



Environmental Defenders Office

12 September 2025

Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

By email: stewardship@detsi.qld.gov.au

Dear Department,

Submission on the Queensland Government's discussion paper *A Fresh Start for Private Protected Areas*.

Environmental Defenders Office (**EDO**) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Government's commitment to expanding Queensland's protected area estate.

We support the Government's commitment to expanding Queensland's protected area estate and to recognising the critical role of private landholders in biodiversity conservation. With only 8.6% of Queensland currently protected – the lowest proportion of any Australian state or territory – urgent reform is required to secure high-conservation-value lands and meet both state and national biodiversity targets, including Australia's commitment to protect 30% of land by 2030 under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

EDO supports mechanisms to expand private protected areas and 'other effective conservation measures' (**OECMs**). However, these will only deliver genuine and durable conservation outcomes if accompanied by robust legal protections against land clearing, incompatible land uses, and extractive industries.

In 2022 EDO was commissioned by WWF-Australia to undertake research into how we can better protect Australia's wilderness after the bushfires ravaged many areas of the east coast. This research culminated in various reports with recommendations for improving nature protections, including in growing the private protected area estate. We particularly point out the following reports of most relevance to this discussion paper:

- [Opportunities to expand and enhance environmental stewardship](#);
- [Legal mechanisms for protecting critical unburnt habitat following the 2019-2020 bushfire season](#)
- [Offsetting our way to extinction](#)

1. More clarity needed on how OECM recognition will be legally implemented with long term security of biodiversity outcomes

The discussion paper identifies OECMs as a new tool for recognising and rewarding conservation outcomes on private and public land. While the discussion paper recognises the potential role of OECMs, it does not yet outline how they will interact with the existing protected area framework. More information is required as to how the Queensland Government intends to support integration of the OECM National Framework. For example, how will Queensland laws secure long term protection of OECM areas? Will OECM areas be protected from vegetation clearing or degradation that may be allowed under Queensland laws? For consistency, all land contributing to biodiversity conservation must be subject to a coherent system of protections.

Recommendations:

- a) Formally recognise OECMs under Queensland law, with equivalent clearing controls to those applying in declared protected areas.
- b) Develop a hierarchy of protection where OECMs can be progressively upgraded to stronger forms of protection (e.g. from OECM → nature refuge → special wildlife reserve).
- c) Ensure transparent public reporting on the extent, management, and protection status of OECMs in Queensland's State of the Environment reporting.

2. Strengthen legal security over private protected areas

Nature refuges and special wildlife reserves are created through voluntary agreements under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992 (Qld)*. While these agreements provide some security, they vary in duration and enforceability. To meet the "long-term conservation" requirement under the National OECM Framework, Queensland must ensure that once land is recognised, it is not later subject to clearing or conversion. This can be achieved through the following recommendations focused on ensuring legal recognition and long term conservation.

Recommendations:

- a) Require all private protected areas and OECMs to be registered on title to ensure transparency and enforceability.
- b) Standardise legal agreements supporting private protected areas to ensure perpetual or at least multi-generational protection.

3. Integrity of all protected areas must be protected from other interests, particularly fossil fuel infrastructure and native forest logging

Currently, Queensland law does not provide absolute security for all protected areas against logging, mining, gas or other extractive industries and associated infrastructure, such as pipelines. For example, a draft environmental authority had been provided by the Queensland Environment Department for the Galilee Coal Project to develop over and around the Bimblebox Nature Refuge. The Bimblebox Nature Refuge is an almost 8000 hectare, 95% uncleared sanctuary in central west Queensland, approximately 500 km west of Rockhampton and 30km north west of the town of Alpha. The refuge has received Federal Government funding and has been used for research by the Queensland Herbarium amongst many other researchers. The Galilee Coal Project would have substantially and irreversibly impacted the nature refuge, and yet the Department was willing to support the mine going ahead. Ultimately the mine was refused after the Land Court of Queensland determined that the impacts would be unacceptable on this important protected area, but this was not a definite outcome and the Court was open to have found differently on the law.

Further, Queensland is an anomaly as the only Australian jurisdiction in which logging is allowed to occur within protected areas. Logging is not an activity that is in alignment with the principles and long-term health of private protected areas. The recently released Draft Queensland Future Timber Plan describes plans to expand the timber industry 'on all tenures', which severely diminishes the confidence of landholders that the integrity of PPAs will be maintained.¹ Allowing

¹ Draft Queensland Future Timber Plan, pg. 26 (accessed 12 September 2025), available here: <https://dpi.engagementhub.com.au/projects/download/21564/ProjectDocument>.

such activities within declared protected areas undermines ecological integrity and public trust, and is inconsistent with the objectives of the *Nature Conservation Act 1992 (Qld)*.

Recommendations:

- a) Legislate a blanket prohibition on logging, mining, petroleum, and gas activities in all categories of protected areas.
- b) Ensure that all existing and future agreements for private protected areas explicitly exclude extractive activities.
- c) Align Queensland's laws with international best practice, which requires that protected areas are managed primarily for biodiversity conservation.

4. Better support restoration and carbon market participation

In addition to protecting existing conservation lands, Queensland has an opportunity to drive ecological restoration and carbon sequestration on degraded and low-productivity agricultural lands. This would enhance biodiversity, increase resilience to climate change, and create new income streams for farmers. However, any market-based stewardship mechanism must have accountability mechanisms around it to ensure it delivers genuine environmental outcomes, as listed in the recommendations below.

There are some impediments hindering the ability of farmers and other landholders to access these markets and to undertake restoration activities to increase the private protected area estate. For example, we are aware that currently some local planning schemes are hindering the ability of restoration focused land purchasers to change old poor quality agricultural land into privately protected restoration areas, even right next to the Daintree National Park. This could be overcome through State Government level planning laws which override local planning scheme restrictions to enable the changing of use of agricultural land to restoration focused uses. We are also aware that many landholders have found the administration required in accessing the Land Restoration Fund and other carbon market offerings has been significant and a barrier to accessing this incentive to restore their land.

Recommendations:

- a) To ensure carbon markets deliver genuine environmental outcomes, providers (including those that are government affiliated) must be subject to rigorous integrity standards based on the best available science and regular transparent monitoring, reporting and auditing.
- b) Establish a state-level planning framework to facilitate the conversion of poor-quality agricultural land into restoration areas, supported by zoning and regulatory mechanisms.
- c) Continue to support Land Restoration Fund activities which assist farmers to participate in the carbon market and co-benefits schemes, by continuing funding and supporting farmers to move through complex administrative barriers.

5. Implement a conservation investment strategy and dedicated funding and support for landholders

There is a need for committed and increased government funding to drive an uptake in private land conservation e.g. by supporting and expanding existing programs mentioned above, and also by increasing capacity for on-ground outreach to private landholders. Unless government

supports and incentivises landholders there is not going to be a sudden uptake in the available mechanisms, no matter how good they are.

The Queensland Government should adopt a conservation investment strategy to guide investment to priority areas (e.g. to work towards establishing a comprehensive, adequate and representative protected area system and improve landscape connectivity and build resilience to climate change). The investment strategy can guide expenditure, so that programs can target the areas prioritised by the strategy.

The Biodiversity Conservation Trust NSW (**BCT**) has enabled significant uptake of private protected areas through dedicated government funding for private land conservation and fundraising capital investment to support landholders via various programs including annual payments for conservation agreements, Conservation Partners Grants, and other co-investment opportunities. It is guided by the NSW *Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategy 2018*. The BCT's work incentivises landholders to transition their land into the private protected area estate and delivers sufficient funds to continue adequate management of that land. This could be a model that Queensland could seek to emulate given its success.

Recommendations:

- a) The Queensland Government should adopt a conservation investment strategy to guide investment and expansion of private land conservation to priority areas.
- b) Provide grants, extension services, and technical advice to assist farmers to undertake conservation and restoration at scale.

Conclusion

Queensland has an exciting opportunity to expand its protected area system through partnerships with private landholders and the recognition of OECMs. However, for these measures to be credible and effective, they must be accompanied by **clear prohibitions on clearing, absolute exclusions of logging, mining and gas, and proactive support for restoration and carbon market participation**. Without such safeguards, recognition risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, jeopardising Queensland's contribution to the 30 by 30 target and undermining community trust.

By embedding strong protections and enabling restoration across degraded landscapes, the Queensland Government can deliver a genuinely world-leading approach to conservation stewardship on private land, ensuring that biodiversity and communities' benefit for generations to come. EDO looks forward to engaging further as the refreshed Protected Area Strategy and supporting legislation are developed. For further information, please contact revel.pointon@edo.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Environmental Defenders Office



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