

National conservation and land management employment program would deliver thousands of jobs in regional communities hit hard by COVID-19

Media Release

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Large scale investment in conservation and land management could provide work for thousands of people in regional communities hard hit by COVID-19, according to a new report released today.

The *'Delivering economic stimulus through the conservation and land management sector'* report, prepared by EY, examines the economic impacts of an economic stimulus proposal developed by a coalition of more than 70 conservation, farming and land management groups. [1]

The report finds that a \$4 billion national conservation and land management employment program would create 53,000 jobs, reduce welfare costs by \$620 million and raise economic output by \$5.7 billion over the next four years, with economic gains rising to \$9.3 billion over the next 20 years. [2]

The proposed program aims to provide safe, meaningful and socially beneficial work during the period of economic recovery, while leaving enduring benefits for the environment through practical activities like tree planting, weed control and restoration of rivers, wetlands and coastal habitats.

The report highlights the value of the proposed program for hard-hit regional and rural areas, and identifies 35 local council areas most affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19. [3]

"The analysis found that the areas hardest hit by COVID-19 across the country were generally those with tourism-dependent economies," said Pepe Clarke, Deputy Director of The Pew Charitable Trusts, one of the 70 plus organisations who co-authored the proposal examined in the report.

"There is strong evidence that investment in a national conservation and land management jobs program would deliver timely and targeted economic stimulus as well as long-term economic and environmental benefits for regional communities."

"For regional areas, the ability to provide temporary employment for workers displaced from other industries can reduce the loss of workers to cities and keep young people connected to the workforce during the period of economic downturn," said Mr Clarke.

The findings of the report have been welcomed by leading conservation and farming organisations:

"The labour intensive nature of the work, combined with low capital 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," said Jim Adams, CEO, National Landcare Network.

"This hands on conservation and land management work will leave a lasting legacy for the environment, including supporting recovery of landscapes damaged by recent bushfires and drought," said Mr Adams.

“This program could deliver meaningful gains in agricultural productivity, by reducing costs, improving the condition of soil, water and native vegetation and enhancing resilience to natural disasters,” said Kate Andrews, CEO of NRM Regions Australia.

“Right now tens of thousands of people are unemployed and unsure when they will get their jobs back. By scaling up existing conservation and land management work we can give these people jobs right away while the economy recovers,” said Ms Andrews.

“This program would create opportunities for young people, women and unskilled workers, who have been particularly hard hit by the current economic crisis, and can be rolled out fast, to provide work when and where it is needed most,” said Nerida Bradley, CEO, Australian Land Conservation Alliance.

“We encourage federal and state policy-makers to consider the important benefits that this program would deliver for hard-hit regional communities, farm businesses and the natural environment,” said Ms Bradley.

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Notes for editors:

[1] The stimulus proposal was developed by an alliance of more than 70 conservation, farming and land management organisations, including Landcare, National Farmers Federation, NRM Regions Australia, Australian Land Conservation Alliance, Australian Conservation Foundation and Pew Charitable Trusts.

[2] The \$4 billion program was estimated to raise economic output by around \$5.7 billion and generate 53,000 jobs over the next four years to support Australia’s post COVID-19 economic recovery. Over the period to 2040, when long run gains from natural asset and land management investments may be realised, economic gains are estimated to be in the order of \$9.3 billion, with total employment expected to increase by around 62,000 workers.

[3] For each state and territory, the report identifies five regional Local Government Areas most significantly affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19:

New South Wales: Snowy Monaro, Murray River, Byron, Kiama, Singleton

Victoria: Surf Coast, Bass Coast, Stonnington, Yarra, Hume

Queensland: Port Douglas, Whitsunday, Cairns, Livingstone, Isaac

Western Australia: Denmark, Augusta-Margaret River, Broome, Wyndham, Busselton

South Australia: Yankalilla, Kangaroo Island, Victor Harbour, Mount Barker, Whyalla

Tasmania: West Coast, Waratah / Wynyard, George Town, Clarence, Glenorchy

Northern Territory: Unincorporated NT, West Arnhem, East Arnhem, Roper Gulf, Darwin.

Benefits of the program

The report found that the program has various features that increase its investment attractiveness:

- The ability to employ many workers with no previous experience in conservation and land management work, allowing people who have lost their jobs in other sectors to participate in the program.
- The creation of thousands of jobs in the conservation and land management sector, which will reduce the demand for welfare payments such as JobSeeker and Youth Allowance.
- The ability to temporarily transfer workers who have lost their job in different industries may prevent displacement of people to other regions.
- The nature of the program, which involves many labour-intensive tasks, means that much of the work can be completed in a Covid-19 safe environment.
- The potential for participants in the program to upskill or retrain in conservation and land management roles, ensuring the creation of practical and transferable skills such as teamwork, communication, leadership and job readiness.
- The proposed activities build on existing models and mechanisms, which will help drive the success of the program.
- The increase in conservation and land management efforts has the potential to improve future agricultural productivity and reduce the cost of restoration of degraded environments down the track.