



# Native vegetation in Western Australia

## Issues paper consultation summary

August 2021



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# Executive summary

## Purpose

On 15 November 2019, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (the department) released a [Native vegetation issues paper](#) for public consultation for 12 weeks, closing on 10 February 2020.

The issues paper was developed in response to stakeholders calling for improved consistency and transparency in the consideration of native vegetation, across government processes.

The issues paper proposed four initiatives for comment:

- A state native vegetation policy
- Investing in better information including mapping and monitoring.
- Improving regulatory processes.
- Exploring a bioregional approach to managing native vegetation.

This report summarises consultation feedback across all submissions, workshops and meetings and has been released together with the draft native vegetation policy. The draft policy contains information on how this feedback informed its drafting.

## Consultation

During the consultation period, 383 participants attended 15 public workshops across Western Australia, four in Perth and 11 in regional locations. Seven sector focus group meetings were also held, with 80 participants from the conservation, farming, mining, local government and urban development sectors.

In addition, 657 public submissions were received during the consultation period. These comprised 232 unique submissions and 425 campaign submissions.

## Feedback

The public consultation process showed there is clear support for a consistent, transparent and strategic approach to native vegetation management, including development of a state native vegetation policy. Across sectors, there is support to improve native vegetation information and regulation, and to pursue a bioregional approach to managing native vegetation.

### Native vegetation policy

Many submissions suggested a native vegetation policy should guide decision-making for State Government agencies and, in turn, influence local government, industry, individual landholders and community. There was some feedback that the policy should be positioned to enhance native vegetation values and go beyond the intention to 'strike a balance'. Across sectors, there was also some concern

regarding the resources and funding available to implement such a policy. Some made calls for consultation on the policy to be longer than four weeks.

### **Better information**

Across all sectors there was a high level of support for better information for native vegetation regulation, conservation and management. Diverse feedback was received on the types of information considered important, reflecting varied uses across sectors, but there was broad agreement that better information is needed to improve the evidence base for decision-making. There was strong support from the environmental conservation sector to reinstate State of the Environment reporting to measure the ongoing impacts on native vegetation. Feedback also highlighted concerns with the costs and feasibility of providing, maintaining and collecting accurate and timely data.

### **Better regulation**

There is high-level support for better regulation of native vegetation. Feedback identified a range of ideas to enhance native vegetation protection and improve decision-making on native vegetation matters. What exactly better regulation entails differed across submissions; however, a consistent regulatory approach that provides clarity for all stakeholders was a key feature. Environmental groups, in particular, called for regulation to improve protection for native vegetation. Proponents called for streamlined assessments, to support protection of native vegetation – voicing frustration with current processes.

### **A bioregional approach**

While there was support across sectors for a strategic, bioregional approach to protecting and conserving native vegetation, many submitters felt more detail is required around implementation. There were concerns with how the bioregional approach could be delivered across current management boundaries. Leveraging local knowledge and transparent outcomes and objectives were considered to be priorities. There was also strong support for monitoring and evaluation, to understand and improve the effectiveness of regulation and conservation efforts.

## **Next steps**

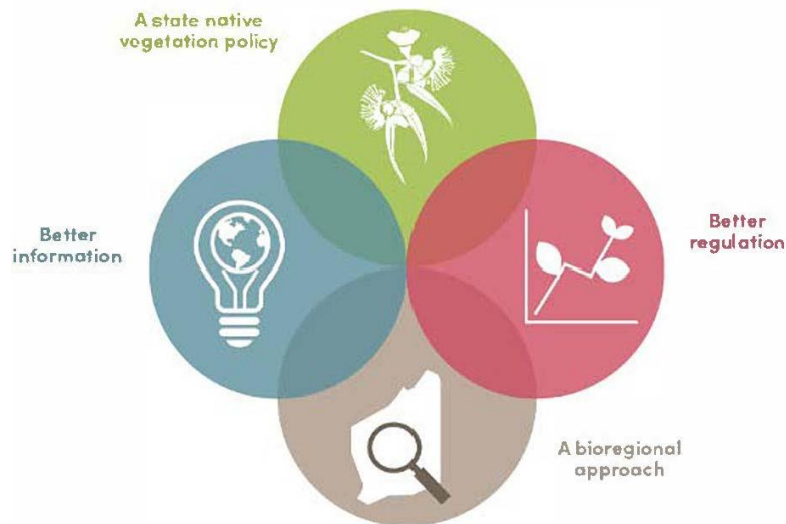
Feedback from this consultation informed development of the draft native vegetation policy, which has been released for public consultation together with this summary.

Feedback received during consultation on the draft policy will be taken into account in finalising a policy for the State Government's consideration.

# 1 Background

During consultation on an [improved cost-recovery model](#) for clearing permit application fees undertaken by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (the Department) in 2018, various stakeholders called for improved consistency and transparency in the consideration of native vegetation across government processes. In response, the [Native vegetation issues paper](#) was developed to outline four proposed initiatives:

1. A state native vegetation policy.
2. Investing in better information including mapping and monitoring.
3. Improving regulatory processes.
4. Exploring a bioregional approach to managing native vegetation.



Between 15 November 2019 and 10 February 2020, the State Government sought feedback on the Native vegetation issues paper. The 12-week consultation program comprised a series of public workshops, sector focus group meetings and a call for submissions.

Consultation focused on asking the community and stakeholders to respond to the four proposed initiatives. Across the consultation methods, more than 1,000 people from a range of sectors were engaged. Many submitters and workshop participants appreciated the opportunity to comment on the issues paper.

This report summarises consultation feedback across all submissions, workshops and meetings. The draft policy and the website contain breakdowns of how the feedback informed the draft.



## 2 Consultation overview

### 2.1 Workshops

Fifteen public workshops were held across Western Australia with four held in Perth and 11 held in regional locations, as shown below. In total, 383 participants attended the workshops, 253 in regional locations and 130 in metropolitan locations. Each workshop ran for 2.5 hours and provided an opportunity to discuss and explore the issues paper in depth.

*Table 1 Native vegetation workshops and attendance*

Location	Attendance	Location	Attendance
Albany	51	Kalgoorlie	8
Broome	18	Karratha	8
Bunbury	56	Katanning	19
Bruce Rock	23	Northam	16
Esperance	16	Perth (four sessions)	130
Geraldton	32	Port Hedland	6

Feedback between the workshops and submissions was similar; however, workshops provided participants with opportunities to ask questions on the concepts proposed and discuss them with participants from other sectors. This was particularly the case for the bioregional planning initiative, with workshop participants widely demonstrating support of this initiative whereas submitters mostly sought more information.

A summary of the workshops is available online at [dwer.wa.gov.au/consultation/nativeveg](http://dwer.wa.gov.au/consultation/nativeveg).

### 2.2 Sector focus group meetings

Seven sector focus group meetings were held during the engagement process to discuss specific issues or concerns from identified key stakeholder groups. In total there were more than 80 participants from the Environmental Defenders Office, Conservation Council of WA, Pastoralists and Graziers Association, WA Farmers including the Beekeepers Section, Chamber of Minerals and Energy of WA, Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association, Urban Development Institute of Australia WA, WA Local Government Association, Wildflower Society of Western Australia and Urban Bushland Council WA.

## 2.3 Submissions

A total of 657 submission were received during the consultation period. These comprised 232 unique submissions and 425 campaign submissions.

Unique submissions were received from a wide range of stakeholders, highlighting the many sectors with a high level of interest in native vegetation. The majority of submissions, including campaign submissions, were from private citizens (84 per cent). Submissions were also received from across sectors including peak bodies and individuals in environment and natural resource management, government, agriculture and pastoral, Aboriginal, mining and development, as shown in Figure 1

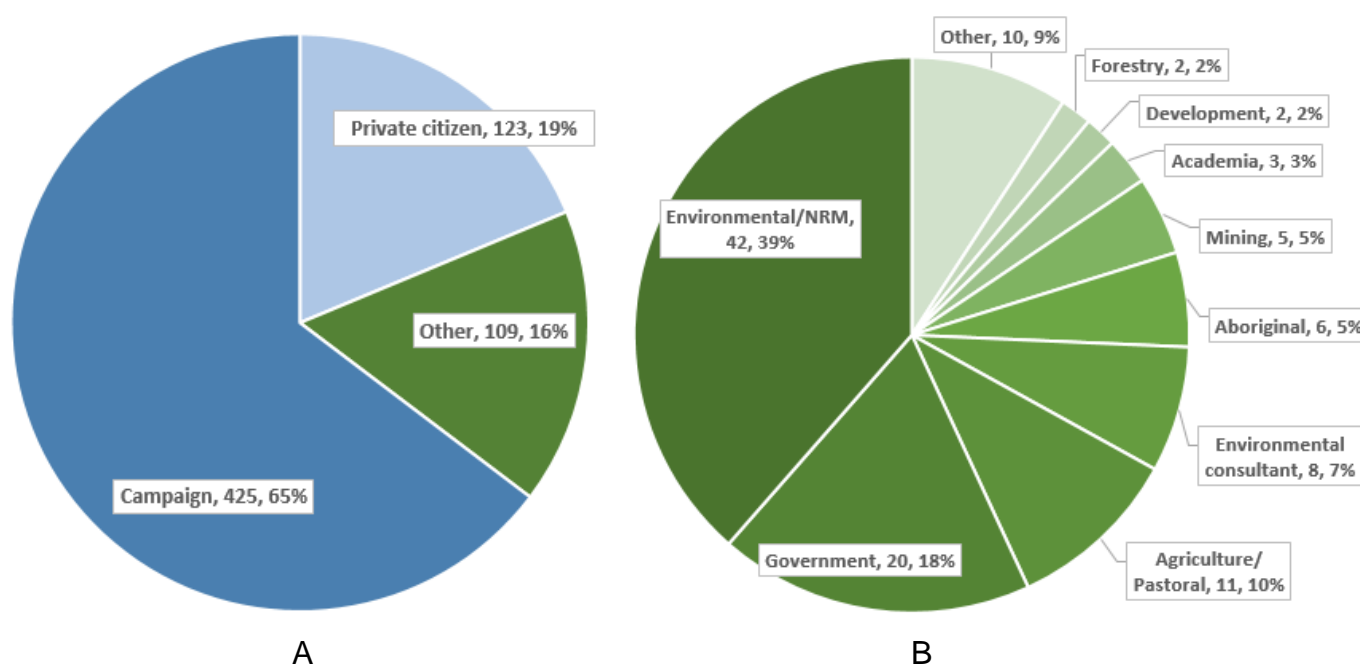


Figure 1 A. Broad submission groups; B. Composition of other submissions (breakdown of green segment in A)

## 2.4 Campaign submissions

The 425 campaign submissions were based on template text by the Wilderness Society, representing 65 per cent of all submissions. About 15 per cent of the campaign submissions included issues or comment in addition to the template text.

The campaign called for improved monitoring and mapping of native vegetation extent and condition including establishing annual State of the Environment reporting. The campaign also called for stronger laws and better regulation to protect native vegetation. A copy of the campaign submissions is available online.



## 3 State native vegetation policy

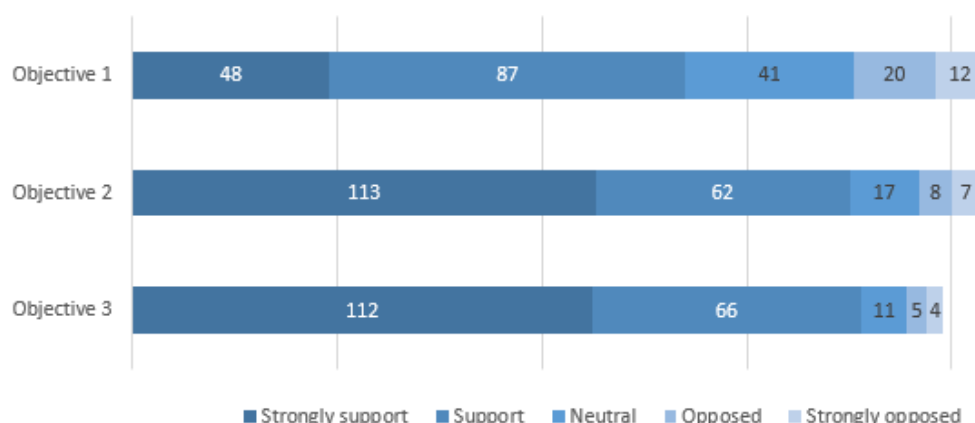
### 3.1 Overall

There was broad support from workshop participants and submissions for a statewide native vegetation policy, for improved consistency and transparency and better protection and enhancement of native vegetation. Many called for the policy to guide decision-making for government agencies and, in turn, to influence local government, industry, individual landholders and the community.

Across workshops and submissions there were many suggestions on how a native vegetation policy could be implemented (e.g. coordination across agencies) and what it should address (e.g. focus on native vegetation and threatening processes). Those who were not supportive raised concerns about possible financial impact, additional complexity and whether the policy would be strong enough to address native vegetation degradation.

#### Proposed objectives

All three proposed objectives in the issues paper were well-supported, in particular objectives 2 and 3 (Figure 2). Some submitters called for the policy to have outcome-based objectives rather than process-based objectives.



**Objective 1:** The management of native vegetation is consistent, transparent and strategic and strikes a balance between environmental, economic, social and cultural outcomes to Western Australians.

**Objective 2:** Western Australia's native vegetation is strategically conserved and restored to maintain and improve ecological function and biodiversity at a landscape scale.

**Objective 3:** Higher priority and strategic protection for unique and at-risk native vegetation, tailored to the regional setting.

Figure 2 Feedback on the proposed objectives

## 3.2 Priority elements for a policy

Feedback on the concept of a policy showed:

- strong support for:
  - transparent management and consistent decision-making
  - increasing the protection and conservation of native vegetation
  - a landscape-scale approach to native vegetation management (with calls to clarify the meaning of *landscape-scale* or *strategically*)
  - a bioregional approach to native vegetation management (with calls to clarify the meaning of the *regional setting*)
- concerns that priority protection for unique or at-risk native vegetation may involve a lack of protection for native vegetation which is not ‘at-risk’
- achieving a balance through a native vegetation policy is considered important; however, stakeholder views on balance varied with:
  - some suggesting a balance would be achieved through having a greater focus on environmental outcomes to address previous decision-making that favoured economic and social outcomes
  - there also being support for recognising and measuring native vegetation’s intrinsic value, as value tends to be measured in economic terms.

## 3.3 Opportunities and key considerations

### Opportunities

Feedback in submissions and workshops highlighted opportunities including:

- improved clarity and certainty regarding the implementation of legislation affecting native vegetation, and a consistent approach across all pathways
- good governance and better coordination across all levels of government and government agencies
- better public awareness, education and community participation
- greater recognition for native vegetation from government and the community, including its importance as habitat for native fauna and for human health.

### Key considerations and concerns

Key considerations and concerns identified in submissions and workshops included:

- need for increased resourcing to map, manage and regulate native vegetation as well as implement a state policy
- a stronger policy is necessary to address degradation (e.g. the policy to be supported by legislation or have a goal of nett environmental gain)

- protection of old-growth forests and wetlands
- acknowledgement should be given to climate change in the policy and it should include Commonwealth and International Union for Conservation of Nature goals for native vegetation
- precautionary principle and intergenerational equity should be referenced.

### 3.4 What did submissions say?

*A State Native Vegetation Policy is supported and essential to guide the protection of Threatened Vegetation Communities, flora and fauna as well as retention of key vegetation linkages across broad landscape area in a bioregional approach. This needs to be resourced and include updating vegetation/habitat mapping and monitoring.*

**City of Busselton**

*A WA native vegetation policy must detail desired outcomes for vegetation management and proposed actions to achieve these outcomes together with an accounting system that periodically reports on trends in condition, extent and whether management and regulations are having a positive impact. It will require an implementation plan.*

**Conservation Council WA and The Wilderness Society**

*We fear that economic imperatives have the potential to dwarf environmental, social and cultural outcomes. Striking a 'balance' might sound very well on paper but a re-wording of this objective could perhaps strengthen non-economic outcomes.*

**Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation**

*A more strategic approach to conservation and restoration would make it easier for industry to determine what areas are likely to be unsuitable for development and to identify areas where there might be strategic offset opportunities e.g. through funding of restoration.*

**MBS Environmental**

## 4 Better information

### 4.1 Overall

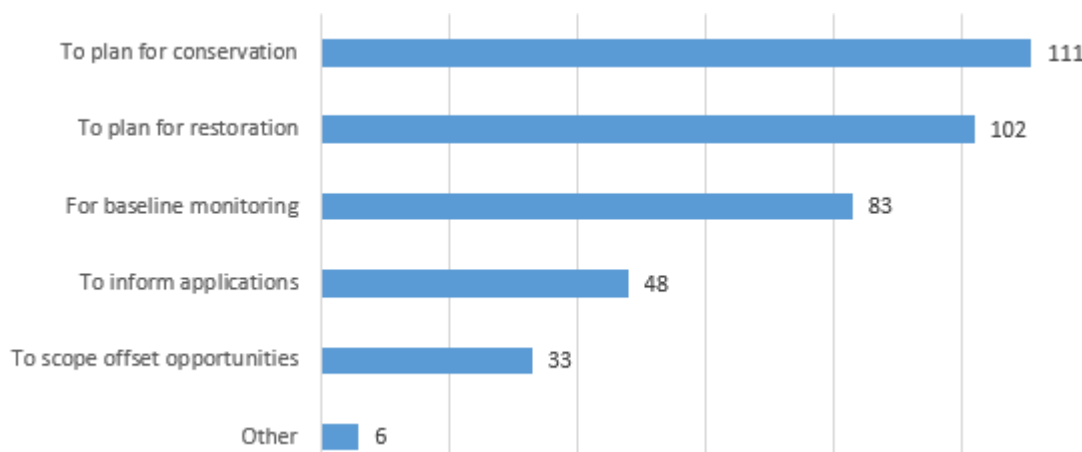
Workshop participants and submitters across all sectors were consistently highly supportive of the better information initiative. Many considered better information critical to support decision-making and improve native vegetation outcomes.

Submitters and workshop participants expressed the importance of comprehensive, accessible and accurate data. Workshop participants were also highly supported having a single source of information.

Diverse feedback was received on the types of information considered important, reflecting varied uses across sectors. Priorities included monitoring of native vegetation extent and condition; and spatial information about regulatory approvals to clear native vegetation.

#### Current uses

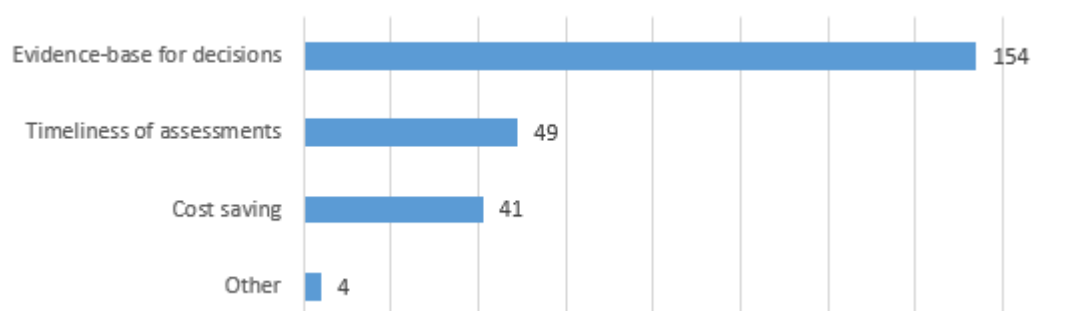
Most submitters reported using native vegetation data for conservation planning. Other uses included education and farm management.



**Figure 3** *Response to online submission question: How do you use native vegetation data within your sector?*

## 4.2 Priority elements for better information

The majority of submitters and workshop participants responded that an evidence-base for decisions would be the most relevant element of better information provision.



*Figure 4* Response to online submission question: Which of the following elements of better information provision would be most relevant to your sector?

## 4.3 Opportunities and key considerations

### Opportunities

Feedback in submissions and workshops highlighted opportunities including:

- single-source or a common platform of publicly accessible information to improve consistency and transparency across all sectors, and support increased awareness and knowledge
- consolidating data and leveraging opportunities for information sharing between local governments, State Government and volunteer groups working in the field
- enhanced management and decision-making by government, industry and the community
- identification and reporting of trends, risks and threats to native vegetation to support enhanced monitoring for compliance and conservation purposes
- identification of priority areas for assessment and investment.

### Key considerations and concerns

Key considerations and concerns identified in submissions and workshops included:

- the need for adequate resourcing and funding to collect, collate and maintain data
- the need for baseline data to support monitoring and evaluation
- providing accurate and up-to-date information, with many submitters of the view that ground-truthing satellite data is necessary.

## 4.4 What did the submissions say?

*CME support government decisions which are evidence-based, underpinned by a common platform of reliable data. Consistent, reliable information is important for ensuring coherent regulation, timeliness of assessments and transparency through evidence-based decision making.*

**Chamber of Minerals and Energy**

*We agree very strongly that protection of our native vegetation cannot be achieved without knowing the full extent of what we have, what is at risk and what is being lost.*

**Wildflower Society of WA, Murdoch Branch**

*State of the Environment Reporting should be re-introduced which would allow public reporting on how the environment is responding to the various threats, pressures and management responses, including the extent of cover and condition of native vegetation.*

**WALGA**

*We believe that a centralised database with contemporary, up-to-date information about native vegetation, clearing and rehabilitation is a powerful tool for informed decision-making. We believe this information should be freely available to allow for greater transparency and accountability, that the pathway to development should be clear, efficient and cost-effective, and that the industry can work with scientists, conservationists and traditional owners to achieve balanced outcomes.*

**Property Council of Australia, WA**

## 5 Better regulation

### 5.1 Overall

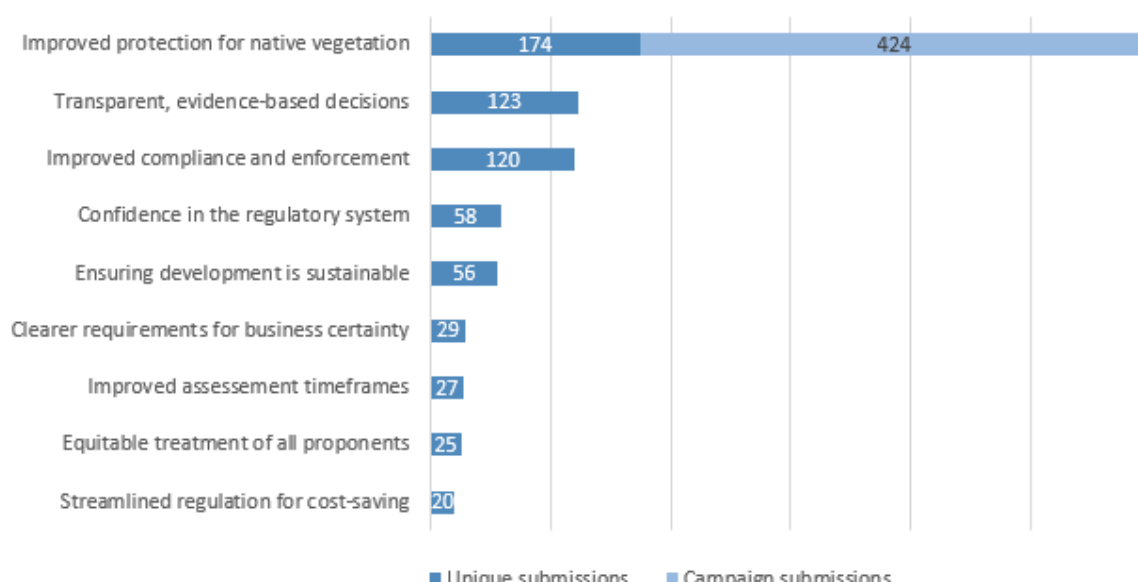
Submitters and workshop participants were supportive of better regulation for native vegetation and offered a range of ideas on how it could be improved. While feedback differed widely on what would constitute better regulation, a key feature supported across sectors was a consistent regulatory approach that provides clarity for all stakeholders and improves native vegetation protection. Some proponents voiced frustration with inconsistent decision-making and delays to approvals.

Across all sectors, consistent decision-making was closely tied to a desire for transparent and evidence-based decision-making and advice. Feedback also highlighted the different regional challenges; for example, balancing roadside vegetation clearing with driver safety in the Wheatbelt.

There was a strong call in submissions for additional resources to assess permits and monitor compliance to enable proactive regulation and management of native vegetation.

### 5.2 Priority elements for better regulation

In the online survey, respondents were asked to select as many elements of better regulation that would be important to their sector. The majority of submissions, including campaign submissions, called for regulatory changes to improve protection for native vegetation. At workshops, transparent and evidence-based decision-making was the highest priority, followed by improving protection for native vegetation.



**Figure 5** Response to online submission question: Which of the following elements of better regulation would be most important to your sector?



## 5.3 Opportunities and key considerations

### Opportunities

Feedback in submissions and workshops highlighted opportunities including:

- a consistent approach to regulating native vegetation across all levels of government (for example, overarching native vegetation legislation or a single agency to approve native vegetation clearing)
- formal protections for Bush Forever sites and extensions to Environmentally Sensitive Areas
- integration of native vegetation in the planning framework, such as in subdivision approvals or combining environmental and planning legislation
- legislative amendments providing clear objectives, addressing cumulative impacts and improving the appeals process
- streamlined assessments to improve timeliness (for example, low-impact clearing by councils). Conversely, some submitters felt this would lead to a less robust assessments with a lowered focus on native vegetation outcomes
- enhanced compliance monitoring and enforcement of unauthorised clearing and increased resourcing to undertake responsibilities
- greater clarity on how the clearing principles in the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* are applied in assessments for clearing permits and transparency on the reasoning, evidence and information available in the decision-making process
- enhanced stakeholder engagement in native vegetation reform and through the regulatory process
- improved transparency, clarity and strengthening of mechanisms that guide the use of offsets, including use of strategic offsets to better mitigate the impacts of clearing.

### Key considerations and concerns

Key considerations and concerns identified in submissions and workshops included:

- alignment of the native vegetation reform agenda with the proposed amendments to the *Environmental Protection Act 1986*, the WA Environmental Offsets Framework review and the independent review of the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.
- issues paper focused on regulatory process rather than environmental outcomes
- clarity regarding exemptions to native vegetation clearing. Some submissions called for a reduction in exemptions while others believed the exemptions should be maintained.

- offsets do not achieve the environmental outcomes they are designed for and result in a net loss of native vegetation.

## 5.4 What did submissions say?

*AMEC members continue to be concerned about the costly delays and frustrations with the overall approvals process across relevant Government agencies.*

### **Association of Mining and Exploration Companies**

*While EDO acknowledges the importance of regulation being efficient and streamlined, especially given the limited resources of regulatory/government departments such as DWER, we emphasise that this objective cannot be prioritised over, and at the expense of, good environmental outcomes.*

### **Environmental Defenders Office WA**

*The Shire has ongoing concerns over the unclear regulatory requirements, inconsistent advice and long timeframes for gaining approvals.*

### **Shire of Cuballing**

*A perception exists that there is limited enforcement in relation to unauthorised clearing and if there are no consequences for undertaking unauthorised clearing, then there is limited incentive for people to do the right thing by following the timely and costly process of applying for a clearing permit.*

### **City of Gosnells**

## 6 Bioregional approach

### 6.1 Overall

Workshop participants indicated strong support for a bioregional approach while submitters broadly provided in-principle support, seeking more detail on matters such as thresholds, flexibility and offsets. This indicated that the opportunity to discuss and explore the approach during workshops improved levels of understanding. Across workshops and submissions, feedback questioned how this approach would work in practice, particularly within and between bioregions.

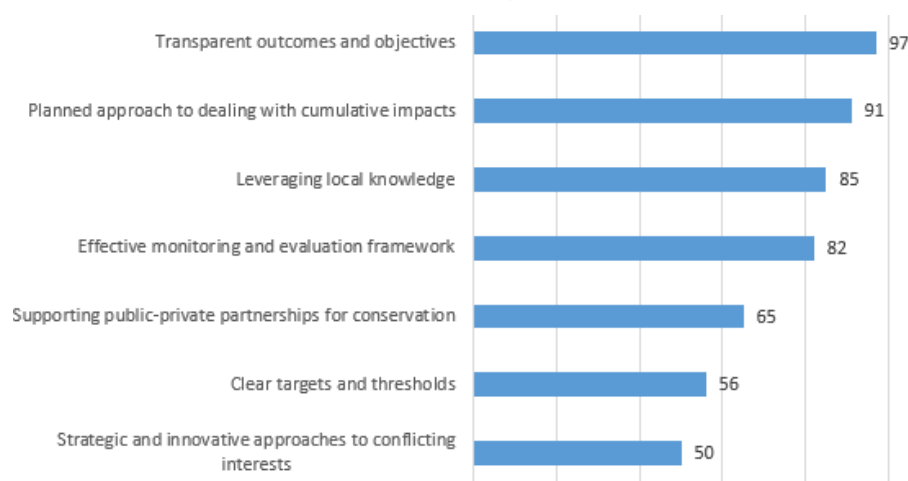
Overall, submissions called for an approach that effectively manages biodiversity across traditional boundaries, providing more consistent decision-making and improving environmental outcomes. Some felt that a one-size-fits-all approach across the state is not achieving adequate native vegetation outcomes.

There was a small amount of concern that a bioregional approach could lead to inconsistent decision-making. Another concern raised, particularly in workshops, was on the funding and governance of managing native vegetation at a bioregional level.

### 6.2 Priority elements for a bioregional approach

Feedback in submissions and at workshops showed that transparent outcomes and objectives; establishing a planned approach to cumulative impacts; and leveraging local knowledge are high-priority elements for stakeholders in a bioregional approach.

Setting a foundation for monitoring and evaluation also ranked highly, to understand and improve the effectiveness of regulation and conservation efforts.



**Figure 6** *Response to online submission question: Which of the following elements are the most important to you/your sector?*

## 6.3 Opportunities and key considerations

### Opportunities

Feedback in submissions and workshops highlighted opportunities including:

- enhanced native vegetation outcomes and strategic environmental outcomes, such as strategic restoration in the regions
- improved strategic planning and management along borders dictated by the natural landscape and incorporation of values, pressures, threats and management strategies into the bioregional approach
- involving and sharing knowledge from Aboriginal people, local community members, environmental volunteers and farmers
- improving decision-making clarity and business certainty through targets and thresholds. Conversely some submitters felt thresholds would be arbitrary and allow for clearing until a threshold was reached
- assessing development applications in their regional context
- incorporating local strategies and plans to support native vegetation management
- concentrating the regulatory effort where it is needed most
- greater recognition for urban bushland.

### Key considerations and concerns

Key considerations and concerns identified through submissions and workshops included:

- management and implementation challenges across traditional management borders
- the potential for inconsistent approaches and inequality across bioregions
- the approach could lead to a nett loss in native vegetation, including through the use of offsets.

## 6.4 What did submissions say?

*The EPA strongly supports the proposed bioregional approach to native vegetation management policy. This offers the opportunity to tailor native vegetation management in accordance with variation in environmental pressures and impacts recognising differing geographies, while improving the assessment and management of cumulative impacts.*

**Environmental Protection Authority (EPA)**

*Allowing flexibility and differing regional rules and thresholds seems contradictory to overall proposal of standardisation, clear regulatory expectations, and treating all proponents the same.*

**City of Albany**

*Threatening processes have differing relative impacts within different bioregions, and even the same threat (e.g. wildfire) will need to be managed differently depending on where it is occurring across WA. If these more regional nuances are considered when prioritizing and refining management practices, better outcomes for native vegetation can be achieved.*

**10 Deserts Project**

*UDIA supports the adoption of a bioregional approach and ensuring that rules and thresholds appropriate to each bioregion are adopted. We also support the intent to introduce flexibility in terms of how objectives are met.*

**Urban Development Institute of Australia WA**

## 7 Other initiatives

### Pricing, incentives and markets

Many felt that encouraging landowners and native vegetation managers to conserve and enhance native vegetation is a positive step. Tools and mechanisms such as incentives for land management and carbon farming were generally supported by the submitters that commented on these initiatives. Some submitters also tied this to the state's climate change policy.

### Aboriginal land management

Across sectors there was wide support for land management undertaken by Aboriginal people. Many acknowledged that leveraging traditional management methods and traditional ecological knowledge could enhance native vegetation. There was particular support for the Aboriginal Rangers Program and traditional fire management techniques.

Additionally, at workshops and in some submissions, there was a call to preserve cultural corridors and ensure compliance with the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972* (WA) and the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth).

### Nature-based or cultural tourism

Native vegetation was identified as a significant attractor to the regions, with many recognising that the state's nature-based tourism sector is growing. The economic benefits of increased tourism and the opportunity for Western Australia to become known internationally as The Wildflower State was mentioned by several submitters.

### Private land management

Many recognised the important role that private land managers have in caring for and enhancing native vegetation. A range of land managers were identified as key stakeholders during this consultation, including farmers, pastoralists, local government, beekeepers and philanthropic organisations undertaking conservation programs. It was suggested that these land managers should be assisted and encouraged to protect and maintain native vegetation and other ecosystem services. Feedback on private land management was closely tied to feedback on pricing, incentives and markets.

## Other suggestions

Feedback in submissions and workshops provided other suggestions to enhance native vegetation, including:

- reduce or prevent native vegetation clearing in areas that are highly cleared
- increase support for local conservation groups who undertake a significant amount of volunteer work to manage and protect native vegetation
- improved management methods, including fire management and biodiversity conservation
- more research on the state's native vegetation, so that threats to native vegetation are better understood and can be mitigated
- further action on climate change.

### 7.1 What did submissions say?

*Many private landholders are willing to improve management of their native vegetation, initiatives exist as models and Government should make every effort to ensure this willingness and enthusiasm does not go to waste.*

**Nature Reserves Preservation Group**

*Support for carbon farming based on ecological restoration is recommended. This mean using local endemic species, making connections across landscapes and involving local communities and in particular First Nation peoples.*

**WA Landcare Network**

*Western Australia has a potentially great future as the Wildflower State. Tourists already come from around the country and around the world to see our natural landscapes and our flowers. We have a unique offering and we need to look after it and enhance it.*

**Private citizen**

*A major threat to all native vegetation is fire. There is a wealth of scientific research into fire management in the natural environment and the adverse impacts of fire on biodiversity... Current prescribed burning is far too frequent and extensive, especially the south-west forest region, where logging and burning are the principal disturbances.*

**South-West Forests Defence Foundation Inc.**



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