with the laws that protect the environment, if overall environmental indicators are trending down.

This lack of visibility is exacerbated by the complexity of the EPBC Act and limitations in both the scope and transparency of information used for decision-making, and to ensure compliance with the Act. There is a growing trend of post-approval arrangements, where specific environmental impacts and treatments are considered when proponent management plans are assessed. This happens without the opportunity for public comment.

The community also cannot see how allegations of non-compliance with the EPBC Act are investigated and resolved.

The EPBC Act and its processes focus on the provision of environmental information, yet the Minister can and must consider social and economic factors when making many decisions. The community can't see how these factors are weighed in Act decisions under the current arrangements. There is no requirement for proponents to give fulsome information in relation to social and economic impacts of a project proposal, nor is there scope for the assessment process to test the veracity of that information.

The social and economic benefits and costs put forward by proponents are at the project scale, meaning that decision-making is not based on a complete nationally focused economic or social analysis. The trade-offs and considerations of decision-makers are not explicit, often happening behind closed doors. This gives rise to allegations that proponents have undue influence on decision-makers and the environment loses out to other considerations.

The advice provided to support decisions is not always made publicly available. This promulgates concerns over the quality of the advice, or that government may have something to hide and shuns accountability for its decisions.

There is a lack of confidence in the quality of the advice provided, and views that decisions are biased towards competing imperatives other than protection of the environment. To resolve this concern, many submissions to this Review have expressed a strong preference for decisions to be made by

independent authorities or commissions, rather than democratically elected decision-makers and their delegates.

5.1.3 High-profile decisions are contested—the community is dissatisfied with environmental outcomes

It is not clear how decisions explicitly contribute to environmental outcomes. Many contributions to the Review raised concerns that decisions made under the EPBC Act are out of step with the views and values of the community.

Where concerns arise about environmental outcomes associated with a decision—and with no other viable alternative for the community—public focus turns to challenging high profile decisions. These challenges can succeed on technical legal grounds rather than on environmental outcomes. For example, there is currently no avenue in the EPBC Act to challenge the merits of EIA decisions; consequently, technical process compliance has become the focus.

In the *Shree* case⁹⁶, the technicality was a failure to attach documents to a Ministerial decision brief. This legal challenge was on the basis of a failure to fulfil process obligations rather than questioning the outcomes resulting from the decision, which was remade with the same environmental outcome after legal proceedings were completed.

Where used, campaigns, protests and the use of the courts do slow down developments. These delays often result in no material change to the decision. Technical challenges result in delays and costs for industry and the economy with little, if any, benefit to the environment.

5.2 Industry perceives the EPBC Act to be cumbersome and prone to unnecessary delays

5.2.1 Complexity of the EPBC Act leads to uncertainty for business

The complexity of the EPBC Act leads to cumbersome processes, which are inefficient for both business and government. This adds to regulatory costs, without any associated environmental benefit (see [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 7](#)). For example, the EPBC Act does not allow decision-makers to correct or adjust decisions that are faulty only on technical grounds. This leads to unnecessary process delays for industry, without necessarily changing the substance of the original decision.

Judicial review cases have driven a culture of ‘box-ticking’ within the Department. This has led to fewer resources being dedicated to assisting proponents to improve outcomes for the environment and more on administering processes.

The information used to make a decision and how the decision is made based on that information is not always consistent or clear. This leads to uncertainty for proponents. Past decisions are not transparent. Industry cannot derive lessons from previous interactions with the EPBC Act, which would lead both to efficiency and improvements over time. This is in contrast to determinations made under tax law or competition law, which are public and searchable.

5.2.2 Duplicative processes and slow decision-making drive up costs

An underlying theme of industry mistrust in the EPBC Act relate to its perceived duplication with state and territory processes (see [Chapter 4](#)) and the length of time it takes to receive an approval. These are key reasons why industry is calling for a ‘one-stop-shop’ model to reduce duplication and assessment time frames.

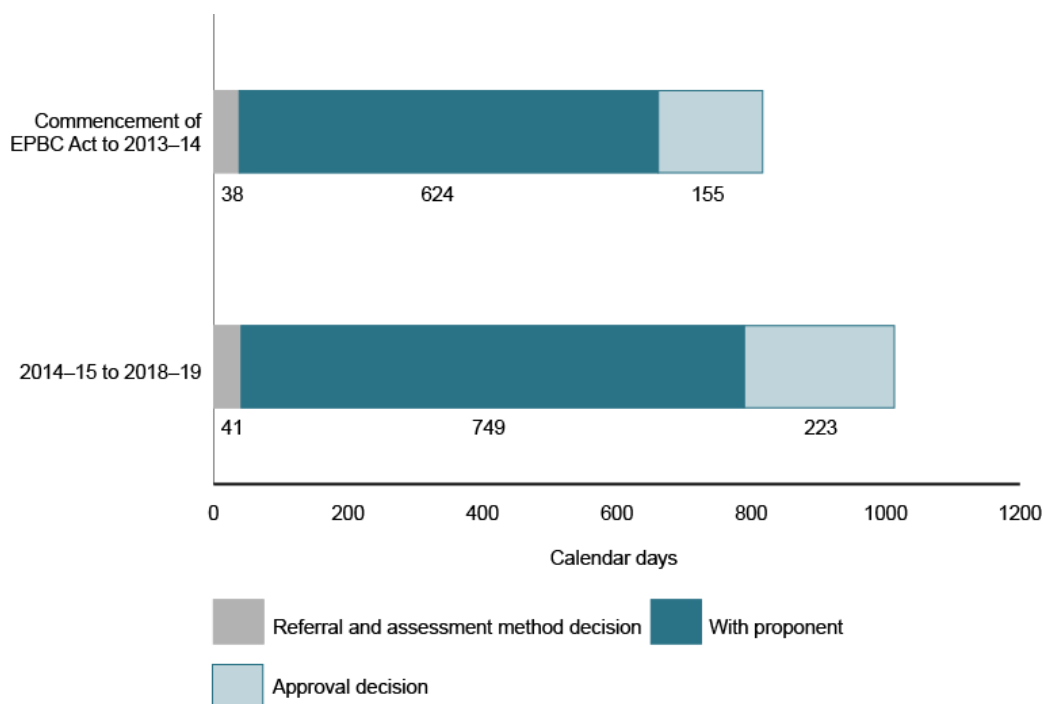
On average, resources sector projects can take nearly 3 years, or 1,013 days to approve under the EPBC Act⁹⁷, and this is too long. For business, time is money. On large projects, time delays can result in significant additional costs (see Box 16) for time frames related to resources sector projects). The recent provision of additional resources to conduct EIAs has improved performance from 19% to 87% of key decisions made on time.

There is also little accountability in the post-approval phase. There are no statutory time frames for these decisions, and this has led to increased uncertainty and delay for industry⁹⁸.

Box 16 Time frames for assessment and approval of resource projects under the EPBC Act have increased over time

Since the commencement of the EPBC Act, the average time taken for large, complex resource projects to be assessed and approved has increased from an average of 817 days to 1,013 days (see Figure 4). The time taken for the Minister to make an approval decision on these projects also increased to an average of approximately 223 days.

Figure 4 Average number of days taken for approvals processes under the EPBC Act for resource projects⁹⁹



Source: Unpublished data, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

These time frames do not factor in time taken for post approval requirements, such as the development of management plans, which can be significant. They also do not factor in appeal time frames.

Submissions have noted that businesses have experienced time delays due to statutory deadlines being missed by the regulator. The Minerals Council of Australia¹⁰⁰ cited project examples of where it has taken 7 months to make a controlled action decision with a 20 business day statutory time frame (EPBC 2019/8534), and 87-business days to make an approval decision with a 40-business day statutory time frame (EPBC 2017/7902).

Lengthy assessment and approval processes are not all the result of a slow Commonwealth regulator. On average, the process is with the proponent for more than 3 quarters of the total assessment time (example in Figure 4). This includes the time needed to collect required environmental information and collate necessary documentation, or when projects are shelved for periods of time for commercial reasons by proponents. In some instances, projects that require state and Commonwealth approvals can be held up by state or territory assessment and approval processes. In rare cases, Commonwealth approvals can be received years before a state or territory approval¹⁰¹.

5.2.3 Industry is concerned that legal challenges add further delays

Poor trust in the EPBC Act has played out in a lengthy public debate about ‘green lawfare’, with accusations that politically motivated environment groups use the courts to delay projects. The public discourse on legal challenges is focused on large projects, with considerable economic benefits that impact highly valued environmental areas¹⁰². Pro-development groups argue that the extended standing provisions (standing beyond a person directly affected by a decision) should be removed from the Act. Previous attempts have been made to remove these provisions¹⁰³.

Highly conflicting evidence and viewpoints have been received by the Review about whether there is significant abuse or gaming of appeal mechanisms under the EPBC Act¹⁰⁴. Generally, only a small number of decisions have been challenged relative to the approximately 6500 projects referred under the Act (19 challenges in the last 5 years).

Similarly, evidence from other jurisdictions indicates that open standing arrangements (which are broader than the current provisions in the EPBC Act) do not necessarily lead to excessive numbers of legal challenges. In NSW, less than 2% of development applications are challenged via judicial or merits review¹⁰⁵.

The focus should not be to limit the capacity of people to use legal review to challenge decisions in the public interest. Rather, the excessive process requirements as well as improving communication and transparency for the EPBC Act should be addressed as a matter of urgency to remove the most significant sources of delay and to increase certainty. This effort will minimise the drivers for legal challenge, particularly for litigation that is vexatious or without reasonable prospects of success.

5.3 Proposed key reform directions

The national interest requires different objectives to be weighed and values reflected. This means that the EPBC Act will never satisfy all stakeholders all of the time. A key driver of low trust in the EPBC Act is lack of confidence that it is contributing to achieving environmental outcomes. The suite of reforms proposed by this Review is designed to work together to lift trust in the EPBC Act and its operation.

The setting of National Environmental Standards and the development of regional plans are key mechanisms to set the clear outcomes that the EPBC Act intends to achieve (see [Chapter 1](#)). Many of the reform directions proposed in other chapters seek to provide greater confidence that decisions contribute to achieving these outcomes. These include a quantum change in the data and information that underpins the operation of the Act (see [Chapter 6](#)), the development of effective frameworks for monitoring and evaluating the operation of the Act and the broader national environmental management system (see [Chapter 7](#)), and effective, independent monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance (see [Chapter 9](#)).

Many of the reforms proposed will also reduce the time taken for regulatory decisions. Clear rules (see [Chapter 1](#)), greater harmonisation with other regulators (see [Chapter 4](#)) and better information, data and regulatory systems (see [Chapter 6](#)) will speed up the time taken to receive environmental approval.

The aim of the key reform directions proposed in this chapter is to minimise the demand for formal review, while providing the necessary access to the law demanded of modern regulatory practice. They seek to address the reasons the community chooses legal challenge over other mechanisms, while allowing for improvements to be generated from effective scrutiny and testing of decision-making through formal legal review.

5.3.1 Improve community participation in decision-making and transparency of information

A fundamental reform is to facilitate adequate time for the community to consider information and respond to it.

Improved community participation in processes can save time by ensuring that the right information is surfaced at the right time and can be considered in the decision-making process. Best-practice community consultative processes are well established¹⁰⁶ and the National Environmental Standard for transparent processes and robust decisions should include specific requirements for community consultation.

Better information management systems (see [Chapter 6](#)) that are interactive and digitally connected can improve community access to information about decisions, including greater transparency of the stage of the decision-making process, the opportunities for community participation, and the information that is being considered in the decision-making process.

Improving participation and transparency will mean that stakeholders will be less likely, and have less justification, to resort to legal challenge. The limited merits review model proposed requires information to be introduced and sustained as part of the decision-making process. Therefore, more complete information is available to make the decision rather than being withheld for legal ‘forum shopping’.

5.3.2 Strengthen independent advice to provide confidence that decision-makers are using best available information

There is low trust that decisions are not subject to inappropriate political interference. Lack of trust is an underlying driver behind calls for independent authorities or commissions to make decisions¹⁰⁷.

This solution is not supported by the Review. It is entirely appropriate that elected representatives (and their delegates) make decisions that require competing values to be weighed and competing national objectives to be balanced. It is important that the law is clear and that core regulatory functions are carried out effectively, rather than decision-making being ‘independent’.

That said, community confidence and trust in the process could be enhanced by the provision of transparent, independent advice on the adequacy of information provided to a decision-maker. The statutory advisory committee structures in the EPBC Act should be recast. An Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) Committee should be established, comprising an independent chair and the chairs of these committees:

- Information and Knowledge (to advise on science, economic, social impacts and traditional knowledge)
- Indigenous Knowledge and Engagement (to advise on the co-design of reforms and the National Environmental Standard for Indigenous engagement)
- Threatened Species Science (to advise on the status of threatened species and ecological communities and actions needed to improve their condition in regional recovery plans)
- Australian Heritage Council (as established under the *Australian Heritage Council Act 2003* to provide advice on heritage matters)
- A committee with water resources expertise (to advise on the impacts of projects subject to the water trigger (see [Chapter 4](#))).

The ESD Committee should provide transparent advice to the Minister to inform decisions on the making of National Environmental Standards and regional plans, and the accreditation of arrangements for devolving decision-making. The Minister could request the Committee’s advice on other issues or decisions where they have relevant expertise.

The ESD Committee should provide the Minister with transparent formal advice on:

- the adequacy of the information provided to inform the decision
- whether the processes that underpin the recommendation have been conducted in accordance with relevant standards (for example, for community or Indigenous engagement)
- whether the recommendation is consistent with the National Environmental Standards.

In making a decision, the Minister should be required to provide reasons as to how the advice of the ESD Committee was considered.

5.3.3 Retain standing with a refined, limited merits review mechanism

The legal review framework should not be the primary determinant for the performance of the EPBC Act. However, effective, efficient and transparent decisions based on clear outcomes should reduce the demand for legal review.

The Review is not yet convinced that the current standing provisions in the EPBC Act (section 487) should be removed, but adjustments to legal review provisions should be made to provide for limited merits review ‘on the papers’. This form of review limits the considerations to those matters that were raised and maintained by the applicant during the due course of the regulatory decision or matters arising from a demonstrable material change in circumstances.

Standing

The Review is not convinced of the view that extended standing should be curtailed. Broad standing remains an important feature of environmental legislation, particularly given the presence of collective harm resulting from damage to environmental or heritage values. Individual loss is not always identifiable or quantifiable, reliance on which would result in restoration falling fully on the public purse.

The courts have the capacity to deal with baseless or vexatious litigation. Litigation with no reasonable prospect of success can be dismissed in the first instance. Both the Federal Court and the High Court have the capacity to maintain lists of vexatious litigants, who are prohibited from taking legal action without permission. This can also impact a litigant’s ability to retain counsel.

The likely result in removing extended standing is that individuals with a direct interest in a project would be co-opted to join litigation driven by others or that courts would continue to grant standing to applicants in line with previous case law. It also means that hearings would be lengthened to consider arguments as to a person’s standing before the substantive issues are considered.

Although the review also found no reason to broaden standing under the EPBC Act, even open standing (as opposed to extended standing as set out in section 487) is not likely to result in a deluge of cases. As highlighted in the submission from the Law Council of Australia¹⁰⁸, the case law supports a finding that standing is not interpreted broadly by the courts as it is aimed at protecting the public interest rather than private concerns.

Court time should be optimised by limiting vexatious litigation and litigation with no reasonable prospect of success. Reforms should focus on:

- improving transparency of decision-making, to reduce the need to resort to court processes to discover information
- limiting legal challenges to matters of outcome not process to reduce litigation that does not have a material impact on the outcome.

However, it may be beneficial for the EPBC Act to require an applicant seeking to rely on the extended standing provisions to demonstrate that they have an arguable case, or that the case raises matters of exceptional public importance before the matter can proceed.

Form of legal review

Legal review processes are to ensure that decisions are:

- made correctly in accordance with the law (judicial review)
- ‘preferable’ such that, within the range of decisions possible under the law, the best decision is made based on the relevant facts (merits review)¹⁰⁹.

In a mature regulatory framework, judicial and merits review mechanisms are complementary. They operate in concert to test and refine decision-making over time to ensure that regulation achieves its objectives and is responsive to changing circumstances¹¹⁰.

Although the existence of judicial review helps ensure legal processes are followed, there is a need for merits review to ensure decisions are meeting the intent of the legislation, not simply following processes.

Full merits review is not advised. The evidence in support of full merits review is limited and indicates that it could lead to adverse consequences. Opening decisions, on appeal or review, to the admission of new documentation or materials for consideration delays decisions without necessarily improving outcomes. It can also result in the applicant receiving a substituted decision that is preferable or more complete in some way, leading to withholding of important information and forum shopping.

The proposal for limited merits review ‘on the papers’ has benefits in terms of:

- ensuring decisions are ‘reasonable’ given the material at the time of the decision
- contributing to ensuring decisions are of high quality—that is, transparent and consistent decisions, contested to a degree that is not detrimental to the effectiveness of regulation, and less open to gaming.

However, it must be carefully designed to minimise perverse outcomes. A focus on good, transparent decision-making by the regulator is the primary consideration. Merits (and judicial) review should be a last resort to ensure correct decisions are being made. Limits on the ability to exercise merits review should be clear and in the interests of outcomes of the legislation.

The Review proposes merits review should be available for EIA decisions, but only:

- limited to specific decisions in the EIA process
- time limited in terms of when an action can be brought
- if its application is demonstrated to be in the interest of the desired outcomes.

6 Data, information and systems

Key points

Decision-makers, proponents and the community do not have access to the best available data, information and science. This results in suboptimal decision-making, inefficiency and additional cost for business, and poor transparency to the community. The key reasons why the EPBC Act is not using the best available information are:

- The collection of data and information is fragmented and disparate. There is no single national source of truth that people can rely on.
- The right information is not available to inform decisions. Information is skewed towards western environmental science and does not adequately consider Indigenous knowledge of the environment, or social, economic and cultural information. This broader set of information is not clearly integrated to inform decisions that deliver ecologically sustainable development (ESD). Cumulative impacts and future challenges like climate change are not effectively considered.
- The Department's systems for information analysis and sharing are antiquated. Cases cannot be managed effectively across the full life cycle of a project, and the user experience is clunky and cumbersome for both proponents and members of the community interested in a project.

The key reform directions proposed by the Review are:

- A national 'supply chain' of information is required so that the right information is delivered at the right time to those who need it. This supply chain should be an easily accessible 'single source of truth' on which the public, proponents and governments can rely.
- To deliver an efficient supply chain, a clear strategy is needed so that each investment made contributes to building and improving the system over time.
- A custodian for the national environmental information supply chain is needed. The Commonwealth should clearly assign responsibility for national level leadership and coordination. Adequate resources should be provided to develop the systems and capability that is needed to deliver the evidence base for Australia's national system of environmental management.
- A National Environmental Standard for information and data should set clear requirements for the provision of data and information in a way that facilitates transparency and sharing. The standard should apply to all sources of data and information, including information collected by proponents.
- To apply granular standards to decision-making, Government needs the capability to model the environment, including the probability of outcomes from proposals. To do this well, investment is required to improve knowledge of how ecosystems operate and develop the capability to model them. This requires a complete overhaul of existing systems to enable improved information to be captured and incorporated into decision-making.

6.1 There is no single source of truth for data and information

6.1.1 Data and information are hard to find, access and share

There is no single national source of truth that people can rely on. This adds cost for businesses and governments, as they collect and re-collect the information they need. It also results in less community trust in the process, as they question the quality of information on which decisions are made, and the outcomes that result from them.

There are many sources of information on the environment. These are produced by a wide range of organisations, including proponents, researchers, various Commonwealth agencies, state and territory governments, local governments and regional natural resource management organisations. Each organisation collects and manages information to suit their own needs.

There are many different portals, tools and datasets available, but there is no clear, authoritative source of environmental information to help users identify and access information that is relevant. Department datasets, including the Species Profile and Threats (SPRAT) Database and the Protected Matters Search Tool (PMST), do not refine and present data in a way that is useful for proponents, assessment officers, decision-makers or the general public. The Atlas of Living Australia attempts to bring together disparate sources of data in one place, but even its custodian, CSIRO, acknowledges its shortcomings (see Box 17).

Box 17 The Atlas of Living Australia

The [Atlas of Living Australia](#) (ALA) is a digital platform that pulls together Australian biodiversity data from multiple sources, making it accessible and reusable. It aims to support better decisions and on-ground actions and deliver efficiency gains for data management.

Launched in 2010, the ALA is hosted by CSIRO and funded under the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy. Further funding is secured out to 2023.

A wide range of organisations and individuals contribute data to the ALA, including universities, museums, governments, CSIRO, Indigenous ecological knowledge holders, and conservation and community groups. The ALA provides the technology, expertise and standards to aggregate the data and make it available in a range of ways. The platform now contains over 85 million biodiversity occurrence records, covering over 111,000 species, including birds, mammals, insects, fish and plants.

The ALA provides a user-friendly, online interface that supports species information, data visualisation and mapping tools, download of data and access to more sophisticated analysis tools. Organisations can also build on the ALA's open IT infrastructure to enhance their own information services and products, for example the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement Tool (MERIT) platform.

A [recent review of the ALA](#)¹¹¹ found that the ALA has 'pioneered a step-change' in the use of Australia's biodiversity data. However, the review noted some stakeholder concerns regarding the lack of controls and metrics around data quality and reliability, and data coverage and diversity. The report noted that minimal data is provided to the ALA by consultants and industry, which can represent a major source of biodiversity information. Industry is also not identified as a key user of the ALA, which appears to be a missed opportunity.

The issues identified by stakeholders in the ALA review highlight the overall lack of both a strategic approach to delivering diverse, representative and comprehensive data to align with national needs, and consistent funding to support such an approach.

Valuable data is often ‘locked’ in inaccessible formats. Valuable historical data is stored in paper reports. Information on listed species and communities, and assessment documents provided by proponents, are usually in PDF form. To access this information, each document must be found, opened and read individually.

Large amounts of valuable environmental data collected are not shared within government, between governments, or made available for further use. Data collected by proponents to support environmental impact assessments or the acquisition and management of offsets is not provided in a way that is able to be shared or reused. It is often considered proprietary by proponents. Data collected by the research community is often targeted for scientific publication and not always easily accessible for wider use. Regrettably, critical data and the opportunity to establish longitudinal datasets is lost over time as organisational priorities change and the resources to maintain datasets are withdrawn.

The costs and frustrations of unclear requirements, limited access to shared data, duplication and lack of transparency in the environmental assessment process have been widely acknowledged. In November 2019, environment ministers from across Australia agreed to work together to digitally transform environmental assessment systems. In 2019 the Australian and West Australian governments made financial commitments to the collaborative Digital Environmental Assessment Program. This will deliver a single online portal to submit an application across both tiers of government and a biodiversity database that will eventually be rolled out nationally¹¹². This is a good first step to improve the interface between proponents and regulators and the access and ease of use of information for environmental impact assessments.

There is no clear strategy for environmental information. Unlike other areas of national policy (such as the economy, the labour market and health), environment and heritage policy does not have a comprehensive, well-governed and funded national information base. Efforts are duplicated, and Australia does not make the most of public investment in information and data. Multiple parties collect or purchase the same or similar information, often because they aren’t aware of other efforts. Similar systems and databases are built by multiple jurisdictions. Shared or collective development would be more efficient.

A number of government-funded initiatives have sought to deliver greater coordination and standardisation of environmental data. These include the National Environmental Information Infrastructure, the Terrestrial Ecosystem Research Network, the Atlas of Living Australia (see Box 17), Digital Earth Australia (the monitoring framework that underpins the Regional Land Partnerships program), and the work of the Western Australia Biodiversity Science Institute.

Despite these efforts, governments often must resort to negotiating case-by-case data licensing and sharing, rather than having data-sharing agreements and systems that can talk with each other. The collation of information on the impacts of the 2019/20 bushfires on the environment is an example of this.

There is no comprehensive long-term national strategy or coordination. Funding is often uncertain because it consists of ad-hoc program-based investments. There are custodians for some national-level data and information (for example Geoscience Australia coordinates satellite data, and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority coordinates information related to the Great Barrier Reef) but there are major gaps, particularly for terrestrial environments.

No single organisation has clear responsibility or adequate and ongoing funding for stewardship and coordination across the breadth of national environmental information. The lack of coordination drives higher costs and derives fewer benefits from the investments that are made in information collection and curation.

6.2 The right information is not available to inform decisions made under the EPBC Act

6.2.1 Western scientific environmental information is the focus

To deliver ecologically sustainable development (ESD), decision-makers must weigh up information on the long-term environmental, economic, cultural and social impacts and benefits of their decisions.

The current focus of the EPBC Act is on western environmental science. There are currently clear structures and avenues for western scientific advice on the environment to be provided and considered. For example, the Act establishes the Threatened Species Scientific Committee for threatened species and communities listing advice and the Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development (IESC) for advice. There is no corresponding avenue or expectation for Indigenous environmental knowledge, or economic or social information, to be explicitly included or considered in statutory processes. Decision-makers must weigh competing factors, yet the information they rely on to do so is not comprehensive or transparent.

The information base for development assessment decisions is heavily skewed to environmental information collected by the proponent. There is no requirement for the proponent to give comprehensive information on social, economic or cultural impacts, or for the assessment process to examine the veracity of that information. The avenues to seek expert advice (beyond that provided by the IESC) in the development assessment process are limited, and rarely used in practice.

6.2.2 Cumulative impacts and future threats are not well considered

Environmental science and management have traditionally aimed to understand past environmental conditions, how and why conditions have changed, and what needs to be done to 'return' the environment to its 'past' state.

As highlighted in [Chapter 1](#), a key shortcoming of the EPBC Act is the focus on project-by-project decisions. These decisions are largely based on project-centric information, collected and collated for the purposes of conducting an environmental impact assessment. With limited exceptions (see, for example, Box 18), the cumulative impacts of decisions on the landscape are not well considered. This is a key shortcoming of the Act.

Box 18 Assessment of cumulative impacts of proposed coal seam gas or large coal mining developments

The analysis and advice provided by the Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development (IESC) is an example of a clear expectation and process for considering cumulative impacts in advice provided to the decision-maker.

The ['Information Guidelines for the Independent Expert Scientific Committee advice on coal seam gas and large coal mining development proposals'](#) outline the definition and requirements for the consideration of cumulative impacts and provide advice on the scale and nature of assessment.

The consideration of cumulative impacts and risks needs to take into account 'all relevant past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions, programmes and policies that are likely to impact on water resources'. Consideration of local-scale cumulative impacts is undertaken by the proponent, informed by groundwater and surface modelling, bioregional assessments and other relevant regional plans. Advice on broader cumulative impacts may be provided by government regulators.

Continued next page

Box 18 (continued)

This focus on considering and providing advice on cumulative impacts is facilitated by several factors, including:

- the broad definition of 'water resources' (defined according to the *Water Act 2007*) supports a holistic view of impacts on the underlying processes that support species and ecosystem services, leading to more comprehensive and integrated scientific advice
- significant focus on and investment in groundwater and surface water models over several decades
- the more recent investment in the Commonwealth Government's [bioregional assessment programs](#) to deliver independent, scientific assessments of the potential cumulative impacts of coal and unconventional gas developments on the environment
- the IESC's legislative functions, and its focus on developing a suite of resources to assist industry and regulators with environmental assessments, providing clarity around expectations and information needs.

The establishment of the IESC and the delivery of the Bioregional Assessments Program was part of a \$150 million National Partnership Agreement announced by the Commonwealth Government in 2012¹¹³, with an additional \$30.4. million in funding announced for the Geological and Bioregional Assessments Program in 2017. This highlights the significant amount of investment required in data aggregation, analysis and expert advice required to underpin the consideration of cumulative impacts.

Due to climate change, the past will no longer be a useful guide to the future. Key threats to the environment, including biosecurity incursions and altered fire regimes, will be compounded by climate change. While considering cumulative impacts is important now, this becomes increasingly so as the predicted widespread and substantial changes to the environment arising from climate change manifest.

There will always be inherent uncertainty about how future pressures will affect the environment, but it is possible to better understand different future scenarios to help inform decisions. There is a clear need to enhance capability to consider a dynamic environment and a changing future.

The proposed key reforms, including the setting of National Environmental Standards and the making of regional and strategic national plans, enable cumulative impacts to be considered over long time frames. This requires a substantially improved information base and a broader suite of information tools, including the capacity to model the outcomes of alternative scenarios.

New information tools are needed. While proven and long used in many areas of environmental management (such as climate modelling, fisheries, the management the Great Barrier Reef and for water resources), the modelling capability to predict the impacts of threats and management actions on land-based biodiversity is still relatively immature in Australia.

The technologies to analyse and gain insights from diverse and very large datasets are not broadly used, but these insights are essential to develop and refine predictive models. This contrasts to other areas of national policy such as the economy and health, where predictive modelling is a mainstream and widespread tool used to inform decision-making.

6.3 The Department's information management systems are antiquated

The EPBC Act was developed in the last century, when the use of paper was standard, and the internet was not yet central to the effective delivery of government services. The way the Act is administered has not kept pace with the rapid transformation in how government, businesses and people interact with technology. In essence, the Department uses systems which are insufficient to deliver its regulatory functions efficiently.

The online systems that support the EPBC Act are cumbersome, duplicative and slow, and do not meet expectations for an easy, tailored, digital experience. The Department's systems for managing assessment documentation result in the need to manually handle (and double handle) files, leading to mistakes and delays. Interactions with proponents are not easily recorded, resulting in duplication and a lack of structure.

There is no system for efficient case management, and it is not easy for the Department, the proponent or the community to determine the status of a proposal in the assessment process or track a project after an approval has been granted. Departmental systems do not link with state and territory systems, and there is no single user portal.

The EPBC Act requires archaic methods of communication such as newspaper advertisements and publishing in the [Government Notices Gazette](#). The focus on meeting statutory requirements often comes at the expense of effort to use more modern forms of presenting and communicating information in an easily accessible way.

6.4 Proposed key reform directions

6.4.1 A national environmental information supply chain, roadmap and custodian

The provision of information can be viewed like a supply chain. Information is delivered through a series of processes that convert raw data into end products that can be used—by decision-makers to inform their decisions, by proponents to help them understand and design their project proposals, and by the community to understand the impacts of decisions and the outcomes that are achieved.

As with other supply chains, effort and resourcing is required for an efficient chain that delivers the right products at the right time to the right customers. The customer (the user) is central to the design of the supply chain.

Reform activities proposed by this Review will become core users of the supply chain of information, including:

- requirements to make decisions that deliver ESD
- the setting and implementation of National Environmental Standards
- the development of regional environmental plans and the monitoring and evaluation framework of the EPBC Act ([Chapter 7](#)).

The opportunity is broader than just the EPBC Act. A national environmental information supply chain that delivers for a national system of environmental management is needed. The national environmental information supply chain should:

- prioritise the collection of environmental and other information, making the most of modern technologies to do this efficiently
- have a central repository (or clearly linked repositories), from where data can be curated into information and knowledge
- incorporate the data and information that is owned and curated by others, including economic and social information. Indigenous data and knowledge should be also incorporated in a culturally appropriate way, which respects the custodians of that knowledge

- incorporate predictive modelling capability, so cumulative pressures can be considered and, future scenarios and risks can be comprehensively examined
- supply the decision-making frameworks, that enable ESD to be effectively considered, and the precautionary principle applied
- feed into the frameworks that support monitoring and evaluation, of the National Environmental Standards, the operation of the Act and the broader national environmental management system.

A national supply chain, which can deliver the same information to a decision-maker (for example the Commonwealth or a state or territory under a devolved arrangement), will make it easier for governments to demonstrate their systems deliver decisions that are consistent with the National Environmental Standards.

Significant upfront investment is required to deliver the substantial improvement in the information supply chain, and ongoing investment will be required to maintain the system over time. This will improve the effectiveness of Australia's environmental management and deliver efficiency for governments and for business.

Given the significant investment required, the supply chain should be delivered in a strategic and coordinated way. A comprehensive roadmap is needed. Responsibility for planning and delivering the supply chain should be assigned to a national institution—a custodian of the national environmental information supply chain. There are numerous potential candidates amongst key national institutions. However, the Review is not going to 'pick a winner'.

The national custodian would have clear responsibility for:

- facilitating the collaboration of relevant stakeholders to establish information needs for national-level reporting, and policy and program design
- developing, publishing and maintaining a long-term data, information and systems strategy and road map that identifies priority needs
- overseeing the central repository (or connected repositories) of information, noting that individual datasets may be managed by the collecting organisation that has the relevant expertise
- providing advice on the national standards for data collection, management and use
- coordinating national level capability for predictive modelling, including facilitating a community of knowledge to support the development and use of these models
- advising on the frameworks for delivering ESD in decision-making and for applying the precautionary principle (which should be required by the EPBC Act).

6.4.2 A national environmental standard for information and data

A National Environmental Standard for information and data should describe and define data requirements, and the form in which data should be provided to support data sharing and transparency. Building on existing technical data standards, a National Standard should provide a clear framework to support the provision of the required data and information, in a form that supports its integration into the supply chain.

Some standards for data and information already exist. However, there are rarely consequences if these standards are not used. Proponents should be required to submit data and information supporting development approval applications in a standardised way. Compliance with the standard should be a requirement for an application to be validly made.

The standard should apply to proponents and other providers of information and data including relevant departments. The 'Digital Transformation of Environmental Impact Assessment' work being delivered through a partnership between the Australian and West Australian governments provides a sound starting point for this standard¹¹⁴.

Legislative changes could further embed expectations for data collection and sharing in the EPBC Act. The Act could include powers that enable the Commonwealth to compel public institutions, researchers and other organisations funded by government grants and programs to provide the environmental information they collect in a manner consistent with the National Environmental Standard for information and data.

6.4.3 The Department's information management systems need a complete overhaul

The Department's information management systems need to be overhauled to provide a modern interface for interactions on the EPBC Act and to embed within systems the key decision-making frameworks that harness information and knowledge.

A modern interface includes:

- a case-management system that supports the full project lifecycle, from application through assessment, approval, to compliance and enforcement
- the capacity to link with others—so that information can be provided once and shared many times (for example with the supply chain custodian or other regulators)
- the ability to record, share and search information related to EPBC Act decisions in a way that is accessible to both the public and proponents
- the ability to readily communicate decisions using modern communication channels, rather than relying on newspaper advertisements and the Government Notices Gazette.

In the short-term, the granularity of National Environmental Standards is limited by the information available to define and apply them to decision-making. A quantum shift in the quality of information is required to transform standards from qualitative indicators of outcomes to quantified measures of outcomes. To apply granular standards to decision-making, governments need the capability to model the environment, including the probability of outcomes from proposals, drawing on predictive modelling capabilities and decision-making frameworks for ESD that will be delivered as part of the information supply chain.

To do this well, investment is required to improve knowledge of how ecosystems operate and develop the capability to model them, which is essential for testing scenarios and making informed, risk-based decisions. This requires a complete overhaul of the systems to enable improved information to be captured and incorporated into decision-making.

The frameworks and data used to advise decision-makers, and how these have been applied in the development of advice for decision-makers (for example in the making of a standard, regional plan or decision on a development application), should be publicly available information. The Government's systems should have the capability to efficiently support the preparation, consideration and publication of this information.

To build public trust and confidence, the proposed Information and Knowledge Committee ([Chapter 5](#)) should be responsible for providing the Environment Minister with independent advice on the application of the National Environmental Standard and the ESD decision-making frameworks. This advice should be transparently provided, and, where the Environment Minister acts in a manner contrary to the advice, a statement of reasons should be published.

6.4.4 Resourcing reforms

The Review acknowledges that the quantum shift required in information and data systems will come at significant cost.

A national information supply chain, with a custodian, should deliver efficiencies for all governments over time. It is an up-front investment that negates the need for multiple systems to be developed by individual governments, or to fund new one-off initiatives requiring grants or program funds.

CSIRO noted in their submission that systems of linked repositories and standardisation between jurisdictions could deliver both economic gains and increased transparency¹¹⁵. In Western Australia, it is estimated that digitally transformed environmental impact assessment would deliver a benefit of more than \$150 million every year through accelerated private and public project development¹¹⁶.

The need for investment in data, information and systems is in part generated by the need to regulate the impacts of development on the environment. Consistent with the principle that the impactor (or 'polluter') pays, proponents should be required to pay the efficient cost of the share of information, knowledge and systems required to underpin the regulation of their activities.

7 Monitoring, evaluation and reporting

Key points

There is no effective framework to support a comprehensive, data-based evaluation of the EPBC Act, its effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes and the efficiency of implementation activities.

The EPBC Act includes some requirements for monitoring and reporting on activities and outcomes. However, these do not span the operation of the Act. Activities that are done lack a clear overall purpose, coordination and intent. There is a focus on ‘bare minimum’ administrative reporting, rather than genuine monitoring and evaluation of outcomes to learn lessons, adapt and improve.

The national State of the Environment (SoE) report is the established mechanism that seeks to ‘tell the national story’ on Australia’s system of environmental management. Although it provides an important point-in-time overview, it is an amalgam of insights and information, and does not generate a consistent data series across reports. It lacks a clear purpose and intent. There is no feedback loop, and as a nation no requirement to stop, review and where necessary change course.

Combined, these issues make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assess the relative effectiveness of the levers governments individually and collectively pull to manage Australia’s environment.

The key reform directions proposed by the Review are:

- A coherent framework to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the EPBC Act in achieving its outcomes and the efficiency of its implementation should be developed. The framework must be backed by a commitment to its implementation.
- A revamp of national SoE reporting should incorporate trend analysis and address future outlooks to provide the foundation for national leadership on the environment.
- National environmental economic accounts will be a useful tool for tracking Australia’s progress to achieve ecologically sustainable development (ESD). Efforts to finalise the development of these accounts should be accelerated, so they can be a core input to SoE reporting.

Regular monitoring, evaluation and reporting are key features of modern public policy and regulation. They are essential for:

- understanding the success or failure of interventions, to enable improvements to be identified and settings to be adapted to enhance effectiveness or increase efficiency
- providing accountability to the public.

Effective monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the EPBC Act, and of the broader national environmental system is essential to achieve improved environmental outcomes. It is also central to improving and maintaining public trust in the regulatory system. If the community, and the regulated community don’t have visibility of the outcomes arising from regulatory intervention, then they question whether it is worthwhile.

Monitoring and evaluation is fundamentally linked to information and data management—it should inform the design of monitoring activities that provide data into the ‘information supply chain’ (see [Chapter 6](#)). The quality of the insights that can be drawn from evaluations depends on how information is collected, collated, shared and analysed.

The Review acknowledges that evaluating the effectiveness of environmental policy is challenging and that attributing observed outcomes to individual interventions is extremely difficult. Many different organisations are involved at different levels, there are lengthy time lags between human actions and observed changes in the environment, and broader impacts (such as climate variability and change) that contribute to environmental outcomes can mask the impact of specific interventions.

But that does not mean we should put environmental monitoring and evaluation in the 'too hard basket'. This chapter examines the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation of the EPBC Act. As the Act includes settings for the national State of the Environment (SoE) report, it also explores the leadership role the Commonwealth plays in monitoring, evaluation and reporting on the effectiveness of the nation's broader system of environmental management.

7.1 Monitoring, evaluation and reporting of the EPBC Act is inadequate

7.1.1 The EPBC Act lacks a cohesive monitoring and evaluation framework

There is no comprehensive framework that supports effective, data-based evaluation across all the operations of the EPBC Act. The absence of a strategic monitoring and evaluation framework means that there are information gaps that hinder effective evaluation, the resources that are dedicated to monitoring are likely to be inefficient, and there is no clear pathway to learn lessons, adapt and improve.

The activities to monitor and report on the EPBC Act are patchy and inconsistent. They lack a clear overall purpose and intent, including how the operation of the Act contributes to the overall performance of the nation's environmental management system.

The broad policy areas of the EPBC Act ([Chapter 3](#)), combined with the lack of clearly defined outcomes that the Act seeks to achieve ([Chapter 1](#)) provide a challenging foundation for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the Act. Furthermore, the Department lacks the systems (see [Chapter 6](#)) to collect data on its regulatory activities. This makes analysis of where resources are directed, and the efficiency of activities, difficult to assess.

To answer the fundamental question of whether the EPBC Act is operating effectively and efficiently, this Review has relied on diverse, disparate and, at times, patchy sources of information and the deep knowledge of contributors. In modern public policy, this is unacceptable.

7.1.2 There are some requirements for monitoring and reporting

The EPBC Act includes some requirements for monitoring and reporting on activities and outcomes. However, these do not span the operation of the Act and follow-through is poor. Resourcing constraints mean that the focus is on reporting to meet the bare minimum requirements, rather than monitoring and evaluation driving adaptive improvements over time.

For listed threatened species and ecological communities, requirements for monitoring are limited in scope. Recovery plans for threatened species are required to include details on how progress will be monitored, but there is no requirement to implement monitoring activities and report on whether outcomes are being achieved. This means that efforts to monitor and report are a rare exception, rather than common practice.

Conservation advices for listed threatened species and ecological communities have no detail on monitoring requirements. Most mandated 5-yearly reviews of threat abatement plans are either well behind schedule or haven't occurred¹¹⁷.

For developments approved under Part 9 of the EPBC Act, the Environment Minister may attach conditions that require specified environmental monitoring or testing to be carried out and reports to be prepared. This is an administrative decision, rather than a statutory requirement. As highlighted in [Chapter 8](#) and [Chapter 9](#), where offsets form a condition of approval, there is no comprehensive tracking of offsets, or assessment to determine if they are achieving the intended outcomes.

While not a requirement, strategic assessments made under Part 10 of the EPBC Act often include provisions as to how monitoring and evaluation will be achieved. Although approval holders are required to provide reports, the Department lacks the capacity to follow-up if activities are not conducted. Similarly, bilateral agreements 'may include' provisions for auditing, monitoring and reporting on the operation and effectiveness of all or part of the agreement, but these are not a requirement.

Other parts of the EPBC Act require management plans to be developed, and in some cases, reports against these plans to be prepared. While many requirements and approaches fall short of best practice, there is ongoing effort to improve the quality and consistency of planning and reporting.

For World Heritage properties and National Heritage places entirely on Commonwealth land, a management plan is required to be prepared and reviewed every 5 years, while for those not entirely on Commonwealth land 'best endeavours' must be made to ensure a plan is in place. Similar requirements are in place for Ramsar wetlands.

Solid processes are in place for the monitoring and reporting of World Heritage properties, which is guided by the international [World Heritage Committee](#) and highly scrutinised. Planning and review of National Heritage places is patchier. While some form of plan is in place or in preparation for most areas, a recent 5-yearly review by the Environment Minister did not assess their effectiveness¹¹⁸. Work is currently underway to develop a standardised monitoring methodology for heritage places, consistent with the existing requirements for World Heritage properties.

The Director of National Parks (DNP) and the joint national park Boards of Management are required to prepare management plans for jointly managed Commonwealth reserves, which must be updated every 10 years. While all reserves have plans in place, a recent Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) report identified shortcomings in their effectiveness and implementation¹¹⁹, which the DNP is working to address.

All Commonwealth entities are required to report on ecologically sustainable development (ESD) activities and outcomes in their annual reports (s516A). While the intent is to provide a mechanism to ensure the Commonwealth Government is considering ESD in its operations, this has been lost over time. The reality is that most Commonwealth entities report on their use of recycled paper or the energy efficiency of buildings. It is an administrative burden with no real benefit.

The Department is required to report annually on the operation of the EPBC Act. This is currently delivered as part of the Department's annual report. Despite some recent improvements, in practice, this reporting is output and activity-focused, rather than focused on the outcomes arising from the operation of the Act. The measures used to report publicly on the operation of the Act consolidate performance information across several programs and they change from year to year. This greatly reduces the usefulness of the reporting effort.

7.2 Monitoring and evaluation of Australia's environmental management system is fragmented

7.2.1 Monitoring and evaluation of Australia's environment management system is challenging

The management of Australia's environment is a shared responsibility between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, with jurisdictions working in partnership with the community and the private sector ([Chapter 1](#)). To meet its international obligations, the Commonwealth has an overarching responsibility to monitor and report on the national environment.

The approach to monitoring and evaluation within the system happens at a range of scales (project site, environmental asset, region), for a range of reasons (project, program and regulatory framework) and varies considerably. Some of the monitoring and evaluation frameworks are strong and have benefited from decades of investment and effort, others are emerging and some, like many under the EPBC Act, are immature (see Box 19).

Box 19 Examples of environmental monitoring, evaluation and reporting

The [Reef 2050 Long-term Sustainability Plan](#) provides the overarching strategy for the Great Barrier Reef, developed by the Commonwealth and Queensland governments and partners. It is underpinned by a coordinated and integrated monitoring, modelling and reporting program to support an adaptive management approach¹²⁰. It guides the coordination and alignment of existing long-term monitoring programs in order to capitalise on existing investment and avoid duplication, and informs annual report cards and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's 5-yearly outlook reports.

The Commonwealth Government's Regional Land Partnerships program has a long-term monitoring framework for projects, which builds on improved practices for collecting and storing information on on-ground activities funded by the Commonwealth Government under previous programs. The current work has a greater emphasis on processes to support monitoring and evaluation of ecological outcomes at the project and program level, with an aim to promote more robust, long-term ecological modelling and evaluation more broadly¹²¹.

There is no cohesive mechanism that brings the various efforts together to present a picture of the performance of our national system of environmental management. This is a key shortcoming that should be addressed.

7.2.2 The purpose of national State of the Environment reporting is not clear

The national State of the Environment (SoE) report is the established mechanism that seeks to 'tell the national story' on Australia's system of environmental management. Despite recent improvements in the way the national SoE report is presented, as the centrepiece of monitoring and environmental reporting on Australia's national environmental system, it is dated.

The EPBC Act requires the preparation of the national SoE report every 5 years (s516B). Five national SoE reports have been delivered, the first in 1996 and the most recent in 2016. The practice has been for the SoE report to be prepared by a team of independent authors and the approach to each report has been determined by the authors. This has influenced capacity to use the SoE report as the driver for establishing longitudinal datasets.

Although the national SoE report provides an important overview of the state and trend of Australia's environment, it is an amalgam of insights drawn from disparate sources. It does not generate a consistent data series across reports and is an attempt to report on everything for everyone. There is no feedback loop, and as a nation there is no requirement to stop, review and where necessary, change course.

The EPBC Act provides no guidance as to the purpose or objective of the national SoE report, and although provision is made for this to be clarified in regulations, this has never been done. It relies on collating available data and information and authors have repeatedly highlighted the inadequacy of data and long-term monitoring as a key challenge to effective environmental management. The SoE report's purpose is not clear and it lacks a coherent framework that supports consistency over time.

National SoE reports provide little insight into the effectiveness of different activities to manage the environment and there is no requirement for a government response. The links between SoE reporting and other initiatives, such as the development of national environmental economic accounts (see Box 20) is not clear.

Box 20 Environmental economic accounting

In April 2018 the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments agreed on a strategy to implement a common system of environmental economic accounts (EEA) across Australia¹²².

EEA is a framework for organising statistical information to help decision-makers better understand how the economy and the environment interact. The importance of the environment and its contribution to our economic and social wellbeing is often overlooked because it is not fully reflected in traditional financial accounting methods, which have developed and improved over decades.

The ultimate outcomes of a national system of environmental economic accounts include that:

- policy and decisions by government, business and community take into account the benefits of a healthy environment
- decision-makers balance social, economic and environmental outcomes
- return on investment into the environment can be demonstrated
- information on the condition and value of environmental assets is fully integrated into measures of social and economic activity.

In practice, EEA brings together information on the environment and how it is changing over time in a consistent way that can be easily integrated with social and economic data. The common national approach to EEA agreed as part of the [2018 National Strategy](#) will adopt the internationally agreed System of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA) framework. It starts by classifying and measuring the extent of environmental assets, then considers the condition or health of the asset and the range of goods and services that the asset provides. The values of those services are estimated based on market transactions, or techniques to assess non-market value.

For example, the value of a national park may be demonstrated through the income from park entry fees, and the value of tourism to the local economy. The park also provides health benefits for physically active park visitors, with a value estimated from avoided health care costs. Other benefits include pollination for local agriculture, water supply and filtration, climate change mitigation, biological diversity and flood protection.

The 2018 National Strategy sets out a roadmap with intermediate outcomes delivered over 5 years, including improving the consistency of reporting on Australia's environment and the coordination of, and access to, the data that underpins it. Several pilot accounts are underway, but they have yet to be picked up and implemented in Commonwealth or jurisdictional level reporting.

7.3 Key reform directions

7.3.1 A specific monitoring and evaluation framework for the EPBC Act

A comprehensive and coherent framework to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the EPBC Act in achieving its outcomes and the efficiency of its implementation is required.

The fundamental purpose of this framework is to enable two key questions to be answered:

- Is the EPBC Act achieving its intended outcomes?
- Is the EPBC Act operating efficiently?

A comprehensive framework backed by the systems needed to support its implementation will mean the next review of the EPBC Act will start with a comprehensive evidence base on which judgements can be made. The framework should specify:

- the key outcomes to be measured, noting that the outcomes and objectives of the National Environmental Standards provide a key basis for this
- the spatial and temporal scale at which outcomes should be measured
- the monitoring and data required, including how requirements for specific areas of the EPBC Act (for example, Standards and regional plans) come together.

The reforms proposed by this Review, particularly the establishment of National Environmental Standards and regional plans provide a solid foundation for the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the EPBC Act as a whole. The implementation of the framework should be underpinned by the data and information supply chain ([Chapter 6](#)).

The National Environmental Standard for monitoring and evaluation is envisaged to ensure that those that interact with the EPBC Act (such as proponents or accredited regulators) are required to contribute their information as appropriate to populate the framework.

In line with this framework, the annual reporting on the operation of the EPBC Act should be enhanced. It should report against the achievement of the National Environmental Standards, where these Standards have not been achieved, and the core activities undertaken to support the operation of the Act.

7.3.2 Revamp national State of the Environment reporting

A revamp of national SoE reporting is required to provide the foundation for Commonwealth leadership on the environment. It should be the vehicle through which Australia, as a nation, tells its story on the environment, both to itself and to the world.

The national SoE report should continue to be independently prepared, so that judgements are made at arm's length and without fear or favour. But the report should be rooted in a nationally agreed evaluation framework, to which the data and information collected by many can support. This framework will provide focus and consistency to the reports, while being sufficiently flexible so as not to limit the ability of the report to consider information in new ways or talk to emerging issues.

The national SoE report should examine the state and trends of Australia's environment and the underlying drivers of these trends, including interventions that have been made, and current and emerging pressures. It should provide an outlook for Australia's environment, based on future scenarios.

Government should be required to formally respond to the national SoE report. For example, it could respond in the form of a national plan for the environment, that identifies priority areas for action and the levers that will be used to act.

This revamp of the national SoE report requires an ongoing commitment to resourcing and maintaining capacity for national scale monitoring. Ideally, national SoE reports should be published on a cycle that enables comprehensive input into strategic planning and the statutory reviews of the operation of the EPBC Act.

The EPBC Act should be amended to set the formal objectives for the national SoE report, require the Commonwealth to respond and to better align the timing of the report with the statutory review.

7.3.3 Accelerate efforts on national environmental economic accounts

Environmental economic accounting provides a mechanism to underpin consistent ESD reporting across governments (see Box 20). The collaborative development of a nationally consistent system will support greater coordination and the capacity to better tell a national-level story.

While a National Strategy and Action Plan for a common national approach to environmental economic accounting was agreed in 2018, progress has been slow. A series of pilot and experimental accounts have been developed, but it has yet to be incorporated into State of the Environment reporting at the state and territory or Commonwealth level.

Efforts to finalise the development of these accounts should be accelerated, so that they can be a core input to SoE reporting, and are used to promote explicit consideration of environmental, heritage and cultural assets as part of Australia's broader national accounts.

8 Restoration

Key points

To deliver ecologically sustainable development, the EPBC Act must encourage restoration. Given the state of decline of Australia's environment, restoration is required to enable future development to be sustainable. Available habitat needs to grow to be able to support both development and a healthy environment. The current settings of the Act do not support effective or efficient restoration.

Environmental offsets are poorly designed and implemented, delivering an overall net loss for the environment.

The stated intent of the offsets policy, to only be used once proponents have exhausted all reasonable options to avoid or mitigate impacts on Matters of National Environmental Significance, is not occurring. In practice, offsets have become the default negotiating position, and a normal condition of approval, rather than the exception.

Offsets do not currently offset the impact of development. Proponents are allowed to clear or otherwise impact habitat by purchasing and improving other land with the same habitat and protecting it from future development. It's generally not clearly established that the area set aside for the offset is at risk from future development, and overall there is a net loss of habitat.

Offsets need to include a focus on restoration and should be enshrined in the law, rather than Departmental policy. The proposed key reforms to the EPBC Act include:

- requiring offsets to be considered only when options to avoid and then mitigate impacts have been actively considered, and demonstrably exhausted
- requiring offsets, where they are applied, to deliver protection and restoration that genuinely offsets the impacts of the development, avoiding a net loss of habitat
- incentivising investment in restoration, by requiring decision-makers to accept robust restoration offsets, and create the market mechanisms to underpin the supply of restoration offsets.

There are opportunities for government to explore policy mechanisms to accelerate environmental restoration including those to:

- leverage the carbon market, which already delivers restoration, to deliver improved biodiversity in suitable habitat types
- co-invest with the philanthropic and private sectors, including funding innovation to bring down the cost of environmental restoration, growing the habitat available to support healthy systems.

The reforms proposed by this Review recommend that the EPBC Act focus on protecting, conserving and restoring the environment, so that development can proceed in a sustainable way ([Chapter 1](#)). To deliver the net gain for the environment that is needed, the national focus on restoration must be enhanced (see Box 21).

Box 21 Meaning of restoration

Restoration in this chapter refers to improvement in the condition of the environment to a state that is required to be sustainable in the long-term, or a state that is desirable. It should not be inferred as a blanket ambition for a return to a particular historic environmental condition (although this may be a reasonable goal for some areas), because this may not be possible, particularly considering ongoing impacts such as climate change.

Central to the proposed reform agenda is a commitment to monitoring and evaluating progress made. Settings should be reviewed and amended to ensure that interventions made are on track to deliver intended environmental outcomes. The proposed National Environmental Standards and regional plans (see [Chapter 1](#)) are key mechanisms that specify the outcomes sought from development decisions and the priorities for restoration. Reviewing and, where needed, amending these instruments is critical to delivering ecological sustainable development (ESD) in the long-term. A recurring cycle of review provides the opportunity to adjust the rules when circumstances change or where outcomes are not being achieved.

In addition to this commitment to adaptive management, specific action is required to support restoration. Fundamental change to the way developments are permitted to 'offset' the impacts of their development are needed.

The Review has identified opportunities for national leadership outside the EPBC Act, which should be considered. Existing markets, including the carbon market, can be leveraged to deliver restoration in appropriate areas, and greater effort can be made to coordinate the investments in restoration made by governments and the private sector. There is an opportunity for these investments to improve the techniques used for restoration, so that it can be delivered at least cost. These opportunities are explored in this chapter, although no firm reform directions are proposed at this stage. The Review will continue to consider the merits of these concepts.

8.1 Environmental offsets do not offset impacts of developments

The offsets policy permits continued environmental decline

The [EPBC Act offsets policy](#) was implemented in 2012. The policy enables developers to compensate for unavoidable environmental impacts, mostly by protecting areas of habitat similar to the area that has been destroyed or damaged by the project.

The policy embeds a hierarchy of considerations when assessing the impacts of a proposal. In the first instance, impacts on matters of national environmental significance (MNES) should be avoided. Once all reasonable efforts are made to *avoid*, remaining impacts should be '*mitigated*', with efforts made to reduce the impact(s) on MNES. The 'residual impacts'—those remaining after all reasonable efforts to avoid and mitigate have been exhausted—can then be *offset*, in accordance with the rules of the offsets policy.

The offsets policy is based on the notion that as suitable habitat becomes more scarce overtime, offsets become harder to find and secure, and therefore more expensive. Although this has played out, it has not resulted in projects avoiding increasingly scarce habitat. Rather, it has led to concern from business that the scarcity of some offsets creates an 'unworkable' cost of doing business¹²³.

While the *avoid, mitigate, offset* hierarchy is its stated intent, this is not how the policy has been applied in practice. Proponents see offsets as something to be negotiated from the outset, rather than making a commitment to fulsome exploration (and exhaustion) of options to avoid or mitigate impacts.

This is in part because the proponent's decision to develop a particular site (or on a specific footprint within a site) has generally already been made before a referral is made under the EPBC Act. This limits real consideration of broadscale avoidance. Project cost and difficulty drives final decisions about siting of projects, rather than environmental considerations.

For example, the Review has noted proposals where proponents have placed linear infrastructure through habitat, rather than considering all opportunities to site it through adjacent already disturbed or cleared lands. In other cases, proponents have identified multiple prospective areas for extraction activities and have chosen sites for solely commercial reasons (such as lower costs due to proximity to transport hubs), despite generating potentially high environmental impacts.

Once a proposal is referred, assessment officers have limited scope and time to work with proponents to avoid and mitigate impacts. This becomes a 'nice to do', rather than a core focus of their efforts. An offset has become an expected condition of approval, rather than an exception.

Further to problems with application, there are significant shortcomings with the design of the offsets policy. The current policy is based on the concept of 'averted loss'. This means that proponents usually seek to meet the offset requirement by purchasing and improving land with the same habitat and protecting it from future development. However, there is no formal requirement for the proponent to demonstrate that the area set aside for the offset was sufficiently likely and able to be cleared for future development. Therefore, the environmental outcome achieved by the purchase of the offset may not be genuinely 'additional' to the outcome that would have been achieved anyway.

While the policy allows proponents to meet their offset condition by creating new habitat from highly degraded land (an approach the Review terms a restoration offset) or by using an offset that has been delivered in advance of the impact occurring (an 'advanced offset'), most offset conditions are met by protecting areas of like habitat (an averted loss offset) (see Box 22).

Box 22 Averted loss, advanced and restoration offsets

Averted loss offsets

These offsets are met by purchasing and improving an area of land with the same habitat as that which is destroyed or damaged by the development. This offset is then protected from future development. Across the range of developments that use averted loss offsets, a net reduction of habitat has resulted.

Restoration offsets

These offsets are met by creating new (or recovering old) habitat from highly degraded land. A development with a restoration offset can result in a net gain of habitat.

Advanced offsets

Advanced environmental offsets are those that are 'supplied' in advance of an impact occurring. The offset area is set aside for potential future use by the owner, or to sell to another developer. The current offset policy allows advanced offsets for:

- protecting and improving existing habitat (averted loss)
- creating new habitat from highly degraded land (restoration).

Advanced offsets are difficult to deliver under the current settings. There is no guarantee that the Environment Minister will accept an advanced offset, nor is it possible to accurately determine the area of offset required before an approval is granted. This makes investing in an advanced offset a risky proposition, and so proponents focus on protecting what is left rather than promoting restoration. This means that over time, the policy permits continued loss and ongoing decline, rather than realising a gain (or at least no net loss) to offset expected environmental impacts, let alone improve them.

Offset requirements are a condition of approval. As with other conditions (see [Chapter 9](#)), offset conditions are not adequately monitored and efforts to enforce compliance are weak. There is no transparency of the location, quality or quantity of offsets. There is no 'register of offsets' and, in the absence of such a tool it may well be possible that the same area of land has been 'protected' more than once.

Because most offsets are averted loss offsets, the offset policy in its current form delivers little other than weak protection of remnant habitats of MNES that may have never been at risk of development. It requires fundamental review.

8.2 Proposed key reform directions

The offset policy should be replaced with clear laws. The EPBC Act should require offsets only be considered when options to avoid and mitigate impacts have been demonstrably exhausted.

The EPBC Act should require that offsets deliver genuine restoration to offset the impacts of the development. Requirements for restoration should be proportional to the risk to matters of national environmental significance (MNES), with more stringent requirements for highly endangered species or ecological communities.

To provide the certainty needed to invest in restoration ahead of impacts occurring, the EPBC Act should require a decision-maker to accept *robust* advanced offsets that are created before approval is granted. Restoration offsets should be encouraged to enable a net gain for the environment to be delivered.

If offsets, including advanced offsets, were to be supported with greater certainty under the EPBC Act, then this could be the catalyst for a market response. Proponents are generally not in the business of managing habitats as their core business. However, there are expert land managers and specialist project managers who deliver these services, as has been demonstrated through the operation of the carbon market¹²⁴. The right policy settings would provide certainty for these players to invest in landscapes, confident that developers will be in the market to purchase the restored and protected habitat or management services down the track.

The concept of a biodiversity restoration market should frame the approach to offset reforms. Settings should promote regulatory certainty, transparency and competition, and the supply of robust offsets including:

- market depth—the ability for a wide range of participants to purchase restoration for a range of reasons. Voluntary buyers (for example, companies purchasing credits for green credentials), philanthropic investors and government funds should be able to purchase credits
- market integrity—the integrity of the environmental market unit is central to a successful and trusted market. This requires market transparency, clear standards, reporting and registries all backed by firm monitoring, compliance and enforcement (see [Chapter 9](#))
- market efficiency—buyers and sellers should be able to easily find each other, and the overhead costs to participate kept as low as possible.

Laws that accept advanced restoration offsets, and provide a robust market to underpin them, will mean that third parties will pre-empt the needs of developers, invest in restoration activities now, and then on-sell the robust offset to proponents when they need them. This will provide business with a far simpler mechanism to meet their residual obligations to offset their impacts.

There are barriers between biodiversity markets that are currently delivered at an individual state or territory level. Consideration should be given to how systems could be better aligned (for example, by enabling recognition of cross-border offsets). This would reduce costs for business while delivering the same environmental benefits.

8.3 The carbon market could be leveraged to deliver environmental restoration

There is an opportunity to better leverage other schemes that promote environmental restoration. Australia's carbon market, underpinned by the *Carbon Credits (Carbon Farming Initiative) Act 2011*, has successfully promoted environmental restoration since its inception.

To participate in the carbon market, farmers and other land managers can change the way they use their land to absorb and store carbon dioxide. Land is managed in accordance with prescribed rules (called methods) to earn carbon credits. These credits are then on-sold either to the government or another purchaser (for example a philanthropic investor or a company voluntarily purchasing to enhance its 'green' credentials).

Carbon credits can be earned in many ways, including by allowing or actively promoting the restoration of native forests. Since 2013, when the rules for these activities were put in place, more than 2.3 million hectares of land have been restored¹²⁵, expanding the area of natural habitat.

To date, most restoration activity under the carbon market (by area and credits generated) has occurred in drier regions of Australia¹²⁶, where both biodiversity and the numbers of threatened species are lower. In these areas, the returns from using land for carbon are often greater than returns from other land uses.

The Australian Government has recently agreed to carbon market reforms that are intended to increase the competitiveness of carbon farming when compared with other land uses. These reforms include the ability to use different carbon methods on the same parcel of land (for example, for one area to be credited for the carbon sequestered in vegetation and soil). This is known as 'stacking' carbon credits. These reforms will result in a shift in restoration arising from the carbon markets into areas of higher biodiversity, and higher numbers of threatened species. This is because the returns from 'farming carbon' will be greater than alternatives, resulting in land use change to deliver environmental outcomes.

The value derived from using land to deliver environmental outcomes can be further increased if credits from a biodiversity market can be 'stacked' on top of carbon credits, with one area of land delivering both carbon and biodiversity outcomes.

Although not covering the entirety of the biodiversity habitat types likely to be required, enhancing the links between the carbon market and biodiversity markets can shift restoration efforts into many areas of higher biodiversity, delivering multiple benefits for the community including:

- an increase in the overall sequestration of carbon over time—because the regions where carbon and biodiversity farming is a commercially viable land use would increase
- the recovery of threatened species—because the area of habitat necessary to their survival would increase.

It would also lower the overall cost of achieving carbon and threatened species outcomes because both benefits can be realised from one activity.

8.4 Investments in restoration could be better coordinated to maximise outcomes

Commonwealth Government programs for investment in environmental restoration have been a constant feature of national environmental policy over the past 20 years. These include the National Heritage Trust, Caring for Country, the Environmental Stewardship Program, the National Landcare Program, Green Army, Threatened Species Recovery Fund and the Reef Trust.

The current streams of Australian Government funding allocated towards environmental protection conservation and restoration, despite being aligned with MNES, are not comprehensively coordinated to prioritise investment in a way that achieves the greatest possible biodiversity benefits.

The reforms proposed by this Review, with a focus on National Environmental Standards and national and regional planning, will provide a foundation for more effective prioritisation and coordination of investments by governments.

There is an opportunity to provide the policy settings to better leverage private interest in investing in the environment as well as drive down the cost of restoration. A global shift towards companies focusing on their corporate social responsibilities has resulted in growing interest from the private sector to invest to improve environmental outcomes. The pool of available capital has grown over the past decade. In 2018 the responsible investment market in Australia reached \$980 billion and sustainability-themed investments accounted for \$70 billion.¹²⁷ It is also likely the resources available to invest in environmental outcomes will continue to grow.

The biodiversity offset markets proposed are one destination for this capital. Philanthropic and other investors could also be voluntary participants in the market purchasing restoration.

Contributions to the Review have suggested that a national biodiversity trust be established that links government and philanthropic investments, as well as enabling developers to meet their offset obligations. These proposals are similar to those implemented in some states and territories, such as the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust and Queensland Land Restoration Fund. These models are government-run, sometimes independent legal entities and investment vehicles designed to oversee the collection and allocation of money to improve the environment. They have legal, governance and financial structures, and capitalisation and resourcing strategies. Environmental trust funds come from public funding, philanthropic donations and from developers who pay the trust to discharge their development approval offset obligations.

Contributions to the Review have highlighted the key role the philanthropic sector plays in 'testing new solutions to tough problems'¹²⁸. A proposal posed to the Review is for co-investment to advance innovation and bring down the costs of environmental restoration¹²⁹. This is akin to the role that the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) plays in supporting activities in the renewable energy sector that are not yet commercially viable. ARENA co-invests with the private sector in projects to research, develop and demonstrate new approaches, providing a pathway to prove the viability of technologies to support commercialisation and uptake. The uptake of proven restoration 'technologies' or new approaches could be accelerated by government—for example, by recognising their suitability in the biodiversity market or by underwriting access to the finance need for upfront investment.

The merits of the application of these types of models for biodiversity will be further explored before finalising the Review.

9 Compliance, enforcement and assurance

Key points

Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance under the EPBC Act is ineffective. There has been limited activity to enforce the Act over the period of 20-years it has been in effect, and the transparency of what has been done is limited.

The culture of monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance is not forceful. This erodes public trust in the ability of the law to deliver environmental outcomes.

There is broad consensus from the regulated community and the experts that advise them that it is not easy to comply with the EPBC Act. Likewise for the Department, the complexity of the Act impedes compliance, enforcement and assurance.

The monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance powers in the EPBC Act are outdated. Powers are restrictive and can only be applied in a piecemeal way across different parts of the Act due to the way it is constructed.

Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance activities are significantly under-resourced.

The key reform directions proposed by the Review are:

- establish a modern, independent regulator responsible for monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance to be a strong cop on the beat
- increase the transparency of activities
- effectively draw on Standards, simplified law, and better systems to increase compliance and simplify enforcement and assurance
- shift focus toward assurance of devolved decision-making and monitoring, compliance and enforcement of national strategic plans, regional plans, offsets and regeneration
- provide the regulator with a full suite of modern regulatory monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance tools and adequate funding.

Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance is core to delivering the intent of the EPBC Act. There is little point in putting rules in place if they will not be monitored and if failure to meet them does not result in appropriate compliance and enforcement action.

Strong monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance is essential to protecting the environment and building trust that breaches of the EPBC Act will be fairly, proactively and transparently addressed. It is also necessary to protect the integrity of most of the regulated community, who spend time and money to comply with the law. Those that do not play by the rules should face the consequences.

9.1 Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance approach is not forceful

9.1.1 The Department has a weak collaborative approach to monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance

The Department has improved its regulatory compliance and enforcement functions in recent years but it does not have a strong compliance culture. Progress has included the establishment of a dedicated Office of Compliance, the development of a regulatory framework and new compliance policies that identify priority areas for focus.

While these were small steps forward, the foundations of the Department's regulatory posture focus heavily on supporting a voluntary approach to compliance. The Department has positioned itself as a collaborative regulator, working to reach agreement with the regulated community.

The Department's compliance policy describes its approach as 'fair, reasonable, respectful, reliable'¹³⁰. This stance comes from good intentions of recognising that the majority work to be compliant. However, it is a passive approach that has contributed to a culture that has limited regard for the benefits of using the full force of the law where it is warranted.

There is limited evidence of proactive compliance effort, and the compliance posture of the Department is reactionary. Enforcement efforts often rely on a tip off from the public, rather than active surveillance driving enforcement activities. There is little active monitoring to provide assurance that conditions of approval are being met. Assurance to confirm that environmental offsets have been secured and are delivering intended outcomes is limited (see [Chapter 8](#)). There are insufficient resources dedicated to proactive compliance.

9.1.2 Monitoring, compliance and enforcement options are limited and under-utilised

Enforcement provisions are rarely applied, particularly to Part 3 activities (requirements for environmental approvals), and the penalties do not appear commensurate with the harm of damaging a public good of national interest.

Serious enforcement actions are rarely used. There have only been 41 breaches of the EPBC Act that have been subject to compliance outcomes¹³¹. Of these, 31 relate to Part 3 or Part 9 with the remainder being breaches of wildlife trade provisions.

The largest penalty issued under the EPBC Act was via an enforceable undertaking with a company to regenerate 31.5 hectares of Central Hunter Valley Eucalypt Forest Woodland for a cost of \$2.1 million. While a suspended jail sentence has been handed down for failure to refer an activity for consideration under the Act, from the evidence available to the Review to date, a jail sentence has not been applied for a breach of a condition of approval.

Since 2010, a total of 22 infringements have been issued by the regulator for breaches of conditions of approval granted under Part 9, with total fines less than \$230,000. By way of contrast, local governments often issue more than this amount in paid parking fines annually. For example, Dubbo and Orange Councils in NSW respectively issued more than \$220,000 and \$1.15 million in parking fines in the 2018–19 financial year¹³².

While provisions are not fully utilised, the regulator is also impeded by some limitations in the powers at their disposal. The EPBC Act provides an incomplete and inconsistent set of regulatory tools that are spread across different parts of the Act. Some enforcement mechanisms apply only to specific contraventions of the Act. The Act lacks contemporary powers needed to monitor and address breaches of the law. This includes powers for information sharing and tracking.

This can also lead to inefficient and mismatched pathways being taken. For example, the ability to issue an infringement notice under the EPBC Act is limited to instances where a breach of approval conditions has occurred. If a person cleared a protected habitat and wasn't an approval holder, the regulator is limited to pursuing court or other actions even where a fine might be the most direct and appropriate way to respond.

9.1.3 Inadequate transparency of monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance functions

The transparency of monitoring, compliance and enforcement under the EPBC Act, including proactive communication with the regulated community, is limited.

Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance reporting is limited to Departmental annual reports. Some activities are reported online, but the lack of a mandatory requirement to do so under the EPBC Act results in incomplete reporting and the use of different approaches over time.

Submissions received by the Review indicate that the lack of transparency of current compliance arrangements is contributing to low public trust that appropriate action is taken. In the absence of that line-of-sight, submitters to the Review highlighted their view that compliance actions may be subject to political interference.

Most modern regulators have clear logs that include investigation of potential breaches and comprehensively list even minor notices that have been issued. The lack of thorough reporting for the EPBC Act makes it hard to find information. This fails to provide any disincentive to others not to breach the Act or clear assurance to the community that matters are followed-up.

9.2 Complexity impedes compliance, enforcement and assurance

The EPBC Act is long and complex (see [Chapter 3](#)). The complexity of the legislation, impenetrable terminology and the infrequency with which many interact with the law, makes voluntary compliance and the pursuit of enforcement action difficult.

The EPBC Act primarily relies on a self-assessment by proponents to determine whether they are likely to have a significant impact on a nationally protected matter. The Department provides some guidance material to assist with that process but submitters to the Review have highlighted that interpreting the Act remains a challenge due to its size and complexity.

Understanding is further strained where related state and territory-based rules change, generating confusion about how local rules relate to national-level rules. For example, changes to Queensland and NSW land-clearing rules in recent years resulted in confusion about whether activities that could be legally conducted under new state requirements also needed to be considered under the EPBC Act, even though the Act requirements had not changed. For the person impacted by the changed requirements, it didn't matter whose rules had changed, this just led to a new layer of confusion.

For many Australians, they will never need to interact with the EPBC Act. For some, interaction may be limited to a single circumstance. This contrasts with other broad and complex laws, where frequent interactions mean that the regulated community builds knowledge of their obligations over time. For example, most of the adult population engages with the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997* on an annual basis, and both employees and employers frequently engage with their obligations under employment laws.

The infrequency of interactions with the EPBC Act is further complicated because the circumstances in which the rules apply change each time the lists of the threatened species and ecological communities is added to or amended. Companies of reasonable scale have the capacity to deal with these adjustments, but compliance in this context is particularly difficult for individuals and small landholders. This was highlighted in the Craik Review as a challenge for the agricultural sector¹³³.

9.3 Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance activities are significantly under-resourced

The available resources for monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance constrain the ability of the Department to deliver credible functions.

These functions of the EPBC Act are not supported by cost recovery arrangements. Compliance and enforcement staff also undertake compliance and enforcement of other Commonwealth environment laws, constraining the pool of resources dedicated to delivering EPBC Act compliance and enforcement. The resources available for monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance are insufficient and the caseload continues to increase, as more projects are approved.

A move toward risk-based regulation is far from complete and the full investment needed to deliver efficiency by the use of modern risk-based systems and analytics has not yet been made.

9.4 Proposed key reform directions

An effective EPBC Act monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance function will require legislative amendments to improve the regulatory toolkit and structural change to increase independence and build trust. These amendments to the Act will be best supported by commensurate resourcing and evolution of a stronger culture.

Key reforms proposed by the Review, including simplifying the EPBC Act and setting clear standards (see [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 3](#)), will assist with greater clarity of obligations to support voluntary compliance and the ability to better enforce provisions. These reforms should be supported by specific guidance for sectors in line with recommendations by the Craik Review. Combined, these efforts will improve the Department's ability to convey regulatory obligations, and improve the regulated community's ability to understand them.

9.4.1 Independent monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance with improved transparency

An independent monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance regulator that is not subject to actual or implied direction from the Environment Minister should be established. This is important to address significant community concern about perceived conflict of interest, which is undermining their trust in the EPBC Act.

An independent, strong cop on the beat will provide confidence that once conditions are set, they will be enforced to deliver the intended outcomes.

The regulator should have improved transparency, publishing all actions taken in a timely manner. It should publish on its website the directions, prohibition notices and improvement notices it makes and provide follow up when they have been met. The regulator should also publish a clear set of compliance priorities and should report against an annual compliance plan.

The regulator must also set out a clear and strong regulatory stance. While it remains important to be proportional, and to work with people where inadvertent non-compliance has occurred, the regulator needs to establish a culture that does not shy from firm action where needed. This is essential to providing community confidence and giving business a clear and level playing field.

9.4.2 Consolidate, strengthen and modernise monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance provisions within the EPBC Act

The monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance powers in the EPBC Act should be overhauled. The *Regulatory Powers (Standard Provisions) Act 2014* provides a standardised approach to setting out such powers, and these should be bolstered with specific arrangements to ensure that monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance powers in the EPBC Act are fit for purpose. The regulator should have a full 'tool-kit' available to it, so that fair, consistent and proportionate action can be taken across different scenarios.

Changes to the monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance provisions of the EPBC Act should include, but not be limited to:

- standardised powers to delegate authorised officers to undertake EPBC compliance, including to states and territories
- incorporation of modern information sharing provisions—supporting collaboration with other regulators
- improvements to coercive powers under the Act to facilitate greater intelligence capability, including using surveillance warrants.

Penalties must be sufficient to be an active deterrent, rather than a cost of doing business. A review of the adequacy of penalties and provisions should consider, but not be limited to:

- ensuring penalties across the EPBC Act align with the potential harm or benefit and provide a reasonable deterrence
- ensuring remediation orders that deliver restoration are used when monetary penalties are unlikely to provide adequate disincentive, due to the potential significant financial benefit from some areas of non-compliance
- ensuring appropriate use of criminal prosecutions in serious cases of egregious and irreparable damage.

9.4.3 Shift focus of monitoring, compliance and enforcement towards assurance of standards

The Review proposes reforms that will support greater devolution in decision-making (see [Chapter 4](#)). Clear, legally enforceable National Environmental Standards combined with strong assurance are essential to community confidence in these arrangements.

The proposed reform promotes the greater use of regional-level plans, with other regulators and proponents working under agreed rules in a regional context. Together with the National Environmental Standards, a simplified Act, better guidance material and the potential of intelligent systems, will increase confidence in the self-assessment of actions and provide assurance for those actions that demonstrate they can meet the rules.

This shift will not remove the need for monitoring, compliance and enforcement on individual projects, but it will require a refocus and shift over time to provide the assurance needed that standards, plans and other strategic tools are delivering the intended environmental outcomes.

Transparent, independent oversight of these devolved and strategic arrangements will be critical to building community trust that the EPBC Act is effectively protecting the environment and our iconic places in the national interest.

The Commonwealth independent regulator must have power and authority to deal with all breaches of the EPBC Act, even by accredited decision-makers, such as a state or territory. The devolved decision-maker should remain primarily responsible for monitoring, compliance and enforcement of conditions set to meet National Environmental Standards. Reporting on accredited arrangements should include reporting on all potential breaches, and the response taken. The Commonwealth should retain the ability to intervene in project-level compliance and enforcement, where egregious breaches are not being effectively dealt with by the state regulator.

While transition will occur, it is important that the legacy of projects already approved under the EPBC Act have appropriate monitoring and oversight. Approved activities often take years to complete and will continue to require careful management and oversight to ensure environmental protection is achieved over the long-term.

9.4.4 Sustainable resourcing

Monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance functions must be adequately resourced, and resources sustained over the long-term.

In the short-term there is a need to invest in appropriate systems and tools to enable the independent compliance regulator to effectively deliver monitoring and risk-based compliance, to help people comply with the EPBC Act and to assure the community that risks to the environment from non-compliance are identified and managed. Resourcing must support adequate monitoring and more than basic follow-up action to respond to issues as they arise. Proactive monitoring, surveillance and investigation are needed to restore public trust in the system and to review and ensure actions that have occurred to date are meeting requirements and delivering for the environment.

10 Proposed reform pathway

Key points

The EPBC Act is ineffective and reform is long overdue. Past attempts to do so have been largely unsuccessful. Commitment to a clear pathway for reform is required.

Immediate steps to start reform should be taken, focusing on:

- reducing points of clear duplication, inconsistencies, gaps and conflicts in the EPBC Act
- improving the settings for devolved decision-making, including issuing Interim National Environmental Standards to provide confidence that outcomes will be delivered
- building the foundations to provide a solid base for longer-term reform.

Similarly, in the short-term, the conversation to deliver complex reforms and the mechanisms to underpin continuous improvement should commence so that policy development and implementation plans can be finalised, and resourcing commitments made.

Once these steps are taken, reform should focus on comprehensively fixing the problems with the EPBC Act, with this phase of reform focused on:

- developing a full suite of National Environmental Standards, refined from the lessons learned from implementing the Interim Standards, and armed with improved data and information
- redrafting the Act to simplify, clarify and strengthen it
- embedding changes to governance arrangements.

The environment, heritage and Indigenous policy areas covered by the EPBC Act are complex. The benefit of reforms commenced now will reap benefits over the next decade and beyond.

The reform agenda proposed is not one to 'set and forget'. Settings should be monitored and evaluated, and the path forward adjusted as lessons are learnt and new information and ways of doing things emerge.

The EPBC Act is long overdue for improvement. Despite multiple past efforts, the Act has remained largely unreformed over its 2 decades of operation. It is not fit-for-purpose because it is not able to deliver long-term sustainable growth.

Effective administration of a regulatory system is not cost free. The reforms proposed seek to improve the overall efficiency of the system. It is important to consider how to best fund the implementation of a reformed system, including the fair costs that should be recovered from proponents. In principle, government should pay for elements that are substantially public benefits (for example, the development of standards) while business should pay for those elements of the regulatory system required because they derive private benefits by impacting the environment (for example, approvals and monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance). There are elements of the regulatory system that have mixed benefits where costs should be shared (for example, data and information).

Although the reform pathway is ultimately a decision for the Commonwealth Government, the Review considers that a phased approach is necessary to deliver immediate improvements to the effectiveness and efficiency of the EPBC Act, while taking the time to do the detailed work required to deliver more complex reforms. Three key phases should be considered:

- **Phase 1** should deliver urgent, long-overdue changes to the Act and take the steps needed to build the core foundations for more complex reform. There is no reason to wait to commence this phase.
- **Phase 2** should commence early, to start the conversation on complex policy reforms and to deliver those elements of reform required to support continuous improvement in the way the Act operates.

- **Phase 3** should build on Phases 1 and 2, and focus on delivering the more complex legislative reform that will take time to develop and implement.

10.1 Phase 1—fix long-known issues and set the foundations

The initial phase of reform should fix long-known issues with the EPBC Act within its current construct and set the base for key reform foundations that can be built on and improved over time. The 5 areas of focus for phase 1 reforms are:

- Reduce points of clear duplication, inconsistencies, gaps and conflicts in the Act.
- Issue Interim National Environmental Standards to set clear national environmental outcomes against which decisions are made.
- Improve the durability of devolved decision-making, to deliver efficiencies in development assessments and approvals, where other regulators can demonstrate they can meet Interim National Environmental Standards.
- Implement early steps and key foundations to improve trust and transparency in the Act, including publishing all decision materials related to approval decisions.
- Legislate a complete set of monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance tools across the Act.

10.2 Phase 2—initiate complex reforms and establish mechanisms for continuous improvement

The proposed reform agenda involves key elements that need to be initiated and established, and require ongoing development, review and adjustment. These reform proposals require sustained investment because they underpin the effective and efficient operation of the EPBC Act.

This phase of reform should commence as soon possible, so that the policy development and implementation plans can be finalised, and resourcing commitments made.

The 6 areas of ongoing focus for phase 2 are:

- Establish the framework for monitoring, reporting on and evaluating the performance of the EPBC Act, with a key focus on the arrangements for National Environmental Standards and national and regional plans. Commitment to implementing the framework is essential, to enable the settings to be improved over time.
- Start the conversation with the states and territories about their regional planning priorities, and priorities for strategic national plans.
- Start the conversation on the revamp of the national State of the Environment report to support a step forward in the delivery of the upcoming 2021 report, and establish the formal objectives, timing and approach to the Commonwealth Government response for subsequent reports.
- Commit to sustained engagement with Indigenous Australians to co-design reforms that are important to them—ensure culturally respectful use of their knowledge, effective national protections for their culture and heritage, and work with them to meet their aspirations to manage their land in partnership with the Commonwealth.
- Appoint a national custodian, responsible for delivering the information supply chain and overhauling the systems that the Department needs to capture value from the supply chain.
- Establish the mechanisms to better leverage investment to deliver the scale of restoration required for future development in Australia to be sustainable in the long-term.

10.3 Phase 3—new law and implementation of the reformed system

Once the policy direction is settled, and key initiatives are underway, the final phase of reform should involve a complete legislative overhaul to focus on establishing remaining elements of reform and implementing the reformed system.

In this phase, a full suite of National Environmental Standards should be made that cover all areas that have been identified by this Review. This should draw on the experience of implementing the Interim National Environmental Standards and improvements in data and information. Other regulators seeking to be devolved decision-makers, including states and territories, must demonstrate how their regulatory approach meets the National Environmental Standards. All arrangements in place for devolved decision-making should be formally reviewed at this time. Where necessary, the settings in the EPBC Act for making standards, accrediting other regulators and quality assurance of the devolved model and compliance should be amended based on lessons learned.

Phase 3 should deliver a comprehensive redrafting of the EPBC Act to simplify, clarify and strengthen the law. The re-drafted law should incorporate key reform proposals including:

- settings to hardwire the concept of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) into the Act and require that it forms the basis of all decisions because it is the overall outcome that the Act seeks to achieve
- settings for making and reviewing national and regional plans
- measures to improve trust in decision-making, including:
 - requirements for greater transparency
 - an independent monitoring, compliance, enforcement and assurance regulator, not subject to actual or implied direction from the Environment Minister that has a clear mandate to enforce compliance with law
 - changes to the structures of statutory advisory committees, to provide confidence that decision-makers receive sound information and advice for making decisions
 - revised legal review mechanisms to provide regulatory certainty and build trust in decision-making
- a hierarchy of protecting (avoiding impact), conserving (minimising impact) and restoring the environment, including incorporating restoration-focused environmental offsets into the law
- mechanisms to support the use of markets and trusts to deliver environmental restoration.

In embarking on re-drafting the law, the merits of separating the EPBC Act along key functional lines should be considered.

The proposed reforms seek to build community trust that national environmental laws deliver effective protections and regulate businesses efficiently. It is impossible for the Review to satisfy the aspirations of every person with an interest in the environment or in business development. Rather, the Review has attempted to provide a way forward, to ensure effective environment protection and biodiversity conservation and efficient regulation of business. The EPBC Act in its current form achieves neither.

The proposed reforms are substantial, but the changes are necessary to set Australia on a path of ecologically sustainable development. This path will deliver long-term economic growth, environmental improvement and the effective protection of Australia's iconic places and heritage for the benefit of current and future generations.

Appendix 1: Prototype National Environmental Standard for Matters of National Environmental Significance

The EPBC Act Review Interim Report proposes the development of a suite of National Environmental Standards as a key foundation of fundamental reform of national environmental law. The proposed National Environmental Standards serve two fundamental purposes. Strong, clear and nationally consistent Standards will improve outcomes for Australia's biodiversity and heritage, and ensure development is sustainable over the long-term. Improved certainty for all stakeholders will lead to a more efficient, accessible and transparent regulatory system, reducing assessment time frames and supporting devolution where appropriate.

The Review proposes that the suite of National Environmental Standards should set the requirements for decision-making to deliver outcomes for the environment, and clearly define the fundamental processes that ensure sound and effective decision-making. As a starting point, the Review proposes that the suite of National Environmental Standards should include requirements relating to:

- ecologically sustainable development
- matters of national environmental significance (MNES)
- transparent processes and robust decisions, including:
 - judicial review
 - community consultation
 - adequate assessment of impact, including climate impacts on MNES
 - emissions-profile disclosure
- Indigenous engagement and involvement in environmental decision-making
- monitoring, compliance and enforcement
- data and information
- environmental monitoring and evaluation of outcomes
- restoration and recovery
- wildlife permits and trade.

The suite of National Environmental Standards are intended to interact and relate to each other, and together ensure that the objects of the EPBC Act are achieved.

The prototype Standard provided here is a starting point for developing a National Environmental Standard for MNES. Further work, including consultation with experts and stakeholders, is needed to ensure the Standard addresses key threats to MNES and strikes the right balance to enable ecologically sustainable development. The prototype is based on key principles such as prevention of environmental harm and non-regression, and has been developed using existing policies, commitments and requirements of Commonwealth law¹³⁴. The Standards are set at a level that enables the Commonwealth to achieve the objects of the EPBC Act, meet international commitments, and deliver national environmental outcomes.

The Review proposes that National Environmental Standards should be developed in a two-stage process. Interim Standards are recommended as a first step, to facilitate rapid reform and streamlining. Interim Standards will need to be capable of being implemented with the currently accessible data and information. These Interim Standards would enable the implementation of many of the reforms proposed by the Review but should be seen as an interim stage only. As more sophisticated data and information becomes accessible, as proposed in the Review, Standards should evolve into more specific and granular measures. Standards should continue to evolve to take account of changing circumstances and governments' response to these.

The prototype Standard set out includes overarching standards that relate to all MNES and matter specific standards. These elements should be read together, and in conjunction with the existing requirements of the EPBC Act.

A prototype Standard has not been developed for the 'water trigger'. The EPBC Act currently prevents approval decisions related to this MNES from being devolved to states or territories¹³⁵. Any decision to remove this restriction should be accompanied by the development of a Standard for the protection of water resources.

Ultimately, the Review proposes the EPBC Act be amended to define the process for making and implementing National Environmental Standards. These amendments should include a requirement that the Standards be applied unless the decision-maker can demonstrate that the public interest and the national interest is best served otherwise.

Overarching MNES Standards

Element	Description
Environmental Outcome	Matters of national environmental significance are protected, and decision-making actively contributes to their conservation and recovery.
National Standard	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Actions and decisions are consistent with the principles of ecologically sustainable development. 2) Actions do not have unacceptable^a impacts on matters of national environmental significance. 3) Planning and funding decisions that relate to matters of national environmental significance promote their conservation and sustainable management, address key threats and fill key information gaps. 4) Monitoring, reporting and evaluation must demonstrate compliance with this national environmental standard. <p>National Environmental Standards for ecologically sustainable development and monitoring and evaluation should be developed and would replace 1. and 4. Interim monitoring and reporting requirements are provided in the monitoring and reporting section of this Standard.</p>
Monitoring and Reporting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) A monitoring and evaluation plan must be prepared. The plan must: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) be based on best available knowledge and information, and b) implement the precautionary principle^b. Scenario analysis may be useful when uncertainty is high c) establish the baseline, key indicators, and monitoring activities relevant to the protected matter d) be over a time frame and area relevant to the potential risk, and e) identify thresholds for when Standards are not being met and the management response. 2) The plan and monitoring results, and the underpinning data and information on which they are based, must be published. 3) Accurate and complete monitoring and compliance records must be kept and provided to the Department upon request.
Review	This is a prototype and should be replaced with a National Environmental Standard following consultation.

^a Section 46(3)(c) requires that actions approved under a bilateral agreement not have unacceptable or unsustainable impacts on relevant MNES. While a number of EPBC Act decisions provide a precedent for this threshold, the definition of 'unacceptable' impacts requires granular and specific guidance. Further work should be undertaken to refine this definition.

^b The precautionary principle is defined in s3A(b) of the EPBC Act: if there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.

Matter-specific Standards

World and National Heritage

World Heritage areas are places of outstanding universal value that are recognised by the global community. They represent the best examples of the world's cultural and natural heritage.

National Heritage areas comprise natural and cultural places of outstanding heritage value to Australia. National Heritage places also support Australia's commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Element	Description
Environmental Outcome	The outstanding values of World Heritage properties ^a and National Heritage places ^b are identified, protected, conserved, presented and transmitted to future generations.
National Standard	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) No development incursion into a World or National Heritage area^c, unless it promotes the management and values of the property or place. 2) Actions must not cause or contribute to a detrimental change to the World or National Heritage values of a property or place. 3) Management arrangements must ensure World and National Heritage values of a property or place are protected and conserved.
Further Information	Australian Heritage Database General information about Australia's listed heritage places

a Statements of Outstanding Universal Value are available for some of Australia's 19 World Heritage properties.

b The National Heritage values of National Heritage places are identified in the National Heritage listing information and published on the Australian Heritage Database.

c Defined as the boundary of the World Heritage property or the National Heritage place. To the extent that the boundaries may overlap, whichever is larger.

Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar wetlands)

Wetlands of international importance are globally recognised important wetlands and listed under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention), or declared by the Minister to be a declared Ramsar wetland under section 16 of the EPBC Act.

Element	Description
Environmental Outcome	The ecological character of each Ramsar wetland is maintained through the conservation, management and wise and sustainable use of the wetland.
National Standard	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) No development incursion within the boundary of a Ramsar wetland^a, unless it promotes the conservation, management and/or wise and sustainable use of the wetland. 2) Actions must not cause a detrimental^b change in ecological character of Ramsar wetlands^c. 3) Management arrangements must ensure the ecological character of Ramsar wetlands are protected and conserved.
Further Information	<p>General wetlands information</p> <p>Australian wetlands database (including location maps, ecological character description and information for individual wetlands)</p>

a The Australian wetlands database provides information about Australia's Ramsar wetlands

b E.g. outside of the 'limits of acceptable change' where these have been defined. See Limits of acceptable change - Fact sheet

c Some Ramsar wetlands have catchments that cross state or territory borders. Catchment mapping is available.

Threatened Species and Ecological Communities

Threatened species and ecological communities are listed under section 178 of the EPBC Act, following a rigorous scientific assessment of their threat status.

Element	Description
Environmental Outcome	The status of threatened species and communities improves over time, through the conservation, management and sustainable use of the environment.
National Standard	<p>For vulnerable species:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) No net loss^a for vulnerable species habitat. 2) Actions must manage on-site impacts and threats, where these are not managed through alternative frameworks^b. <p>For endangered species and communities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) No net loss^a for endangered species habitat and ecological community distribution. 2) No detrimental change to the listed critical habitat^c of a species or ecological community. 3) Actions must manage on-site impacts and threats, where these are not managed through alternative frameworks^b. <p>For critically endangered species and communities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Actions must deliver a net gain^a for critically endangered species habitat and ecological community distribution. 2) No detrimental change to listed critical habitat^c of a species or ecological community. 3) Actions must manage on-site impacts and threats, where these are not managed through alternative frameworks^b. <p>Additional requirements in Commonwealth areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Actions must not kill, injure or take a listed threatened species or ecological community, except where an EPBC Act permit is issued.
Further Information	The Species Profiles and Threats (SPRAT) database contains statutory and policy documents, including Recovery plans, Threat Abatement Plans, Conservation Advices, Survey Guidelines, Significant Impact Guidelines, Species and Ecological Community Policy Statements and Information Guides and Factsheets.

a Relative to the impacts of the action. Quantification of impacts should include changes to the integrity, quality, condition and/or extent of habitat. Measures must account for the time taken to deliver a conservation gain for the protected matter.

b Alternative frameworks include those implemented or agreed by the Commonwealth, for the protections, mitigation and/or management of threats to Australia's environment. For example, the *Biosecurity Act 2015* manages biosecurity threats to plant, animal and human health in Australia and its external territories. Other examples might include state water management frameworks, which provide for water trading to ensure cumulative water impacts are managed.

c Section 207A of the EPBC Act provides for a Register of critical habitat. This Register is currently incomplete. Critical habitat should be identified and listed over time.

Migratory Species

Migratory species are those animals that migrate to Australia and its external territories, or pass through or over Australian waters during their annual migrations. Examples of migratory species are species of birds (e.g. albatrosses and petrels), mammals (e.g. whales) or reptiles (e.g. marine turtles). Migratory species are those listed on international migratory species conventions and agreements to which Australia is a party.

Element	Description
Environmental Outcome	Migratory species and their habitats are protected, conserved and managed to support their survival.
National Standard	<p>1) No net loss^a of important habitat^b for migratory species.</p> <p>Additional requirements in Commonwealth areas:</p> <p>2) Actions must not kill, injure or take a listed migratory species, except where an EPBC Act permit is issued.</p> <p>Requirements for migratory species that are also threatened species or marine species are addressed in the Standard relevant to that MNES.</p>
Further Information	<p>Statutory Documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wildlife Conservation Plan for Migratory Shorebirds <p>Policy Documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey Guidelines, Significant Impact Guidelines, Species Policy Statements and other information EPBC Act Policy Statement 3.21 - Industry guidelines for avoiding, assessing and mitigating impacts on EPBC Act listed migratory shorebird species National Light Pollution Guidelines for Wildlife Including Marine Turtles, Seabirds and Migratory Shorebirds

a Relative to the impacts of the action. Quantification of impacts should include changes to the integrity, quality, condition and/or extent of habitat. Measures must account for the time taken to deliver a conservation gain for the protected matter.

b Important habitat for migratory shorebirds is defined in [EPBC Act Policy Statement 3.21 - Industry guidelines for avoiding, assessing and mitigating impacts on EPBC Act listed migratory shorebird species](#). For other migratory species, 'important habitat' should be determined with reference to other policy documents. Further work should be undertaken to refine this definition.

Commonwealth Marine Environment

The Commonwealth marine area is any part of the sea, including the waters, seabed, and airspace, within Australia's exclusive economic zone and/or over the continental shelf of Australia, that is not state or Northern Territory waters. The Commonwealth marine area stretches from 3 up to 200 nautical miles from the coast.

Element	Description
Environmental Outcome	The ecosystem functioning and integrity of Commonwealth marine waters are maintained or enhanced in line with relevant marine bioregional plans.
National Standard	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Actions must be consistent with marine park management plans. 2) Actions must be consistent with marine Bioregional Plans. 3) Actions must not kill, injure or take a listed marine species in a Commonwealth marine area, except where an EPBC Act permit is issued. <p>For fisheries operating in Commonwealth waters</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Management arrangements must be consistent with the Guidelines for the Ecologically Sustainable Management of Fisheries (2nd edition). <p>Requirements for threatened and migratory species that are also marine species are addressed in the Standard relevant to that MNES.</p>
Further Information	Marine Park management plans Marine Bioregional Plans Guidelines for the Ecologically Sustainable Management of Fisheries (2nd edition)

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park has a special status, as it is the substantial part of a World Heritage area as well as a separate matter of national environmental significance.

Element	Description
Environmental Outcome	The environment, biodiversity and heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef are sustained for current and future generations.
National Standard	<p>1) Actions must provide for the long-term protection and conservation of the environment, biodiversity and heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef Region. To ensure this, actions must be consistent with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The Management Plan for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. b) The Objectives and Guiding Principles of the Great Barrier Reef Intergovernmental Agreement 2015. c) The Objectives of the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan. <p>Requirements for the Commonwealth marine area and World Heritage and National Heritage are addressed in the Standards relevant to those MNES. These requirements will almost always be also relevant to actions relating to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.</p>
Further Information	<p>Great Barrier Reef Intergovernmental Agreement 2015</p> <p>Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan</p> <p>Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan 2017-2022</p> <p>Reef 2050 Plan Cumulative Impact Management Policy</p> <p>Reef 2050 Plan Net Benefit Policy</p> <p>EPBC Act Referral Guidelines for the Outstanding Universal Value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area</p> <p>Additional policies, plans and position statements are available from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority</p>

Protection of the Environment from Nuclear Actions

Australian Government is committed to maintaining high levels of radiation protection, and of nuclear safety and security in Australia and around the world. Nuclear actions are defined under section 22 of the EPBC Act.

Element	Description
Environmental Outcome	Nuclear actions (including uranium mining and radioactive waste management) are undertaken in a manner that protects the community and the environment.
National Standard	1) Actions, including mitigation and management measures must be consistent with the codes for nuclear activities developed by ARPANSA ^a .
Further Information	ARPANSA Regulatory Publications , including nuclear safety fundamentals, codes and standards

^a Or state or territory frameworks where they have been assessed as compliant with the ARPANSA codes.

Endnotes

¹ This commentary draws on a range of submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper, including: [ACT Heritage Council, ANON-K57V-XQK2-K](#); [Federation of Australian Historical Societies Inc, ANON-K57V-XQP5-U](#); [Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee, ANON-QJCP-UGZ1-N](#).

² Jackson WJ et al 2016, [Overview, In: Australia state of the environment 2016](#), Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra.

³ This commentary draws on a range of submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper from scientific and specialist organisations: [Threatened Species Scientific Committee, ANON-K57V-XF2U-J](#); [The University of Melbourne](#); [The University of Queensland](#); [Australian National University](#); [Charles Darwin University, ANON-K57V-XXS3-4](#); [The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, ANON-K57V-XQTW-1](#); [Centre for Marine Science University of Queensland, ANON-K57V-XQ5X-3](#); [Australian Marine Conservation Society, ANON-K57V-XQRB-A](#); [Australian Institute of Marine Science, ANON-K57V-XQ18-Y](#); [ACT Heritage Council, ANON-K57V-XQK2-K](#); [Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee, ANON-QJCP-UGZ1-N](#); [CSIRO, ANON-K57V-XFQC-Y](#); [Ecological Society of Australia, ANON-K57V-XZXD-U](#); [Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation Science, ANON-K57V-XQQE-C](#); [Australian Academy of Science, ANON-K57V-XQQM-M](#). Other resources drawn on include: [Cresswell ID, Murphy H 2016, Biodiversity, In: Australia State of the Environment \(2016\)](#), Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra.; [Ward, M et al 2019, Lots of loss with little scrutiny: The attrition of habitat critical for threatened species in Australia](#); [TSX 2018, Threatened Species Index](#); [Threatened Species Recovery Hub 2020, Major declines in threatened mammal populations over last 20 years, but news not all bad](#); [Mackay R 2016, Heritage, In: Australia state of the environment 2016](#), Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy, Canberra.

⁴ Woinarski, 2015 in [Ecological Society of Australia, ANON-K57V-XZXD-U](#), [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

⁵ [Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, ANON-K57V-XQTW-1](#), [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

⁶ See submissions to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper from [Centre for Marine Science, University of Queensland, ANON-K57V-XQ5X-3](#) and [Australian Marine Conservation Society, ANON-K57V-XQRB-A](#).

⁷ [IUCN 2017, IUCN World Heritage Outlook 2: a conservation assessment of all natural World Heritage sites](#).

⁸ For further information on international agreements, see the EPBC Act Review Factsheet on [Scope of the EPBC Act](#).

⁹ Examples of foundational agreements on the environment are the [Inter-Governmental Agreement on the Environment \(1992\)](#) and the [Heads of Agreement on Commonwealth/State Roles and Responsibilities for the Environment \(1997\)](#).

¹⁰ For further information on matters of national environmental significance protected by the EPBC Act, see the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment web page [‘What does the EPBC Act protect?’](#)

¹¹ Section 3A of the [EPBC Act](#) defines the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

¹² [Inter-Governmental Agreement on the Environment \(1992\)](#).

¹³ Data provided by the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, 16 June 2020.

¹⁴ See the following submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper for further information: [Indigenous Advisory Committee, BHLF-QJCP-UG3C-Z](#); [Kimberley Land Council, ANON-K57V-XZTA-M](#); [Northern Australia Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance, ANON-K57V-XQKU-P](#); [Indigenous Reference Group to the Ministerial Forum on Northern Australia ANON-K57V-XYV5-9](#); [Threatened Species Recovery Hub, ANON-QJCP-UGT1-F](#); [Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations, ANON-K57V-XY7E-T](#); [Northern Land Council, ANON-QJCP-UGJD-R](#).

¹⁵ [Central Land Council, ANON-K57V-XQQ4-U](#), [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹⁶ The Natural Heritage Trust Reserve is established by the [Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act 1997](#).

¹⁷ The discussion in this section draws extensively on submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper from: [Threatened Species Scientific Committee, ANON-K57V-XF2U-J](#); [Australian Academy of Science, ANON-K57V-XQQM-M](#); [The University of Melbourne](#); [The University of Queensland](#); [Australian National](#)

[University: Charles Darwin University, ANON-K57V-XY53-4; Invasive Species Council and Bush Heritage Australia, ANON-K57V-XQ1E-C.](#)

¹⁸ Invasive Species Council and Bush Heritage Australia, ANON-K57V-XQ1E-C, [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

¹⁹ Threatened Species Scientific Committee, ANON-K57V-XF2U-J, [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

²⁰ Threatened Species Scientific Committee, ANON-K57V-XF2U-J, [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

²¹ This box draws on input from many submissions to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper. The following submissions and documents provide further detail on the range of positions put forward: [Threatened Species Scientific Committee, ANON-K57V-XF2U-J; The University of Melbourne, The University of Queensland, Australian National University, Charles Darwin University, ANON-K57V-XY53-4; Australian Academy of Science, ANON-K57V-XQQM-M; WWF-Australia, ANON-K57V-XQKR-K; Local Government Association of Queensland, ANON-K57V-XQBF-X; Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development, ANON-K57V-XFQ8-M; Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee, ANON-QJCP-UGZ1-N; Douglas Shire Council, ANON-K57V-XFDK-T; Regional Development Australia Pilbara, ANON-K57V-XFKK-1; Indigenous Reference Group to the Ministerial Forum on Northern Australia, ANON-K57V-XYV5-9; Joint ENGO on Nuclear Issues \(Arid Lands Environment Centre Australian Conservation Foundation, Australian Nuclear Free Alliance, Conservation Council SA, Conservation Council WA, Environment Centre NT, Environment Victoria, Friends of the Earth Australia, Greenpeace Australia Pacific, Mineral Policy Institute, Nature Conservation Council NSW, Queensland Conservation Council, The Wilderness Society\), ANON-QJCP-UGK8-D. It also drew from: EDO NSW and Humane Society International Australia 2018, \[Next Generation Biodiversity Laws – Best practice elements for a new Commonwealth Environment Act.\]\(#\)](#)

²² These views were drawn from a review of submissions to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper. A range of the views expressed can be found in these submissions: [Archer Mountain Earth Community, ANON-K57V-XF8Z-W; Sue Carolane, ANON-K57V-XF6P-H; Anonymous, ANON-K57V-XFY2-P; Lyndal Breen, ANON-K57V-XFP7-J; Deidre Stuart, ANON-K57V-XFJT-9.](#)

²³ The International Institute for Sustainable Development has further information on [international biodiversity standards.](#)

²⁴ 10 Deserts Project, ANON-K57V-XQQQ-R, [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

²⁵ Australian Conservation Foundation, ANON-K57V-XQXS-1. [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

²⁶ Business Council of Australia, ANON-QJCP-UGHD-P, [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

²⁷ Minerals Council of Australia, ANON-K57V-XGCN-W, [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

²⁸ Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, ANON-K57V-XQTW-1, [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

²⁹ Western Australian Government, ANON-QJCP-UGJU-9, [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

³⁰ Department of the Environment 2014, [Standards for Accreditation of Environmental Approvals under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.](#)

³¹ The Victorian Auditor-General's Office in the June 2020 audit report '[Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands](#)' found that the Victorian Government commitments under the Melbourne Strategic Assessment to improve conservation outcomes, by establishing the Western Grassland Reserve and Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands Reserve by 2020, had not been met. This was also noted in submissions to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper, including the Victorian National Parks Association, ANON-K57V-XQQG-E. [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.](#)

³² United Nations 2007, [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.](#) Resolution adopted on 13 September 2007.

³³ United Nations, 1992, [Convention on Biological Diversity.](#)

³⁴ See here for further information on the [Aichi Biodiversity Targets.](#)

- ³⁵ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations Environmental Programme 2011, [The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization](#) (the Protocol) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). United Nations.
- ³⁶ For example: Commonwealth of Australia 2016, [Engage early – guidance for proponents on best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#) (EPBC Act); Australian Heritage Commission 2002, [Ask First: a guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values](#).
- ³⁷ Indigenous Advisory Committee (IAC), BHLF-QJCP-UG3C-Z. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).
- ³⁸ Commonwealth of Australia 2019, [Draft Recovery Plan for the Greater Bilby \(*Macrotis lagotis*\)](#).
- ³⁹ See the State of Queensland, Environment Protection Agency 2002, [Recovery plan for the golden-shouldered parrot *Psephotus chrysopterygius* 2003-2007](#).
- ⁴⁰ Commonwealth of Australia 2016, [Engage early – guidance for proponents on best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#) (EPBC Act).
- ⁴¹ Indigenous Advisory Committee (IAC), BHLF-QJCP-UG3C-Z. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).
- ⁴² Indigenous land Councils raising this issue in submissions to the EPBC Act Review Discussion paper include: [Northern Land Council, ANON-QJCP-UGJD-R](#), [Kimberley Land Council, ANON-K57V-XZTA-M](#), [Central Land Council ANON-K57V-XQQ4-U](#), [Indigenous Reference Group to the Ministerial Forum on Northern Australia ANON-K57V-XYV5-9](#).
- ⁴³ Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, ANON-K57V-XQ9N-W. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#)
- ⁴⁴ Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, ANON-K57V-XQKY-T. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#)
- ⁴⁵ Submissions to the EPBC Act Review discussion raising this issue included: [Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, ANON-K57V-XQ9N-W](#), [Indigenous Advisory Committee \(IAC\), BHLF-QJCP-UG3C-Z](#)
- ⁴⁶ Submissions to the EPBC Act Review discussion raising this issue included: [New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, ANON-K57V-XQ28-Z](#), [Indigenous Advisory Committee \(IAC\), BHLF-QJCP-UG3C-Z](#), [Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, ANON-K57V-XQKY-T](#), [Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, ANON-K57V-XQ5S-X](#), [Clanadale Consulting, ANON-QJCP-UG33-G](#), [Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, ANON-K57V-XQ9N-W](#).
- ⁴⁷ [New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, ANON-K57V-XQ28-Z](#)
- ⁴⁸ Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) 2019, [Management of Commonwealth National Parks](#), Auditor-General Report No.49 2018–19.
- ⁴⁹ This discussion draws on input from submissions to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper including: [Northern Land Council, ANON-QJCP-UGJD-R](#), [Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community Council BHLF-QJCP-UGY3-P](#); and Reviewer discussions with Kakadu Traditional Owners.
- ⁵⁰ Central Land Council, ANON-K57V-XQQ4-U. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#)
- ⁵¹ Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) 2019 [Partnership Agreement with the Commonwealth Government](#).
- ⁵² Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) 2018, [A new way of working: Talking about what's needed to close the gap in life outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians](#)
- ⁵³ Submissions to the EPBC Act Review discussion raising this issue included: [Northern Land Council, ANON-QJCP-UGJD-R](#), [Central Land Council, ANON-K57V-XQQ4-U](#), [NSW Aboriginal Land Council, ANON-K57V-XQ28-Z](#), [Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, ANON-K57V-XQKY-T](#)
- ⁵⁴ Submissions to the EPBC Act Review discussion raising this issue included: [Northern Land Council, ANON-QJCP-UGJD-R](#), [Central Land Council, ANON-K57V-XQQ4-U](#)

- ⁵⁵ NESP - Northern Australia Hub, ANON-QJCP-UGJA-N. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#)
- ⁵⁶ Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2016, [Engage Early—Guidance for proponents on best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#)
- ⁵⁷ Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2016, [Engage Early—Guidance for proponents on best practice Indigenous engagement for environmental assessments under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#)
- ⁵⁸ Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2002, [Ask First – A guide to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values](#)
- ⁵⁹ See Section 79B of the [Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006](#).
- ⁶⁰ See the [Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act 1984](#) and [Aboriginal Land Rights \(Northern Territory\) Act 1976](#).
- ⁶¹ See Part 1, Section 3(c) of the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 \(Cmwth\)](#)
- ⁶² Submissions to the EPBC Act Review discussion raising this issue included: [Northern Land Council, ANON-QJCP-UGJD-R](#), [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, ANON-K57V-XFT6-N](#), [Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, ANON-K57V-XQ5S-X](#)
- ⁶³ See Kwaymullina, A. 2005, *Seeing the Light: Aboriginal Law, Learning and Sustainable Living on Country*. Indigenous Law Bulletin, 6: 12. as referenced in [Indigenous Working Group- Threatened Species Recovery Hub, ANON-QJCP-UGT1-F](#).
- ⁶⁴ Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) 2019, [Management of Commonwealth National Parks](#), Auditor-General Report No.49 2018–19.
- ⁶⁵ See for example, the Law Council of Australia, ANON-K57V-XQBU-D. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).
- ⁶⁶ Commonwealth Government, Office of Parliamentary Counsel 2016, [Reducing Complexity in Legislation](#), Canberra.
- ⁶⁷ For example, [NSW Government, ANON-QJCP-UGDX-6](#).
- ⁶⁸ For example, the NSW land clearing codes are not an ‘assessment and approval’ process under Part 5 of the EPBC Act, and hence can not be accredited under a bilateral agreement. Some uncertainty has arisen under current arrangements because while NSW legislation requires approval under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (NSW) once certain thresholds are reached, this may still allow for significant impact on an MNES, particularly if the impacts do not arise from vegetation clearance.
- ⁶⁹ See the Productivity Commission 2020, [Resources sector regulation: draft report](#); [NSW Government, ANON-QJCP-UGDX-6](#)
- ⁷⁰ These examples are drawn from a range of submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper, including: [Australian Energy Council, ANON-K57V-XQUV-1](#); [NSW Minerals Council, ANON-K57V-XQKA-2](#); [Rio Tinto, ANON-K5V7-XG3K-A](#).
- ⁷¹ This sentiment is echoed in most state and territory submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper.
- ⁷² For example, [NSW Government, ANON-QJCP-UGDX-6](#).
- ⁷³ For example, see the following submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper: [Association of Mining and Exploration Companies, ANON-K57V-XYQ4-3](#); [Minerals Council of Australia, ANON-K57V-XGCN-W](#).
- ⁷⁴ This view was expressed in several submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper, including: [Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development \(IESC\), ANON-K57V-XFQ8-M](#); [National Environmental Law Association, ANON-K57V-XQKQ-J](#); [The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, ANON-K57V-XQTW-1](#); [WWF Australia, ANON-K57V-XQKR-K](#); [Northern Territory Government, ANON-K57V-XQVU-1](#).
- ⁷⁵ Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANZA), ANON-K57V-XQRM-N, [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

⁷⁶ See [EPBC Amendment \(Bilateral Agreement Implementation\) Bill 2014](#).

⁷⁷ Examples of submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper making this point include: [Northern Land Council, ANON-QJCP-UGJD-R](#); [The Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, ANON-K57V-XQTW-1](#); [WWF Australia, ANON-K57V-XQKR-K](#); [Australian Conservation Foundation, ANON-K57V-XQXS-1](#).

⁷⁸ [Western Australian Government, ANON-QJCP-UGJU-9](#).

⁷⁹ [South Australian Government, ANON-K57V-XQ2V-X](#).

⁸⁰ [ACT Government, ANON-QJCP-UGT2-G](#).

⁸¹ [NSW Government, ANON-QJCP-UGDX-6](#).

⁸² [Northern Territory Government, ANON-K57V-XQVU-1](#).

⁸³ For example, see submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper: [Environmental Institute of Australia and New Zealand \(EIANZ\), ANON-K57V-XG33-J](#); [Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association \(APPEA\), ANON-QJCP-UGHK-W](#); [Urban Development Institute of Australia, ANON-K57V-XZ53-7](#).

⁸⁴ Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2020, [EPBC Act Condition-setting Policy](#).

⁸⁵ Submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper referring to these issues include: [Lara Harland, ANON-K57V-XZS7-9](#); [Julie Ho, ANON-K57V-XZR1-2](#); [Prue Bartlett, ANON-K57V-XYM9-4](#).

⁸⁶ This sentiment came through in a range of submissions in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper, for example: [Brett Mason, ANON-K57V-XZUZ-E](#); [Anonymous, ANON-K57V-XFY2-P](#); and [Frances Bell, ANON-K57V-XFG9-B](#).

⁸⁷ See [Northern Land Council, ANON-QJCP-UGJD-R](#).

⁸⁸ [Minerals Council of Australia, ANON-K57V-XGCN-W](#).

⁸⁹ [Property Council of Australia, ANON-K57V-XQ5D-F](#).

⁹⁰ Hunter S 2017, [Independent Review of the Water Trigger Legislation](#).

⁹¹ Productivity Commission 2019, [Resources Sector Regulation Draft Report](#).

⁹² Source: Unpublished data, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.

⁹³ Department of the Environment and Water Resources 2007, [2nd edition of the Guidelines for the Ecologically Sustainable Management of Fisheries](#).

⁹⁴ From the definition of an RFA in the [Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002](#) (Cwlth).

⁹⁵ Environmental Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ), ANON-K57V-XG33-J, [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

⁹⁶ *Tarkine National Coalition Inc v Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities* (2013) 214 FCR 233.

⁹⁷ Productivity Commission 2020, [Resources sector regulation: draft report](#).

⁹⁸ See Productivity Commission 2020, [Resources sector regulation: draft report](#); and submissions to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper from the [Minerals Council of Australia \(MCA\), ANON-K57V-XGCN-W](#), and the [Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association \(APPEA\), ANON-QJCP-UGHK-W](#).

⁹⁹ Sourced from Productivity Commission 2020, [Resources sector regulation: draft report](#), and unpublished data from the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.

¹⁰⁰ Minerals Council of Australia (MCA), ANON-K57V-XGCN-W. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹⁰¹ See examples in Productivity Commission 2020, [Resources sector regulation: draft report](#).

¹⁰² For example: the Shenhua Watermark coal mine, the Carmichael coal mine (Adani), and Shree Minerals (Tarkine).

¹⁰³ For example, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Standing) Bill 2015.

¹⁰⁴ See for example Macintosh A, Roberts H and Constable A 2017, 'An Empirical Evaluation of Environmental Citizen Suits under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*'. *Sydney Law Review*, Vol.39(1), pp.87-124; Wallace K 2020, [Section 487: How activists use Red Tape to stop development and jobs](#)

(2020 update), Institute of Public Affairs; and Productivity Commission 2020, [Resources sector regulation: draft report](#), Canberra.

¹⁰⁵ Macintosh A, Gibbons P, Jones J, Constable A and Wilkinson D 2018, 'Delays, stoppages and appeals: An empirical evaluation of the adverse impacts of environmental citizen suits in the New South Wales land and environment court', *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, Vol.69, pp.94-103.

¹⁰⁶ See Environmental Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ), ANON-K57V-XG33-J. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹⁰⁷ See for example Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists, ANON-K57V-XQTW-1, [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#) and [publications by the Australian Panel of Experts on Environmental Law \(APEEL\)](#).

¹⁰⁸ Law Council of Australia, ANON-K57V-XQBU-D, [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹⁰⁹ Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department 1999, [What decisions should be subject to merits review?](#), Administrative Review Council publication; and Australian Government, Attorney-General's Department 2007, [Decision-making: Accountability, Best-Practice Guide 5](#), Administrative Review Council publication.

¹¹⁰ The independent Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing of Onshore Unconventional Reservoirs in the Northern Territory 2018, [Final Report of the Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing in the Northern Territory](#), pg.420.

¹¹¹ Daly J 2019, [Atlas of Living Australia Future Directions National Consultation: Findings Report](#).

¹¹² More information about the Digital Transformation of Environmental Assessment Program is available from The Hon Sussan Ley MP Minister for the Environment media release from 21 November 2019, [Congestion busting for environmental assessments](#), and the media release from the West Australian Government on 13 May 2020, [McGowan Government announces streamlined environmental assessment processes during COVID-19 recovery](#).

¹¹³ Prime Minister's Media release, 7 March 2012, [NSW signs up to coal seam gas agreement](#).

¹¹⁴ Background on this work can be found in the [Digitally Transforming Environmental Assessment Working Group Report](#), a report of the Digital Environmental Impact Assessment Working Group released in October 2019.

¹¹⁵ CSIRO, ANON-K57V-XFQC-Y. [Submission in response to EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹¹⁶ WABSI, 2019. [Digital Environmental Impact Assessment: Report of the Digital Environmental Assessment Working Group](#).

¹¹⁷ Threatened Species Scientific Committee, ANON-K57V-XF2U-J. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹¹⁸ Department of the Environment and Energy 2019, [The National Heritage List and the Commonwealth Heritage List: 1 July 2013 – 30 June 2018](#).

¹¹⁹ Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) 2019, [Management of Commonwealth National Parks](#).

¹²⁰ GBRMPA 2020, [Reef 2050 Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program](#).

¹²¹ Capon S et al 2020, [A long-term monitoring framework for the Regional Land Partnerships Stage 2: Final Report](#), Griffith University.

¹²² This box draws on information on environmental economic accounting from the [National Strategy and Action Plan](#) and the [Commonwealth Government](#). and [Victorian Government](#) websites on environmental accounting.

¹²³ Property Council of Australia, ANON-K57V-XQ5D-F, pg 18-19. [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹²⁴ More information on carbon markets is available from the Clean Energy Regulator, [About Carbon Markets](#).

¹²⁵ Emissions Reduction Assurance Committee 2019, [Review of the Human-Induced Regeneration and Native Forest from Managed Regrowth methods](#).

¹²⁶ Drawing from data on [Area-based Emissions Reduction Fund \(ERF\) projects](#), including regeneration, avoided deforestation and clearing, and reforestation activities, as well as the [Clean Energy Regulator's Quarterly Carbon Market Report, March Quarter 2020](#).

¹²⁷ Responsible Investment Association Australasia 2019, [Responsible Investment Benchmark Report 2019](#), p.5.

¹²⁸ Australian Environment Grantmakers network, ANON-QJCP-UGDN-V, [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹²⁹ The Nature Conservancy, ANON-QJCP-UG6H-8, pg 8, [Submission in response to the EPBC Act Review Discussion Paper](#).

¹³⁰ DoEE 2019, [Compliance Policy, Commonwealth of Australia 2019](#).

¹³¹ DAWE 19 June 2020, Based on a review of the [compliance outcomes](#) published by the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.

¹³² Central Western Daily News 29 July 2019, [Orange City Council issued nearly 8000 parking fines last financial year totalling over \\$1.1 million](#).

¹³³ Craik W 2018, [Review of interactions between the EPBC Act and the agriculture sector. Independent report prepared for the Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Energy](#).

¹³⁴ Environmental outcomes and standards have been drawn from existing EPBC Act policy documents, including: Department of the Environment 2014. [Standards for Accreditation of Environmental Approvals under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#) , intergovernmental agreements including the [Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment 1992](#), and international commitments and treaties.

¹³⁵ s46(1)