

A. Entity responses

As mandated in Section 64 of the *Auditor-General Act 2009*, the Queensland Audit Office gave a copy of this report with a request for comments to the Department of Environment and Science.

This appendix contains its detailed responses to our audit recommendations.

The head of the entity is responsible for the accuracy, balance and fairness of its response.



Comments received from the Director-General, Department of Environment and Science

Our Ref: CTS 02661/23



Department of
Environment and Science

17 February 2023

Mr Brendan Worrall
Auditor-General
Queensland Audit Office
PO Box 15396
CITY EAST QLD 4002

Dear Mr Worrall

Thank you for the opportunity to comment regarding the Queensland Audit Office (QAO) follow-up audit for the *Conserving Threatened Species Report 7: 2018-2019*. I have reviewed the proposed *Protecting Our Threatened Animals and Plants* report.

I accept the findings of the **Department of Environment and Science's** (DES) progress against the recommendations from the *Conserving Threatened Species Report 7: 2018-2019*. The audit identifies a great deal of work has been undertaken to address the recommendations including a new Threatened Species Program 2020-2040, which fully addresses the **report's commentary** around coordination and bases its activity on a program logic approach. Information on the Threatened Species Program is available at www.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0022/209803/threatened-species-program-2020-2040.pdf.

More than 72% of threatened species listed under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* are found in **national parks and other public protected areas, with about 26% of Queensland's threatened species either highly or entirely reliant on these areas for their survival.** Queensland's Protected Area Strategy 2020–2030 provides the pathway to grow the protected area system to conserve critical habitat for threatened species.

Since the initial audit report was released, a number of highly significant initiatives have been progressed, developed and actioned to enhance threatened species protection. Firstly, the Queensland Government has provided new investment of \$262.5 million to acquire more land for protected areas which will provide vital habitat for threatened species. Land that is acquired considers a range of values with a core element being what threatened species it will protect and conserve into the future.

Secondly, nearly \$40 million of additional funding has also been allocated to further deliver the Threatened Species Program and the South-East Queensland Koala Strategy. This increased funding will ensure not only the completion of the QAO recommendations but key threatened species priorities to further conserve and protect our threatened flora and fauna. Whilst DES leads the Queensland Threatened Species Program, in doing so, we partner with a range of First Nations organisations, leading researchers, conservation and community groups.

Thirdly, the Land Restoration Fund is a \$500 million initiative which supports landholders, farmers and First Nations peoples to sequester carbon in Queensland landscapes and deliver additional environmental, social and economic outcomes (or co-benefits). Importantly, these co-benefits include large-scale habitat restoration and conservation, with a priority focus on improved outcomes for threatened species.

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In addition, the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* has been amended to improve regulation of the clearing of vegetation (outside protected areas) in a way that conserves vegetation that is: an endangered regional ecosystem; or an of concern regional ecosystem; or a least concern regional ecosystem and prevents the loss of biodiversity. The 2019-2020 Statewide Landcover and Trees Study showed in 2019–2020, 418,656 hectares of woody vegetation was affected by clearing activity. This is a 38% decrease in clearing activity from 2018–2019 (680,688 hectares), consistent with improved habitat conservation outcomes under new settings. .

A number of human-induced factors on threatened species such as population growth, and a changing climate impact threatened species and their habitat, are factors outside DES' direct influence. However, the Strategy for Conserving Biodiversity in Queensland has been released and is being used to guide policies, strategies and programs across Queensland Government. The Biodiversity Strategy has four goals to protect, restore and recover, adapt and connect with a strong focus on threatened species and habitat protection. Through this Strategy, Queensland is well positioned to ensure a coordinated, well planned and monitored approach to biodiversity conservation into the future. An independent, expert report has now been received, and consideration of this will form the basis for a leading monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement framework for the Strategy.

I also offer the following specific comments in regard to aspects of the report:

- The intent of the Common Assessment Methodology (CAM) is to lead to consistent listing (the 'single operational list') based on the technical assessment of scientific data against consistent IUCN-based criteria. It is not a simple administrative exercise of updating the listings to be consistent. The assessment process is a collaborative national effort to align misaligned taxa under the different state and federal legislation. Importantly, the process is based on rigorous analysis of scientific evidence, much of which has itself been subject to peer review.
- While the report considers the Species Technical Committee (STC) may benefit from revisiting opportunities for greater input from the community, your own consultation does not demonstrate that significant demand for such input exists. I am also advised that Federal nominations are open for public consultation for one month, with very little community comment. However, DES will continue to engage with the STC to ensure relevant community stakeholder awareness of assessments to facilitate input. I would further note, that the department provides extensive support for citizen projects focused on threatened species, a matter not canvassed in the report.
- Species classifications are periodically reviewed by the STC. This draws on the broad scientific expertise represented on this group and their knowledge of the current research and data about threatened species. Additionally, this matter has been identified as requiring coordination across jurisdictions and thus referred to the National CAM Working Group with the Commonwealth and Queensland taking the lead in progressing the matter constructively.
- The report discusses how many recovery plans are underway and the monitoring of threatened species by DES. It should be noted that DES is one partner in addressing the conservation of threatened species in Queensland working alongside a range of stakeholders including Australian Government, local governments, conservation and community groups and the research community. As you acknowledge, it is not feasible for DES to lead all recovery efforts or monitor all threatened species. DES is utilising analysis derived from the first iteration of the prioritisation framework developed with CSIRO to drive our work. Consistent with good scientific practise, we are testing and evaluating this work with key experts partners before finalising the prioritisation tool.
- DES has identified various government strategies to align with the Queensland Biodiversity Strategy (as detailed on DES' website) including strategies such as the Queensland Feral Pest Initiative (a Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) initiative) and DAF's early warning surveillance program (regarding exotic plant pests). DES will continue to ensure other agency strategies consider and align with the goals of the Queensland Biodiversity Strategy.

DES will continue to build on key threatened species recovery projects such as the critically endangered northern hairy-nosed wombat, marine turtles and bilby recovery and many other fauna and flora species. DES has a number of leading scientists and conservation officers who work with the relevant species stakeholders to progress actions in recovery plans and respond to emerging threats. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their tireless efforts in the field to conserve our threatened species.

I appreciate the work undertaken by the QAO and the professionalism of the officers undertaking this review. In the spirit of improvement, I would observe that future performance audits could be strengthened by the inclusive of independent scientific expertise with domain knowledge, supplementing the audit team.

Yours sincerely



Jamie Merrick
Director-General

