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Response to the Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 Interim Report.

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The National Landcare Network acknowledge the Interim Report of the Independent Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) presented by Professor Graeme Samuel AC.

As the representative body for Landcare in Australia, the National Landcare Network (NLN) seek to foster, support, and strengthen the knowledge, resources and capabilities of the Landcare movement and the thousands of volunteers who are at its heart. The EPBC Act review and reform presents opportunities to improve the protection and management of Australia's precious biodiversity assets which aligns with one of our core values. The key question the NLN asks in considering the EPBC Act's effectiveness – How do we enable communities to better manage and protect the environment?

The NLN reinforce the need for the EPBC Act to be strengthened and for environmental programs such as the National Landcare Program to be adequately funded to deliver strategic landscape scale restoration with community at the centre. Continuing downward trends are detailed in the State of the Environment Report (2016) with pressures on biodiversity increasing and continuing species decline. Furthermore, the historical and continual loss of native vegetation across Australia linked to climate change and the subsequent increase in natural disasters i.e. Bushfires, highlight the need for change. Below is a summary of the key feedback from the NLN relating to the Interim Report:

*Accurate information on Protected Matters:*

If nothing else is achieved out of the EPBC Act review and reform, there is a need for an improved knowledge on Matters of National Significance. The Interim Report is quoted by saying 'There is no single national source of truth that people can rely on'. There is a need for a greater understanding of what we need to protect; how much is left, what has been lost (clearance approvals) and the best ways to protect, restore and rehabilitate Matters of National Significance. Without this accurate knowledge, informed decision making is impossible. A greater understanding would enable cumulative impacts to be realised and conversely an improved transparency and achievement of environmental gains. An effective monitoring and evaluation program to ascertain this information is paramount to communities, practitioners, NRM Regions and NGO's being able to effectively contribute to the protection and management of Matters of National Significance.

*Devolved Delivery:*

The NLN is supportive of devolved delivery of environmental restoration programs where community capacity can be utilised and developed to gain a much greater benefit on ground. Whilst devolved

delivery is a favoured method for enabling the most efficient on-ground outcomes, the NLN does not support the accreditation of state and territory arrangements to deliver the Federal Government's statutory obligations under the EPBC Act. The streamlining of approval processes can be improved with additional resources, ensuring applications are critically assessed and processed within acceptable timelines.

#### *Funding for environmental restoration programs*

As a peak body for the Landcare community in Australia we are strongly supportive of the National Landcare Program. However, the NLN have observed the reduction in overall funding for the NLP over time and the progressive disempowerment of local Landcare communities in its implementation. As the need for additional and prolonged conservation work increases, there is a need to at least maintain if not increase the level of funding allocated to funding programs. Funding programs which enable Landcare communities to deliver projects are at the heart of protecting and managing Australia's Matters of National Significance. There are thousands of examples of Landcare groups proudly and effectively working to protect and manage Matters of National Significance where volunteers value add to the

#### *Independent Regulator*

As the sole piece of national conservation legislation, the compliance and enforcement tools of the EPBC Act need to be utilised to their full potential to provide a vigorous framework for managing and protecting Matters of National Significance. The NLN support the recommendation of an independent and a-political compliance and enforcement regulator. Without a strong compliance framework, a streamlined and effective approvals process is undermined, and conservation actions may be ineffective.

#### *Environmental Standards*

For an independent regulator to be effective in addition to the issues raised above and more critically the Standards against which the regulator operates must be meaningful in delivering the intended outcomes in assessment, restoration and protection. The NLN is supportive of the adoption of Standards to support the Act, but contends strongly that such Standards must be supported by reliable baseline data, and must set the aspirational targets, not the minimum compliance.

The National Landcare Network are supportive of the overall sentiment provided in the Interim Report. We welcome future opportunities to provide feedback and contribute to policy development in the EPBC Act reform. Please contact Jim Adams, CEO National Landcare Network on 0427 211 406 or jim.adams.nln.org.au.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Adams', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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