



Evaluation management response

Administrative response to evaluation of the Environmental Research Grants Program 2023

NSW Environmental Trust



Acknowledgement of Country

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

This resource may contain images or names of deceased persons in photographs or historical content.

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Artist and designer Nikita Ridgeway from Aboriginal design agency Boss Lady Creative Designs created the People and Community symbol.

Cover photo: Corroboree frog after fire event in enclosures. Kosciuszko National Park. John Spencer/DCCEEW

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Management response summary

The Environmental Research program (the Program) is funded by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust (the Trust). It is one of 3 statutory annual contestable grants programs delivered by the Trust and is aligned with the objects of the *Environmental Trust Act 1998* (the Act).

The program provides funding for applied research in priority environmental themes to help address contemporary environmental problems in New South Wales. The objectives of the program are to:

- increase knowledge and advance techniques to solve general environmental problems in New South Wales
- assess and test application of innovative solutions to decrease environmental degradation in New South Wales
- discover new methods of operation for NSW industries that are less harmful to the environment and enhance public good.

Funding allocation

The program has operated since 1990, delivering over \$27 million to support more than 250 projects. From 2000-01 to 2020, the funding allocation was \$1 million, equating to 5–6 funded projects each year of up to \$200,000 each. In 2021–22, the Trust reduced annual funding to \$500,000, and the annual allocation has since been subject to availability of funds. \$1 million in funding was offered in 2022 and 2023.

Scope and findings of the evaluation

Following a call for tenders in early 2023, ARTD Consultants were engaged to carry out this evaluation. The evaluation was conducted in line with the NSW Treasury Policy and Guidelines: Evaluation (2023) and commenced in July 2023. The final report was received on 15 December 2023.

ARTD examined alignment of the 2017–2021 rounds with the NSW Grants Administration Guide (released 2022), as well as with the Act Objects and Trust's Strategic Plan 2020–24.

The evaluation considered 14 Key Evaluation Questions under 5 broad categories: appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, equity and legacy. Below are the key findings, drawn directly from the final evaluation report.

Appropriateness

- Overall, the program is strongly aligned with the objects of the Act and the Environmental Trust's Strategic Plan.
- Most (65%) survey respondents felt that the Trust's research themes were extremely well or well aligned with the needs of the environmental research community.

- The program is valued by grantees as a rare and critical source of funding for environmental research (including novel research), filling an important niche.
- The funding allocation is low in relation to the funding need in the research community and the grant amount is low for what it is expected to achieve.
- Nearly all (87%) grantees sought a variation to the timeframes of their projects.
- More than half (52%) of applicants surveyed felt that the application and reporting requirements were too laborious or complex considering the amount of funding received.

Effectiveness

- 75% of research projects tested, refined and shared more effective or efficient methods/techniques for restoration and rehabilitation.

Efficiency

- The program achieved greater value for money when more grants were awarded.

Equity

- Location is not a barrier but there are greater costs to do research in remote areas.
- The rigour of application and reporting processes likely excludes community groups, not-for-profits and Aboriginal organisations from applying or successfully managing their grants.

Legacy

- The grants are working to help build NSW's knowledge economy, create jobs and a skilled workforce.

See Appendix 1 for more information on the framework used to conduct this evaluation.

Summary of recommendations and Trust Administration response

Twenty-two recommendations were made, the majority of which have been accepted. The key recommendations are:

- increase annual funding allocation to \$2 million
- maximum grants offered to \$350,000 each over 4 years
- review the Monitoring Evaluation and Reporting framework to simplify application and reporting systems
- better support applicants and grantees in applying for and reporting on their funded projects
- the Trust should consider how it supports equity principles when designing grant programs.

Table 1 **Summary of recommendations and Trust Administration management response**

Recommendations	Accepted	Partly accepted	Not accepted
22	13	8	1

Trust Administration response to evaluation findings

Table 2 **Evaluation findings and response**

ARTD recommendation	Trust Administration response	Timing
1. Increase maximum length of grant to 3.5 years (i.e. adding a further 6 months after project activities are completed) to evaluate and disseminate results, finalise publications and allow time for other indicators of impact to be visible (p 74).	Partly accepted Increase total length of the project to maximum of 4 years. Trust Administration agrees with the principle of extending projects, however believes that 4 years will better allow for assessment of project outcomes and reduce administration with variation requests. This approach is consistent with the Environmental Education program which allows for projects of up to 5 years, in recognition of the time required to measure impact.	Oct 2024
2. Increase the maximum amount offered to \$360,000 (p 74)	Partly accepted (pending Trust approval) Increase maximum grants offered to \$350,000 each. If recommendation 4 is approved, this will be sufficient to fund 5–6 projects per year.	For approval at next Trust meeting. Targeting implementation by Oct 2024
3. Encourage use of post-graduate / PhD students to build in greater capacity - building outcomes within the NSW environmental research community, as well as value for money (p 80).	Accepted Program guidelines should encourage use of post-graduate/PhD students in project delivery.	Oct 2024

ARTD recommendation	Trust Administration response	Timing
4. Increase the funding pool to \$2 million per year to reflect number of applications worthy of funding, and to fund a similar number of projects to past rounds at the higher recommended maximum amount as per Recommendation 2) (p vii and p 75).	Accepted (pending Trust approval) Increase annual funding allocation to \$2 million per year. Adjust the program guidelines to offer \$2 million annually. This will increase value for money for time invested in administration of the program. If recommendation 2 is approved, there will be sufficient funding for 5–6 projects per annum.	For approval at next Trust meeting. Targeting implementation by Oct 2024
5. Consider 5 themes each year. Themes 1–3: broad themes that rotate each year that include a range of issues such as biodiversity, climate adaptation, identified ecosystems, and landscape management etc. Theme 4: Knowledge gap or emerging threat identified in collaboration with other areas of government. Theme 5: Emerging environmental threats or priorities as identified by the environmental research community or industry (p 75).	Partly accepted Align research themes with immediate funding priorities drawn from Strategic Plan 2024–2028. The new Trust Strategic Plan will be announced in July 2024 and will outline the funding priorities for the Trust over the next 4 years. Trust Administration supports aligning the core research themes for this program with those priorities, once they are known. Trust Administration agrees that the program should continue to contemplate emerging environmental issues in the development of its research themes each year. Trust Administration will achieve this by consulting annually with the Technical Review Committee (TRC) and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) colleagues. Trust Administration believes this approach aligns with the evaluation report’s findings, however this is a more efficient approach because it capitalises on the work already being done to consult with stakeholders on the development of the new Strategic Plan priorities.	Oct 2024

ARTD recommendation	Trust Administration response	Timing
6. Review what can be removed from the Expression of Interest and Invited Application forms. To improve usability and reduce duplication in the application, some of the information requested across several different sections in the Invited Application could be repackaged (p 6 and p 76).	Partly accepted Continue work to improve the functionality of the application form in the online Grants Management System (GMS). The evaluation examined applications from 2017 to 2021. In 2022 the program was integrated into the GMS and more closely aligned with other grant programs. This reduced much of the previous duplication of information that applicants were asked to provide, but there is room for further refinement.	Oct 2024
7. Consider providing explicit documented guidance for TRC members and peer reviewers on how to make assessments – especially about applications which do not fit into funding priorities but should be considered on their merits (p 78).	Not accepted The provision for applications outside the priority research themes was available up until 2019 only. It was removed for the single themed rounds in 2020 and 2021 and has not been reinstated in Program Guidelines since. To reinstate this provision would undermine the purpose of including priority research themes and reduce the ability of the program to support the overarching priorities of the Strategic Plan.	N/A
8. That the TRC look at the mix of researcher attributes (e.g. gender), types of research funded and geographic distribution of projects, especially when deliberating between lower ranked applicants. Equity considerations should also be conscious to try and select for diversity, after accounting for strength and feasibility of application and research (p 78).	Accepted The Trust should consider how it supports equity principles when designing grant programs. This recommendation will be considered at branch level. It will require consultation with the Strategic Projects team in Grants Branch on how to capture data. Recommendation 11 will include some provisions for applicants conducting research in remote locations.	2025

ARTD recommendation	Trust Administration response	Timing
9. Provide current TRC members with data on past rounds, previous assessment decisions and grantee reports to better inform their decisions. Implement a post-round TRC debrief/feedback session to improve assessment processes (p 9).	Partly accepted Review the TRC assessment guide annually and provide current TRC members with information on past rounds to better inform their decisions. Recommendation 9 has already been mostly addressed. Trust Administration agrees that TRC support materials in the 2017–2021 rounds were inadequate. This was identified in 2022 and a more detailed TRC Assessment Guide was developed. This has been provided each round to members since 2022 and will be reviewed annually. Information on past rounds and previous assessment decisions are available to the TRC on the Trust website, and meetings include feedback from the Trust as well as updates on relevant NSW Government policy changes. To expect TRC members to review grantee reports as part of their assessment is not feasible due to fairness and equity concerns. It would also unreasonably increase the workload of members, increasing the costs of administering the program for limited gain. TRC members have an opportunity to debrief and provide feedback to Trust Administration at the end of each TRC meeting.	N/A
10. Review the usefulness of the project measures and discuss standards for financial reporting/common financial reporting categories with university finance offices/research offices to find a satisfactory level of financial reporting that is not overly burdensome (p 79).	Accepted Continue work to improve milestone reporting processes in GMS, and review project measures to ensure an outcomes orientation. In 2022, Trust Administration commenced a branch-wide Monitoring Evaluation Reporting and Improvement (MERI) review. As part the phased rollout of the review, a new program logic for Research has been developed and when finalised will include revised project measures. Integration of the Research program in GMS in 2022 also changed the way grantees manage and report on their projects, reducing duplication. Measures were consolidated and reduced in number and budgets no longer use complex	Oct 2024

ARTD recommendation	Trust Administration response	Timing
	spreadsheet systems. There is still room to improve the systems that support monitoring, evaluation and reporting, and this work will continue in 2024.	
11. Consider adding reporting fields to capture economic benefits of funded projects (e.g. employment outcomes, other grants funding leveraged), and include these indicators in the program's monitoring, evaluation and reporting plan (p xi).	Partly accepted Accept the intent of this recommendation and continue work to improve reporting processes in GMS. Budget reports and project measures already capture economic information in relation to cash and in-kind contributions. Grantees can be asked more directly about leveraging, and this can be incorporated into monitoring and evaluation questions that inform planning for post-project maintenance.	Oct 2024
12. Grant guidelines include a step-by-step process for the EOI/application process. Consider including similar process in grant guidelines for reporting process (to ensure grantees budget for this work) (p xi).	Accepted Develop a standardised Guide to Reporting to assist grantees in preparing milestone reports. Some information is provided in their first payment letter, but current advice provided with report reminders is ad hoc in nature and grantees can be better supported if they have more understanding about what reviewers are looking for in their reports.	2025
13. Review variation processes and expectations and consider including additional wording to Funding Agreements to reduce workload and uncertainty (p 79).	Accepted Provide more information in the program guidelines and on the Trust webpages about variation processes. The intent of this recommendation is accepted, and Trust Administration will work to make variation processes clearer and more accessible for grantees to understand and use. The Funding Agreement is not the best place to provide this support. Grantees are not typically in the habit of going to the Grant Agreement for practical advice on administering their project. It will be more effective to use other resources to achieve the outcome of making variations easier to navigate. The focus should be on refining supporting systems in GMS rather than legacy systems as all rounds since 2022 have been rolled out in GMS.	2025

ARTD recommendation	Trust Administration response	Timing
14. The Trust needs to define what elements of equity are most important to achieve in what timeframes and why, in alignment with its objectives and strategic plan, to inform work on any actions to improve equity (p 80).	Accepted The Trust should develop a plan to integrate equity principles in the design of all its programs. This links with recommendation 8.	2025
15. The Trust could consider options such as offering an additional travel stipend for those undertaking work in remote locations (p 80).	Partially accepted Guidelines should recognise the high costs of conducting research in remote locations by empowering applicants to include realistic travel expenses in their proposed budgets. Trust Administration agrees with the intent of improving equity outcomes by providing mechanisms to better support research in remote locations however recommendations 2 and 4 already recommend an increase in grant funding. It is not considered appropriate to offer a stipend on top of the grant. Instead, application materials should empower applicants to include travel costs for work in remote locations in their proposed budgets, e.g. by reiterating that travel is an eligible activity in the Program Guidelines and including advice in supporting materials. The TRC Assessment Guide will be amended so that the TRC do not dismiss applications with high travel budgets, and instead consider the value of funding work in diverse parts of NSW.	Oct 2024
16. Consider adding a requirement to Guidelines that Community organisations must collaborate with an academic researcher (p 5).	Accepted Include a requirement in the program guidelines that community groups must include an academic researcher in their project team to be eligible for funding. Trust Administration agrees this is a sensible solution that will help non-academic applicants to be more competitive with the university and government sectors, while also ensuring that their projects are based on robust scientific	Oct 2024

ARTD recommendation	Trust Administration response	Timing
	methodology. It also aligns well with the Trust's desire to support the building of partnerships through collaborative projects.	
17. Providing a pre-application webinar with attendance by a previous grant-holder will allow greater equitability in accessing support (p 53).	Accepted Engage a facilitator to support design and delivery of online webinars that will support potential applicants in planning their projects and invite a successful grantee to assist with presentation. The participation of a successful grantee will need to be regarded as optional as they may not wish to inadvertently assist potential competitors.	Oct 2024
18. Consider a more systematised approach to providing feedback/reasoning for decisions to unsuccessful applicants so that feedback is provided more equitably/is more transparent. (p xi).	Accepted Review the feedback that is provided to unsuccessful applicants. In 2022 a format for providing more detailed feedback (based on how successful vs unsuccessful applicants addressed the assessment criteria) was established. All unsuccessful applicants receive this feedback, along with an invitation to seek more tailored feedback.	Oct 2024
19. Application materials should emphasise that grants purposely seek to involve Government agencies to increase the speed of translation and uptake of research about management of and response to environmental issues by the NSW Government; and encourage increased collaboration between Government and the academic sector. Applicants may propose projects that	Accepted Guidelines and application materials should encourage involvement of Government agencies in projects to improve policy and management outcomes. Application supporting materials should emphasise the benefits of partnerships between government and non-government organisations for improving environmental outcomes.	Oct 2024

ARTD recommendation	Trust Administration response	Timing
include appropriate agencies as collaborators/end users (p xi).		
20. Consider adding to TRC guidelines that ideally applicants would have some knowledge/expertise in research ethics (p xi).	Accepted and already actioned When assessing applications for funding, the TRC should recommend special conditions if they identify that an applicant should connect with ethics advisors. Trust Administration agrees with the intent of this recommendation to ensure good ethical conduct in the delivery of research projects. Government agencies and universities, who make up the bulk of Research grantees, have rigorous policy frameworks and access to ethics and governance expertise. Scrutiny of ethical considerations is more likely to be weaker in community groups that lack such support. Recommendation 19 will require community groups to partner with an academic researcher, reducing the risk of unethical practices, and this will help them with the rigour of their application and improve strength of the applicant pool. Assessment criteria require the TRC to assess the research team's capacity to undertake the project, and precedent demonstrates that they already consider whether research teams should connect with ethics experts in their chosen research field. In these instances, working with an ethics adviser is recommended as a special condition of the grant if awarded. Trust Administration generally avoids directing TRC members on how to assess the capacity of research teams as TRC members are the subject matter experts in this space.	N/A

Alignment of the Environmental Research Program with the NSW Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide (2022)

Findings

ARTD was asked to examine alignment of the program with the NSW Grants Administration Guide and identify opportunities for improvement. They found that in most areas, the program has a 'Good' alignment with the Grants Administration Guide. Areas to improve are collaboration and partnership (of the Trust's Contestable Grants team with other areas of government), proportionality and outcomes orientation (p 3). Areas for improvement are:

Table 3 ARTD's recommendations in relation to alignment with Grants Administration Guide 2022, and Trust Administration's management response

ARTD Recommendation	Trust response	Timing
21. Consider implementing processes for the Trust to manage and track risks in delivery of Trust funded projects (e.g. a grantee conflict of interest/ fraud/ misconduct register) (p xi).	Accepted Continue work to improve reporting systems in GMS and include direct questions about contractor procurement and staff recruitment. These are the areas where the risk of grantee conflict of interest and / or misconduct is highest in a Trust funded grant project. Also include a question that prompts grantees to consider potential conflicts of interest with every milestone report. Include a link to the University of South Australia's guide to managing conflicts of interest in a Research project in program guidelines <u>Managing conflicts of interest – Research – University of South Australia</u> (unisa.edu.au)	Ongoing
22. Consider tracking use of staff time more systematically, (e.g. time taken to process variations, time taken to review milestone reports, time taken to address reported risks), to help identify areas for process improvements (p xi).	Accepted Continue to improve resources and procedures for staff, for example through the Grants Branch Hub. Trust Administration have implemented a Grants Hub that will assist staff in accessing up to date policies and procedures. These will be refined before they are added to the hub to reflect more efficient practices	Ongoing

Appendix 1: Evaluation framework

The Environmental Trust undertakes independent evaluations for each of its contestable grant programs, in accordance with NSW Treasury Policy and Guidelines. Evaluations assess the effectiveness of each program and assist the Trust inform future iterations of its projects, including objectives, value, and scope of future funding rounds, as well as improvements to process and administration.

In June 2023, ARTD was engaged through a selective tender process run by the Contestables Team, to evaluate the performance of the Environmental Research Grants program.

ARTD was chosen due to their extensive experience in undertaking evaluations, including government and environmental programs.

The purpose of the evaluation was to provide insights into the overall performance of the Environmental Research Grants Program in its 2017–2021 rounds, and whether it has achieved its planned outcomes and delivered value for money.

ARTD undertook a mixed methods evaluation of the program, combining administrative data with document and desktop review, as well as information gathered from key stakeholders through surveys and interviews. The evaluation drew on all data sources to assess the alignment of program with the NSW Premier and Cabinet Grants Administration Guide, Trust Act Objectives, and the Trust's Strategic Plan, using a rubric approach.

A value for money assessment was also undertaken that included a cost-effectiveness analysis to compare the relative cost of activities to the outcomes of actions. A cost benefit analysis was also considered in the value for money assessment, looking at the impacts of the program in terms of savings as a result of the program.

ARTD also considered higher-level program improvements made in 2022 to support the call for applications but did not examine in detail how those applications were assessed and approved.

It should be noted that the evaluation relies on a small sample size from each stakeholder group in both stakeholder surveys and interviews.