



# Environmental Defenders Office

## Explainer: Strategic Assessment of Alcoa's proposed mining activities to 2045 under the EPBC Act

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### Background

Mining projects in WA often need approval under state and federal environmental legislation. In WA, Alcoa is currently involved in the following assessment processes related to their mining in the northern jarrah forests:

- an assessment at the State level under the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* (WA) (**EP Act**) by the Western Australian Environmental Protection Authority (**EPA**) following referrals in February 2023; and
- a Strategic Assessment at the federal level under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) (**EPBC Act**) by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (**DCCEEW**) which started in February 2026.

Each of these processes will assess Alcoa's current and potential future mining areas through to 2045.

However, Alcoa is allowed to continue mining during these assessment processes under a [National Interest Exemption \(NIE\) granted by the Australian Federal Government](#) and under an [exemption from the EP Act granted by the WA State government](#).

### What is the current status of the State Environmental Assessment?

The EP Act operates to protect the WA environment generally. The EPA has a role in achieving this objective through conducting environmental impact assessment of proposals that will have a 'significant effect' on the WA environment.



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The EPA is currently assessing the following Alcoa proposals:

- [Bauxite Mining in the Darling Ranges for the years 2023 to 2027](#) (which covers mining in the Huntly and Willowdale mine regions in the Northern Jarrah Forest)
- [Pinjarra Alumina Refinery Revised Proposal](#) (which covers the operation of one of Alcoa's refineries)

The Public Environmental Review period for both proposals has closed. Almost [60,000 submissions were received during the public comment period](#).

The next step in the process under the EP Act is for the EPA to publish its assessment reports, setting out its findings on the environmental impacts of each of the proposals and its recommendations on whether they should be approved (and, if so, applicable conditions). EPA reports are open to merits appeals against the EPA's findings and recommendations. For more information, see our factsheet on [Challenging Decisions in WA](#).

The WA Minister for Environment is responsible for making a final approval decision under the EP Act.

For more information on the process generally, see our factsheet on [Environmental Impact Assessment under the Environmental Protection Act 1986 \(WA\)](#).

## **Why are Alcoa's operations being assessed under the EPBC Act?**

The EPBC Act operates to protect specified "matters of national environmental significance" (**MNES**) at the federal level. DCCEE is responsible for assessing environmental impacts under the EPBC Act.

The strategic assessment of Alcoa's operations is directed to three MNES protected under the EPBC Act: listed threatened species, migratory species, and internationally protected wetlands. Impacts on these specific matters will be the focus of the federal Strategic Assessment, and the decision by the federal Minister for the Environment on whether to grant Alcoa approval under the EPBC Act to mine out to 2045.

## **What is the 'Strategic Assessment'?**

In February 2026, the Commonwealth Government and Alcoa entered into an [Agreement](#) under section 146 of the EPBC Act to undertake a Strategic Assessment of bauxite mining activities at Alcoa's Huntly and Willowdale mines (**Strategic Assessment**).



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The Strategic Assessment is a broader level of landscape-scale assessment of activities over many years that could allow Alcoa to avoid the need to submit their projects for individual assessments in future. The Strategic Assessment involves Alcoa preparing an overarching “plan” for managing environmental impacts of its mining operations, and the federal Minister deciding whether that plan will protect the identified MNES and, if so, “endorsing” the plan. It is a bit different to the standard individual assessment of activities that ordinarily occurs under the EPBC Act. The aim of this pathway is to set up a broad framework to govern Alcoa’s various mining activities (which might otherwise require individual assessment) over a long period of time.

A specific website for Alcoa’s strategic assessment is [here](#), and details of the process are stipulated in the assessment agreement linked above. The EPBC Act also sets out requirements for how a strategic assessment is conducted.

At this stage, DCCEEW has prepared a “terms of reference” setting out what the assessment will cover, which can be found [here](#).

Alcoa is currently preparing:

- a) a draft proposed plan – a document that sets out how Alcoa plans to undertake and manage its operations at a landscape level; and
- b) a draft Strategic Impact Assessment Report (**SIAR**) – a document that reports on the environmental, social, and economic impacts of those operations.

The draft plan and draft SIAR have not yet been made available for public comment. Alcoa will publish the draft plan and draft SIAR, and there will be a public comment period of at least 28 days.

Following public comments, and any modifications made to the plan to address those comments, the Minister will consider the plan against the criteria in the EPBC Act. Subject to that consideration, the Minister may “endorse” the plan.

If the plan is endorsed, it is then possible for individual projects (e.g., particular areas/periods of Alcoa’s clearing and mining) to be approved to be undertaken in accordance with the endorsed plan, without those individual projects needing a standalone assessment.



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## How can you have your say?

There is one formal opportunity for public participation in the Strategic Assessment. Note that, unlike the process under WA environmental laws, the EPBC Act does not provide a mechanism for merits appeal against the federal environmental assessment.

The key point to look out for is the period for public comments on Alcoa's draft plan and draft SIAR.

### **Step 1: Keep an eye out for the public comment period**

The draft plan and draft SIAR will be available to the public for a minimum of 28 days and will be:

1. posted on Alcoa's website
2. circulated to agreed key stakeholder groups
3. published in a national daily newspaper for the first day of the 28 day period

Visit the DCCEE public comment portal to find current strategic assessments, including the current Alcoa assessment, [here](#).

There is no clear mechanism on the assessment website to sign up for automatic notifications of the progress and updates to this strategic assessment. We recommend regularly checking the website if you want to keep up to date on the opportunities for public comment.

### **Step 2: Review Alcoa's draft documents and prepare your comments**

Once the public comment period is open, you can have your say about whether Alcoa has presented adequate assessment information and whether the impacts are acceptable. You can provide personalised input (such as your local knowledge or specific expertise) to the assessment and make suggestions for how impacts could be better managed (or whether it is possible to make them acceptable at all).

To make the most effective comment, it is useful to review the draft plan and draft SIAR, and compare the environmental, social and economic impacts identified by Alcoa with your own expectations for how those impacts should be managed.



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Specialist environmental groups also often provide resources or assistance to individuals wanting to participate in a comment period, so keep your eye out if this would help you.

## **Step 3: Submit Comments**

Submit your comments on the draft plan and draft SIAR within the advertised 28-day (minimum) period via the methods listed in the formal notice (usually email or the online portal). The website will contain the details once the period is opened.

Ensure that comments and recommendations are specific to the project, focusing on the impacts on the relevant MNES. These are the points that the federal Minister must consider when deciding whether to endorse the plan and approve Alcoa's activities.