

Ms Courtney Bryant  
Assistant Secretary, Drought Policy Branch  
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry  
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7 October 2022

Dear Ms Bryant,

**RE: Submission to A new Australian Government drought plan**

The Australian Land Conservation Alliance (ALCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Federal Government's consultation on *A new Australian Government drought plan*.

Please note that ALCA is happy for this submission to be published in full.

**About the Australian Land Conservation Alliance**

The Australian Land Conservation Alliance is the peak national body representing organisations that work to conserve, manage and restore nature on privately managed land. We represent our members and supporters to grow the impact, capacity and influence of private land conservation to achieve a healthy and resilient Australia. Our eleven members are:

- Australian Wildlife Conservancy
- Biodiversity Conservation Trust NSW
- Bush Heritage Australia
- Greening Australia
- Landcare Australia
- Nature Foundation
- Queensland Trust for Nature
- South Endeavour Trust
- Tasmanian Land Conservancy
- The Nature Conservancy Australia
- Trust for Nature (Victoria)

ALCA land conservation efforts stretch across over 3 million square kilometres with more than 4,000 landholders. We have over 70,000 supporters and our combined annual turnover exceeds \$260 million. Together ALCA and its members address some of the most pressing conservation issues across the country, including restoring endangered ecosystems, building the protected area estate, tackling invasive species, expanding private conservation finance and funding, and using nature-based solutions to tackle climate change.

Through their active land management, ALCA member organisations are deeply embedded in rural communities and economies, providing jobs, securing significant regional investment, and safeguarding remaining native habitat, with its many positive spillover effects for community, wellbeing, and food security. We seek to demonstrate the role and value of private land conservation as a cornerstone of the Australian economy.

Some ALCA members are statutory entities; the views expressed in this submission do not necessarily represent the views of the Government administering those statutory entities.

## Summary

ALCA recognises that Australian drought policy has had a focus on sustaining agricultural livelihoods, and that the focus has predominantly been on directly supporting farming communities that suffer from drought rather than seeking to address every problem that drought may bring.

Environmental health and resilience at the landscape-scale is indivisible to the long-term sustainability, viability, and resilience of agriculture. As such, our environment and its unique biodiversity values should be recognised as an essential and direct beneficiary within Australia's national drought policies and plans.

For example – and to illustrate the point – the United Nations System of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA) details which sectors' supply chains are most critically dependent upon nature. They include<sup>1</sup>:

- Cropping
- Grazing
- Forestry
- Wild fisheries
- Water supply
- Global climate regulation services (e.g. carbon sequestration)
- Local climate regulation services (e.g. urban cooling and agricultural cooling effects)
- Air filtration
- Soil and sediment retention services
- Solid waste remediation
- Water purification services
- Water flow regulation services
- Coastal protection services
- River flood mitigation services
- Pollination services
- Nursery population and habitat services
- Recreation-related services (including tourism)
- Visual amenity services
- Education, scientific and research services
- Mental health services<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore critical that the Australian Government's new drought plan should acknowledge the indivisibility of nature and agriculture, articulating clear actions and strategies for supporting environmental management programs or activities at the landscape level that directly underpin sustainable agricultural production.

## Recommendations

1. The Plan should clearly and prominently acknowledge the indivisibility of nature and agriculture.
2. The Plan should articulate clear actions and strategies that support environmental management. These actions and strategies should be aimed at the landscape level and directly underpin sustainable agricultural production, providing key signals that allow our sector to actively plan and fund landscape-scale environmental management in preparation for future droughts.

<sup>1</sup> Largely reproduced from: p154-157 (Annex 6.1), United Nations, SEEA, *Ecosystem Accounting*; [https://seea.un.org/sites/seea.un.org/files/documents/EA/seea\\_ea\\_white\\_cover\\_final.pdf](https://seea.un.org/sites/seea.un.org/files/documents/EA/seea_ea_white_cover_final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> This last item has been well-documented during the COVID-19 pandemic; for example: S.M. Labib et. al., *Nature's contributions in coping with a pandemic in the 21st century: A narrative review of evidence during COVID-19*, Science of the Total Environment (Journal), 10 August 2022; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8983608/>; and University of Western Australia research: J.N. Sneddon et. al, *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on environmental values*, May 2022, Sustainability Science (Journal); <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11625-022-01151-w>

3. There should be at least one individual program stream that specifically seeks to develop environmental resilience to support agricultural livelihoods, to be managed in coordination with the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment, and Water (DCCEEW).
4. Environmental resilience activities offer a strong opportunity for driving shared community purpose, community cohesion, and social resilience, as well as contributing to the agricultural and economic resilience of the landscape. ALCA supports further investments into the building of networks and capacity building, including leadership; ALCA and its members can be a key delivery partner to the private land sector. This will become increasingly important given the greater need for private landholders to engage in environmental stewardship, management, and protection.
5. Policies and taxes that actively disincentivise environmental management activities that help build landscape-level resilience should be reformed or abolished. For example: State land taxes on land being protected, managed, or restored for nature; or the lack of tax relief available for most conservation and restoration expenses. Whilst the specific policies themselves may be considered outside of the remit of the Plan, the plan should articulate the mechanism or process for coordinating on removing or addressing policy barriers to drought response, preparedness, and resilience.
6. The establishment of a Chief Environment Biosecurity Officer and Environmental Biosecurity Fund are positive steps in the right direction, but environmental biosecurity requires substantial additional resourcing to effectively reduce the heightened impacts of invasive animals, pests, and weeds during drought. The Plan should articulate how it will provide additional support for – or at least help coordinate and leverage – national environmental biosecurity efforts relevant to times of drought.
7. Activities that support environmental resilience at the landscape level should be particularly prioritised where the impacts of drought lead to widespread land use change; for example, where dryland cropping is no longer viable and the land is converted into rangelands.
8. Greater priority needs to be placed upon education and awareness of the economic benefits from protecting remnant native vegetation, as well as actions that can improve degraded native vegetation such as revegetation, fencing waterways, and linking isolated patches.
9. A particular focus should be placed upon protecting and enhancing drought refuges, including by building up buffer areas and linking them up across the landscape.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to *A new Australian Government drought plan*. ALCA looks forward to ongoing engagement with the Drought Policy Branch as it progresses this work.

**Australian Land Conservation Alliance**