



Office of  
Environment  
& Heritage

# **Draft strategic directions for horse riding in NSW national parks and reserves**

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# Foreword

New South Wales has a magnificent reserve system, established for the conservation of natural and cultural values, and for public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of these values.

The NSW reserve system contains 861 national parks and reserves covering over 7.1 million hectares, or approximately 8.8% of the state. The NSW Government is committed to providing a diversity of opportunities for the community to experience and enjoy our national parks and reserves, so we can all appreciate the importance of protecting them for present and future generations.

Horse riding is a popular activity that has strong cultural associations for many Australians. There are currently over 100 national parks and reserves across NSW where people can enjoy horse riding. However, there is increasing demand for improved horse riding opportunities.

I am very pleased to present the *Draft strategic directions for horse riding in NSW national parks and reserves* for consultation with key stakeholders. This strategy will guide the provision of improved horse riding opportunities in NSW national parks and reserves over the coming years.

The strategy balances recreational opportunities which can lead to a greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of our wonderful national parks and reserves with ensuring the unique values of our parks remain protected. Risks to park values will be managed through careful planning and best practice adaptive management. Impacts to areas of high environmental sensitivity will be avoided.

Recreational horse riding contributes to our tourism industry. This strategy could increase the number of visitors to rural and regional towns to enjoy our national parks and reserves.

The initiatives proposed in this strategy are consistent with the Government's commitments in *NSW 2021* to work with the community to protect our local environment and to provide more opportunities to enjoy parks and natural bushland.

**Robyn Parker**

**Minister for the Environment**



# 1. Introduction

Horse riding is a popular recreational and sporting activity. For many Australians, horse riding has strong cultural values associated with exploration, settlement and bush skills. Horse riding in NSW national parks and reserves provides for an expression of these cultural values and an opportunity to appreciate and enjoy the state's wonderful natural environments.

The NSW Government is committed to providing a diverse range of sustainable visitor and recreational experiences to ensure a broad spectrum of the community can enjoy and appreciate national parks and reserves. In line with this commitment, the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) has developed this strategy to guide the provision of improved sustainable horse riding opportunities.

*Draft strategic directions for horse riding in NSW national parks and reserves* (the strategy) provides a framework for the provision of improved horse riding opportunities over the short, medium and longer term. It outlines a process for providing horse riding opportunities in three identified 'horse riding landscapes' of NSW, working with local community representatives. It also provides for a focused and carefully monitored pilot program to be established, which will trial horse riding in a wilderness location for three years.

This strategy explains ways in which OEH intends to manage the risks of horse riding and minimise its impact on park values, including through the development of an adaptive management framework. It includes actions to improve the communication of existing and future horse riding opportunities and identifies new policy requirements to implement the above initiatives.

## 2. Goals

The overarching goals guiding the development and delivery of this strategy are to:

- improve opportunities for sustainable recreational horse riding in NSW national parks and reserves
- ensure identified opportunities meet environmental and safety standards and are appropriate for the reserve category in which they are located
- deliver an enhanced community awareness of existing and improved recreational horse riding opportunities in national parks and reserves
- build support in the horse riding community for national parks and reserves, and collaborate on practical park management actions, including encouraging participation in volunteering.



## 3. Context

### Legislation

The strategy will be implemented within the statutory bounds of existing legislation, specifically the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* and the *Wilderness Act 1987*.

All new horse riding opportunities identified through the initiatives and steps set out below will be consistent with the statutory plan of management (PoM) for the particular reserve. New opportunities, particularly where they involve changing the nature of trails or providing new facilities, will be subject to standard environmental assessment processes.

### NSW 2021

The initiatives outlined in this strategy are consistent with the Government's commitment to encourage a diverse range of recreational activities in the reserve system, and will assist in implementing the following goals of *NSW 2021*:

- *Goal 22: Protect our natural environment*  
The NSW Government will work with the community to protect our local environment and provide more opportunities to enjoy parks, waterways and natural bushland.
- *Goal 27: Enhance cultural, creative, sporting and recreation activities*  
The NSW Government encourages increased participation in sporting activities to support healthy lifestyles.

### Memorandum of Understanding

In 2006, the Liberal National Coalition signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with peak horse riding stakeholders which seeks to provide more horse riding opportunities in the national parks system, including in wilderness areas and nature reserves. The MoU supports the use of an adaptive environmental assessment and management process to manage the potential impacts of horse riding on park values

The Government is committed to providing improved horse riding opportunities in national parks and reserves, within the statutory bounds of existing legislation. This strategy provides the foundation for the Government to implement its commitments under the MoU.

## **4. Current status of horse riding in national parks**

Horse riding is already recognised as a legitimate activity in NSW national parks and reserves. Current policy provides for horse riding to be permitted in national parks, regional parks, state conservation areas and nature reserves (in this last category on designated roads only), on a case-by-case basis. Existing policy prohibits horse riding in wilderness areas and areas of high environmental sensitivity.

Like all recreational activities in parks, the decision about whether and where to allow horse riding in a reserve is guided by the statutory PoM. This ensures that the specific park context – including the particular conservation, cultural and recreational values of the area – is taken into account. It also facilitates community input into park management planning via an open and transparent process.

Horse riding is currently permitted on thousands of kilometres of trails across more than 110 reserves. In some parks, access for horse riding is also allowed off-trail and supporting facilities are provided, such as designated horse camping areas.

## 5. Controlling risks and impacts from recreational activities in parks

Horse riding, like all recreational activities, can have adverse impacts on natural values if it is undertaken in inappropriate locations or without suitable management arrangements in place.

OEH has extensive experience in managing recreational activities. A park management framework already guides all aspects of park management planning and operations. The framework integrates the key elements of best practice park management to ensure there are strong links between management objectives; the implementation of these objectives through planning, policy and processes; and the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes. Robust processes are in place to assess new activities, identify potential adverse impacts, and ensure best practice and sustainable management approaches are applied.

Through the framework, OEH staff learn from the outcomes of management actions and adapt these actions if necessary.

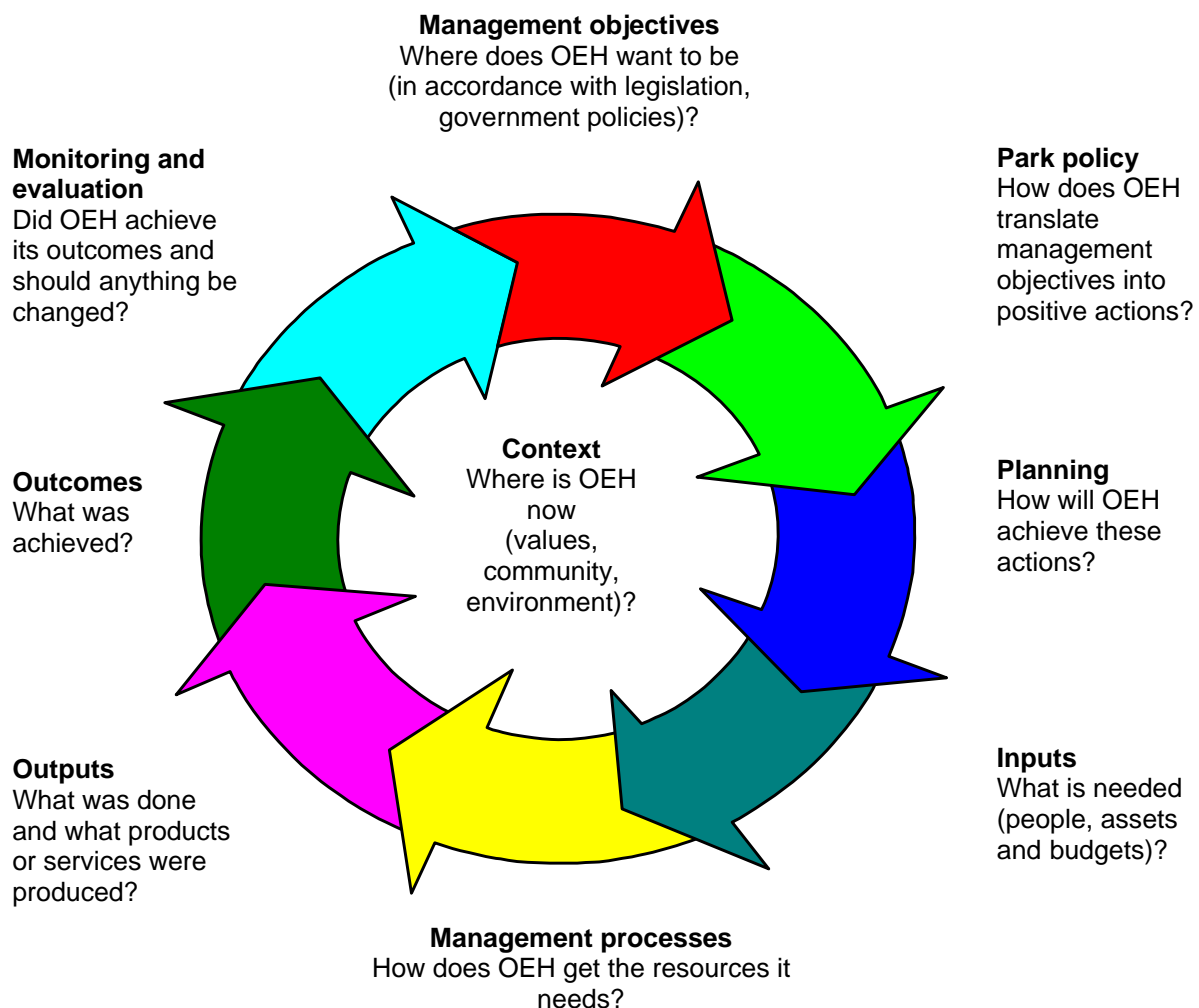


Figure 1 – OEH park management framework

OEH will apply the park management framework when identifying and implementing opportunities to improve recreational horse riding. An adaptive management framework will be developed to apply specifically to horse riding. The framework will identify the key environmental and social indicators to be monitored, thresholds of potential concern and appropriate management responses. It will be designed in consultation with relevant stakeholders and experts. The framework will initially be applied to the wilderness pilot discussed in section 7 but may be applied to other sensitive locations as needed.

In addition, OEH has developed the *2010 Code of Practice for Horse Riding in Parks*. The voluntary Code of Practice provides practical guidance to minimise the impacts of horse riding on natural and cultural values.

## 6. Directions

In accordance with government policy, engaging people through relevant, contemporary park experiences will foster public appreciation and understanding of natural and cultural heritage and strengthen support for protecting and extending the park system in the future. This approach also has health benefits for the community by encouraging active participation in outdoor exercise.

Consistent with the goals of improving access while meeting environmental and safety outcomes, the focus of new horse riding opportunities will initially be on the best use of established management trails, rather than the creation of new trails. A long history of use in national parks and reserves has bequeathed an extensive network of public access roads and management trails. Some management trails may need slight modifications to improve environmental sustainability or safety. In some instances, small extensions to existing trails may be proposed to form loop trails as these provide more enjoyable horse riding experiences. Consideration may also be given to providing access to historical bridle trails.

OEH will take a demand-based approach to the provision of new horse riding opportunities, to ensure they reflect the interests and desires of the community. OEH will engage with relevant statewide and regional stakeholders to ensure new opportunities target areas of highest demand. OEH will also aim to better communicate and promote existing and new horse riding opportunities.

OEH will aim to cater for a diversity of sustainable horse riding experiences in national parks, including the following:

### **Trail riding**

Trail riding is generally undertaken for a short duration, starting and finishing from a base which may be a designated horse campsite in the park or a base outside the park. Trail riding may be carried out as an organised club event or a commercial activity, or by individuals or small groups.

### **Endurance riding**

This is a more active and intensive form of recreational horse riding. It typically involves riding horses in planned and organised events, generally on loop trails with distances of approximately 80 kilometres. Horses may also be engaged in endurance training rides over shorter distances.

### **Horse trekking**

Long distance riding often involves the use of pack horses to carry overnight camping equipment and supplies. It may occur over a number of days or even weeks, sometimes in quite remote areas.

## 7. Key initiatives

A number of key initiatives to improve opportunities for horse riding in the reserve system have been identified. These provide the practical implementation of the goals and directions outlined in previous sections.

### Horse Riding Consultative Group

A Horse Riding Consultative Group has been established, comprising key horse riding stakeholders. The group's role is to provide state level guidance on the development of horse riding opportunities and implementation of this strategy. Members of the Horse Riding Consultative Group may also sit on regional working groups (discussed below).

### Horse riding landscapes

Three horse riding landscapes have been identified where there is a high demand for improved horse riding opportunities. The investigation and provision of new horse riding opportunities will primarily be targeted in these landscapes. By focusing on the landscapes of highest demand for horse riding rather than the entire state, greater efficiencies of effort and resource allocation will be achieved.

The three horse riding landscapes are, as shown in Figure 2 on the next page:

- Far South Coast and Ranges
- Hunter and Northern Tablelands
- Blue Mountains and Northern Sydney.

A regional working group will be established in each horse riding landscape. The group will consist of regional OEH officers, relevant local horse riding stakeholders and a member of any relevant NPWS Regional Advisory Committees where practicable. Groups will report to the OEH Regional Manager/s, who will consult with the full Regional Advisory Committee/s.

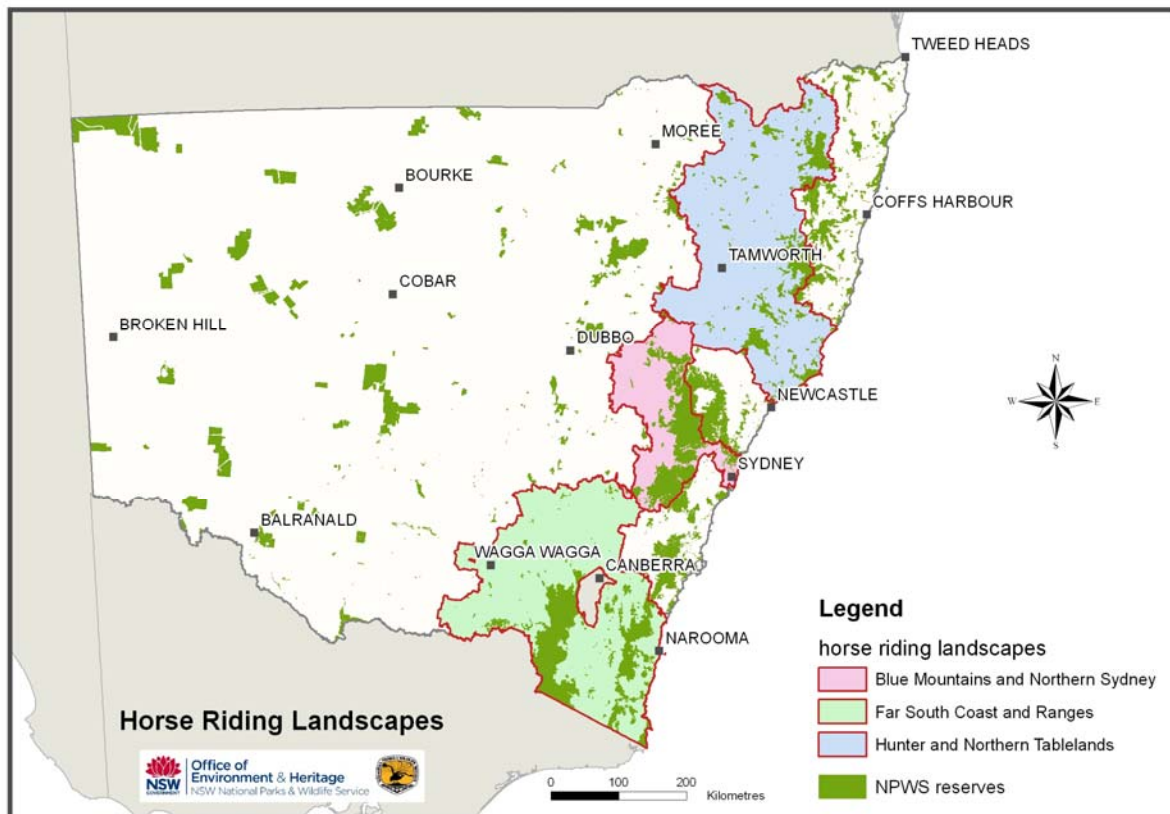
The regional working groups will identify proposals for improved sustainable horse riding opportunities in the horse riding landscape. In the short term, the working groups will identify opportunities that can be delivered without requiring changes to PoMs or statutory environmental assessment, such as trails that are currently closed to horse riding due to access issues such as gates or where PoMs are silent on horse riding opportunities and the horse riding proposal is consistent with the overall intent of the PoM. The working groups will also consider opportunities for horse riders to volunteer to undertake activities such as trail monitoring and maintenance, pest and weed reporting, and bush regeneration.

In the medium term, the working groups will identify more complex proposals for new horse riding opportunities, using existing management trails. These may include horse riding opportunities not currently permitted under the PoM, short extensions of existing trails to form loop trails and the provision of facilities for horse camping. They may also include the provision of access to historical bridle trails.

Any new recreational horse riding opportunities, whether provided in the short or medium term, that involve physical works to trails or the provision of new facilities, will be subject to standard environmental assessment processes.

The OEH Regional Manager/s, in consultation with the Regional Advisory Committee/s, will make the final decision on the provision of new horse riding opportunities. The Interim Horse Riding Policy Directive discussed below will outline the issues the Regional Managers need to consider when making decisions.

Where proposals will require a change to the PoM, the relevant Regional Manager will determine whether to progress PoM amendments immediately or whether the new opportunity would more appropriately be considered during the next planned PoM review.



**Figure 2 – Horse riding landscapes**

## Wilderness pilot

A wilderness pilot will be established to trial horse riding in a wilderness location for three years. The wilderness pilot will be underpinned by an adaptive management framework, as outlined in section 5.

The pilot will be designed and implemented within the statutory bounds of the *Wilderness Act 1987* and the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*.

The location and design of the wilderness pilot will be determined after considering the criteria outlined below. These criteria are informed by the management principles for wilderness areas set out in the *Wilderness Act 1987*, which are:

- protection of the unmodified state of areas and plant and animal communities
- preservation of the capacity of an area to evolve without significant human interference
- opportunities for solitude and appropriate self-reliant recreation.

## Criteria for wilderness pilot location

1. The route must be entirely on established management trails, and must not require the provision of any new facilities or improvements, with the exception of low-key signage if required.
2. The route must not adversely impact on any highly sensitive environments or features, such as:
  - critical habitat
  - critically endangered ecological communities or the habitat of critically endangered populations or species

- nesting or breeding areas for species listed under the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995*
  - sensitive Aboriginal heritage locations, including areas that may be sensitive for archaeological or cultural heritage reasons
  - historic heritage sites that may be susceptible to impacts from horse riding
  - alpine areas above the tree line
  - swamps, saltmarsh and peatbogs
  - sensitive water catchments
  - areas of known high soil erosion risk
  - areas at known high risk of *Phytophthora*, other soil borne fungi, or other transportable soil diseases.
3. The route must be capable of accommodating managed horse riding within specified limits, and take into account existing park usage, to ensure reasonable opportunities for solitude and peaceful enjoyment of the park by both horse riders and other park visitors.
  4. The route must have practical means of access for horse riders, taking into account seasonal weather variations.
  5. The route must be able to accommodate a rigorous and comprehensive monitoring regime consistent with the adaptive management framework.

Potential areas for a wilderness pilot will be assessed against the criteria to determine the most appropriate location. The consultative group has already identified potential options in Kosciuszko, Oxley Wild Rivers, Barrington Tops, Deua and Wadbilliga national parks. These locations will be considered with other options identified by OEH.

Regardless of the final preferred location, the trial will be subject to standard operational requirements. For example, it may need to be temporarily suspended or access may need to be restricted to minimise environmental impacts during wet weather or fire or for other park management purposes including seasonal closures.

These operational aspects of the trial will be considered and detailed during development of the adaptive management framework and interim policy directive (see below).

## **Interim Horse Riding Policy Directive**

OEH will develop an interim policy directive to provide clear guidance on the initiatives outlined in this strategy, including the wilderness pilot.

Both the Horse Riding Consultative Group and the National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council will be consulted on the interim policy directive, which will address the following matters:

### **Horse riding landscapes**

- Improved, sustainable horse riding opportunities are being sought in the three horse riding landscapes with the assistance of the regional working groups.
- If PoMs for national parks, regional parks, state conservation areas and nature reserves are silent on horse riding opportunities on specific trails or generally, the Regional Manager can determine whether to allow horse riding on designated management trails if consistent with the overall intent of the PoM.
- The decision making process to be used by the OEH Regional Manager, relating to environmental and safety considerations and historical usage, will be addressed in the interim policy directive.



## **Wilderness pilot**

- A wilderness pilot will be undertaken in one wilderness location, after consideration of the criteria above and in accordance with the provisions of the *Wilderness Act 1987* and *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*.
- The wilderness pilot will be undertaken for three years.
- The wilderness pilot will be undertaken in accordance with the adaptive management framework.

## **All national parks, nature reserves, state conservation areas and regional parks**

- Where PoMs or statements of interim management intent are being prepared or reviewed, opportunities will be sought to provide recreational horse riding access to management trails where appropriate.

## **Communication**

OEH will work to improve communication of existing and future horse riding opportunities in NSW national parks and reserves. In the medium term, OEH will communicate directly with regional horse riding stakeholders. In the identified horse riding landscapes, this will be done through the regional working group. In other areas, other options will be considered such as communicating directly with horse riding organisations.

Signage will be upgraded to identify trails where horse riding is permitted.

In the longer term, OEH will develop more sophisticated methods of communicating horse riding opportunities. The OEH website is being improved to make information on recreational activities in national parks and reserves, including horse riding, more accessible. Maps identifying horse riding opportunities may be developed for parks and areas not included in the initial rollout of the website upgrade.

In the long term, events may also be planned to promote the development of new horse riding opportunities.

## 8. Implementation and evaluation – the action plan

The *Draft strategic directions for horse riding in NSW national parks and reserves* will be implemented and evaluated in accordance with the action plan.

### Action plan





Initiative	Actions	Timeframe
<b>Statewide stakeholder engagement</b>	<p>Continue working with the Horse Riding Consultative Group to provide strategic direction and guidance on policy and implementation of improved recreational horse riding opportunities across the reserve system.</p> <p>Consult with the National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council on the development, implementation and review of initiatives to support improved recreational horse riding, including new and revised plans of management</p>	Ongoing
<b>Regional scale identification of horse riding opportunities – short-term actions</b> Focus on three identified horse riding landscapes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Far South Coast and Ranges</li> <li>• Hunter and Northern Tablelands</li> <li>• Blue Mountains and Northern Sydney</li> </ul>	<p>Establish regional working groups in the three horse riding landscapes, consisting of :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OEH regional staff</li> <li>• regional horse riding representatives</li> <li>• a member of the National Parks and Wildlife Regional Advisory Committee/s (RAC) where practicable.</li> </ul> <p>Groups will report to the Regional Manager/s who will consult with the RAC/s.</p> <p>Working groups will identify proposals for sustainable horse riding opportunities that can be delivered in the short term without requiring changes to policy or PoMs or statutory environmental assessment, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• where access issues relate to gates</li> <li>• where PoMs are silent on horse riding on particular management trails and the proposal is consistent with the intent of the PoM.</li> </ul> <p>The Regional Manager/s, in consultation with the RAC/s, and following an assessment of proposals against the areas of consideration specified in the Interim Horse Riding Policy Directive, will make the final determination regarding improved recreational horse riding opportunities. If necessary, actions to implement approved horse riding opportunities will be included in annual OEH regional operations plans.</p> <p>Working groups will consider opportunities for horse riders to volunteer with OEH to conduct activities such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trail monitoring and maintenance</li> <li>• bush regeneration</li> <li>• weed and pest reporting</li> <li>• public education programs.</li> </ul>	Short-term

Initiative	Actions	Timeframe
<b>Wilderness pilot – short-term actions</b>	<p>Assess potential wilderness pilot locations against wilderness pilot criteria.</p> <p>Develop an adaptive management framework for the wilderness pilot.</p>	Short term
<b>Interim Horse Riding Policy Directive</b>	<p>Develop an Interim Horse Riding Policy Directive which will provide clear policy guidance for the initiatives outlined in this strategy. The policy directive will include the following key policy positions:</p> <p><b>Horse riding landscapes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide improved, sustainable horse riding opportunities in the three horse riding landscapes, with the assistance of the regional working groups.</li> <li>• If PoMs for national parks, regional parks, state conservation areas or nature reserves do not mention horse riding on specific trails or generally, the Regional Manager can allow horse riding on designated management trails if it is consistent with the overall intent of the PoM.</li> <li>• Issues to consider relating to decision making will relate to environmental and safety considerations and historical usage.</li> </ul> <p><b>Wilderness pilot</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A wilderness pilot will be undertaken in one wilderness location.</li> <li>• The wilderness pilot will be undertaken for three years.</li> <li>• The wilderness pilot will be undertaken in accordance with the adaptive management framework.</li> </ul> <p><b>All national parks, nature reserves, state conservation areas and regional parks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where PoMs or statements of management intent are being prepared or reviewed, opportunities will be sought to provide recreational horse riding on management trails where appropriate.</li> </ul>	Short term

<p><b>Regional scale identification of horse riding opportunities – medium-term actions</b></p> <p>Focus on three identified horse riding landscapes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Far South Coast and Ranges</li> <li>• Hunter and Northern Tablelands</li> <li>• Blue Mountains and Northern Sydney.</li> </ul>	<p>Regional working groups will identify more complex proposals for new horse riding opportunities, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• horse riding opportunities not currently permitted under the PoM</li> <li>• short extensions of existing trails to form loop trails</li> <li>• provision of facilities for horse camping</li> <li>• access to historical bridle trails</li> <li>• wilderness boundary errors (where a portion of a horse riding trail was inadvertently included in wilderness due to a mapping error).</li> </ul> <p>Groups will report to the OEH Regional Manager/s who will consult with the Regional Advisory Committee/s (RAC/s).</p> <p>The OEH Regional Manager/s, in consultation with the RAC/s, and following assessment of proposals against issues to be considered in the Interim Horse Riding Policy Directive, will determine whether to proceed with actions needed to implement proposals. Where PoM amendments are required, the Regional Manager will determine whether to progress these immediately or as part of the next planned regular PoM review.</p> <p>New horse riding opportunities, such as physical works for trails or provision of new facilities, will be subject to standard environmental assessment processes.</p>	<p>Medium term</p>
<p><b>Wilderness pilot – medium-term actions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalise the preferred wilderness pilot location and determine route.</li> <li>• Undertake baseline monitoring prior to commencement of horse riding</li> <li>• Commence pilot program and ongoing monitoring of identified parameters</li> </ul>	<p>Medium term</p>
<p><b>PoM reviews for national parks, nature reserves, state conservation areas and regional parks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During PoM reviews and preparation of new PoMs or statements of management intent, identify opportunities</li> </ul>	<p>Medium term–ongoing</p>
<p><b>Communication of horse riding opportunities – medium-term actions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signage upgrades will identify trails available for horse riding.</li> <li>• Communicate directly with horse riding organisations to advise existing horse riding opportunities, at a regional level. In the horse riding landscapes, this is best done through the regional working group.</li> <li>• In areas outside the horse riding landscapes, consider other options such as communicating with horse riding organisations in the region such as the Australian Horse Alliance, Endurance Riders Association, and local groups.</li> </ul>	<p>Medium term</p>

<b>Wilderness pilot – long-term actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure ongoing monitoring, implementation of adaptive management framework and reporting.</li> <li>• Assess outcomes at the conclusion of the pilot.</li> <li>• Determine whether to expand the wilderness pilot to other areas, based on assessment.</li> </ul>	Long term
<b>Policy review</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess the outcomes of the Interim Horse Riding Policy Directive.</li> <li>• Determine the need for a review of existing policies or continuation of the policy directive.</li> </ul>	Long term
<b>Communication of horse riding opportunities – long-term actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop more sophisticated communication of recreational horse riding opportunities, including broader improvements to the OEH website and the development of area maps identifying horse riding opportunities.</li> <li>• Plan events in collaboration with local groups to promote the development of new horse riding opportunities.</li> </ul>	Long term

**Key**

-  Ongoing actions
-  Short-term actions
-  Medium-term actions
-  Long-term actions