

Economic stimulus measures in the conservation and land management sector

In light of the current and anticipated impacts of COVID-19 across every sector of society, it is clear that decisive action and unprecedented investment is needed to temper the worst social and economic impacts of this crisis. We recognise and welcome the measures taken by federal and state governments to date, particularly in relation to the immediate health and economic threats posed by the rapid spread of the disease.

We recognise that the road to recovery will be a long one, which will require each sector of society to contribute in its own way. We stand ready to help in any way we can.

Right now, hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their job across the country and we write in the interest of assisting government to find ways to give these people security of employment over the next couple of years. It is in this spirit that we share these ideas on the role that the conservation and land management sector could play in immediate, medium and long-term economic stimulus efforts.

Investment in a jobs-rich conservation and land management program, as part of broader economic stimulus measures, presents important opportunities for safe, meaningful and socially beneficial work during the period of economic crisis, while leaving enduring benefits for the environment, tourism and farm businesses.

During the period of economic recovery, there is scope for tens of thousands of skilled and unskilled workers to be employed in the conservation and land management sector in roles that are:

- practical and labour intensive;
- located in both regional and metropolitan areas;
- appropriate for repurposing existing workforces which are under pressure, including tradespeople and workers in the tourism, fisheries and forestry sectors; and,
- will not create long-term structural commitments in the budget.

Practical conservation activities that could be undertaken across public and private land include:

- **a surge in weed control efforts**, focussed on containment and preventing cross-tenure spread;
- **river and wetland restoration**, including fencing, revegetation and erosion control;
- **national park infrastructure**, track maintenance and park management (fire, weeds, feral animals);
- **bushfire recovery and resilience activities**, including infrastructure repairs and habitat restoration;
- **invasive animal control**, including deer and pigs which impact on farming and threatened species;
- **tree planting and habitat restoration** in metropolitan, suburban, peri-urban and rural areas;
- **funding for private land conservation**, putting money in the hands of farmers and other land managers;
- **coastal habitat restoration and monitoring**, in partnership with the fishing industry and local communities;
- **plastics and marine debris clean up**, including research to inform future policy decisions; and
- **funding for Indigenous rangers** to deliver jobs directly to vulnerable communities using a proven model.

This investment would be low risk, especially if the planning occurs during the current 'lock down' as part of the stimulus measures. It would allow people who are newly unemployed or underemployed to have meaningful and secure employment for at least 12 months as soon as social distancing measures are eased, giving an immediate boost to economy confidence and security. In addition, this investment would:

- provide much needed income and economic confidence for bulldozer and other machine operators, weed-sprayers, shooting and trapping contractors, fencers, nursery growers, hardware suppliers, local and Indigenous land managers and bush regenerators;
- have significant economic multipliers, especially in regional communities, with work generated for local suppliers and hospitality businesses; and
- capitalise on existing organisational and land management capabilities across the non-profit sector, private sector and local, state and federal government.

Program design considerations

Developing this package early will allow for good **program design** and the opportunity to learn the lessons of past programs. If funding is committed, then the ‘lock down’ period is an opportunity to develop projects, seek partners and allow people to apply for positions, so that the program can hit the ground running. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the government in the detailed design of this program.

The **geographic focus** of investment could be refined as the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 become clearer over time, including identification of regions experiencing particularly high unemployment, but could range from national park maintenance, bushfire recovery and river restoration in Western Sydney to weed control and coastal restoration in North Queensland communities affected by a rapid decline in tourism.

The program would provide an **immediate economic stimulus** with 90% of funding expended across the first two years. The remaining 10% can be spent in years three to four to **maintain and consolidate** the gains in any short-term stimulus program. Jobs could be directed to areas where existing funding can be leveraged, including through ongoing government programs and donations from the recent bushfire disaster.

Indicative return on investment

Research into employment outcomes from stimulus spending in the United States (Edwards et al. 2013) found that conservation, land management and habitat restoration provide a **high return on investment**, relative to other sectors. The labour-intensive nature of the work, combined with relatively low capital and overhead costs, results in a high proportion of investment flowing to the employees and contractors delivering the work (and, in turn, to their families and businesses in their local community).

The ratio between salary, operational and capital costs will vary by activity, location and program, but we estimate that investment in conservation land management would support about **1,000 full-time equivalent positions per \$100 million invested** (including salaries, on-costs, operational and capital expenditure).¹

We believe the conservation and land management sector – including non-profit organisations, local governments and state conservation agencies – can support delivery of up to \$4 billion in combined federal and state economic stimulus over the forward estimates, **employing up to 24,000 workers**. These positions would span a range of skill levels, from unskilled labourers to professional conservation land managers.

Table 1. Illustrative employment benefits associated with a \$4 billion federal and state investment

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
Number of workers	24,000	12,000	2,000	2,000	
Employee expenses (\$ million) (\$60,000 avg, on-costs)	1,800	900	150	150	3,000
Capital and operational expenditure (\$ million)	600	300	50	50	1,000
Proportion of expenditure	60%	30%	5%	5%	100%

Based on extensive conservation land management experience across the country, we anticipate that a high proportion of operational and capital expenditure would stay in the local community, providing income for hardware stores, plant nurseries, pest control contractors and other local businesses.

This investment could be delivered as a series of thematic initiatives, or as a broader employment and conservation initiative, reminiscent of the highly popular [US Civilian Conservation Corps](#) (1933-1942), which provided work for millions of young, unemployed men during the Great Depression. More recently, economic stimulus measures by the US Government in response to the 2009 recession included US\$3 billion for natural resource conservation, creating tens of thousands of jobs and delivering long-term environmental benefits.

This proposal is for an immediate stimulus package in response to the current crisis and is not intended as a substitute for the need for a longer-term package of measures to support the environment to recover after the bushfires, save threatened species and increase natural capital on our farms and in our landscapes.

¹ This estimate is informed by consultation with conservation organisations with large field teams. It is based on an average salary of \$60,000 pa, plus 25% on-costs (\$75,000 total cost per worker). This reflects pay rates for a range of positions, from unskilled labourers to professional conservation land managers, with a skew towards the lower paid, physical labour roles. The ratio between salary, operational and capital costs will vary by activity, location and program, but is typically around 3:1 (75% salary and on-costs, 25% capital and operational costs).