



South West Conservation Investment Strategy

Biodiversity Stewardship and Credits Supply



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.

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This strategy was jointly funded by the NSW Government and the Australian Government's Renewables Environmental Research Initiative.

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

Cover photo: Shy heathwren, *Hylacola cauta*. Michael Todd/DCCEEW

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ISBN 978-1-76186-099-7

EH 2025/0440

January 2026

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this strategy

This strategy identifies the key strategic conservation priorities and actions to be undertaken in the region covered by the South West Renewable Energy Zone and surrounds (the South West). Significant and ongoing investment is expected in the South West, including as part of biodiversity offsetting associated with the development of renewable energy zones and associated NSW Electricity Infrastructure Roadmap projects.

By identifying conservation priorities and actions for the South West, the strategy seeks to guide investment in biodiversity conservation. Alongside investment from biodiversity offsets, conservation investment may also occur through other NSW programs, and partnerships with other government and non-government organisations. Coordinating this investment is an opportunity to optimise conservation outcomes through complementary efforts.

The strategy is intended to be refined over time to strengthen supporting analysis, improve prioritisation of investment across programs and to incorporate feedback from stakeholders, partners and community members in the South West.

The strategy has been developed for the purposes of section 6.3A of the Biodiversity Conservation Regulation 2017 and will guide biodiversity offsets under strategic offset delivery agreements for any projects associated with the South West Renewable Energy Zone.

1.2 Relationship to other strategies and programs

This strategy has drawn on, and sits alongside, other statewide strategies relevant to the South West, including the Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategy (BCT 2018), NSW National Parks Establishment Plan (DECC 2008) and the NSW Koala Strategy (DPE 2022a). It also draws on program-level investment in threatened species and ecological communities through the Saving our Species (SoS) and Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT) private land conservation programs.

The strategy was also informed by current regional strategies such as the Riverina Murray Regional Plan 2041 (DPE 2023) and the Draft Far West Regional Plan 2041 (DPE 2022b).

Section 3 of the strategy outlines planned implementation, including from existing department programs, opportunities through other Commonwealth and NSW government agency programs, and new ways to improve conservation outcomes. The strategy may inform and complement strategic conservation planning at a more localised level. The strategy will be reviewed for alignment with the Nature Strategy once it is released by the NSW Government.

1.3 About the South West region

For the purposes of this strategy, the South West is defined by the South West Renewable Energy Zone and land that is within 50 km of that renewable energy zone, excluding Victoria (Figure 1). It covers approximately 69,960 km² and includes the regional centres of Balranald, Buronga, Hay and Griffith, on the lands of the Bangerang, Barkandji, Baraba Baraba, Dadi Dadi, Kureinji, Madi Madi, Nari Nari, Wadi Wadi, Wemba Wemba, Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta peoples. Lands within the South West are administered by Griffith City Council and Balranald, Carrathool, Hay, Edward River, Murray, Murrumbidgee and Wentworth councils (Figure 1).

The region experiences a variable climate with semi-arid, hot summers and cool to cold winters. Climate projections suggest temperatures will continue to rise across all seasons. Rainfall is forecast to remain variable with decreases in annual averages likely. The number of cold nights will decrease while the number of extreme fire weather days is projected to grow across the entire region (DCCEEW 2024a).

The region is in the southern part of the Murray–Darling Basin where water from the Darling, Lachlan and Murrumbidgee rivers flow into the Murray River. Within this basin there are many regional, cultural and nationally significant water-dependent ecosystems.

The South West is home to around 33,000 people (DCCEEW 2024b). Agriculture is likely to remain the dominant industry with land uses including grazing (cattle and sheep), broadacre cropping (including rice and cotton) and horticulture. Renewable energy and critical minerals are growing sectors.

The South West Renewable Energy Zone is in the early stages of planning and comprises 2 major transmission lines (Project EnergyConnect and the Victoria to NSW Interconnector West), battery storage systems, wind and solar farms (see Figure 1). At November 2025, 4 of 29 projects have access rights to the transmission line (EnergyCo 2025).

Renewable energy and critical mineral projects will occur in parts of the region that have conservation values. These projects will be required to avoid, minimise and offset their impacts as part of the assessment process. The project footprints shown in Figure 1 may be refined as part of project assessment. Cumulatively, these projects have the potential to displace species, reduce movement and affect ecosystem processes. Highlighting regional conservation priorities early allows impacts to be avoided and minimised while guiding the location of offsets to mitigate cumulative effects and maintain landscape resilience.

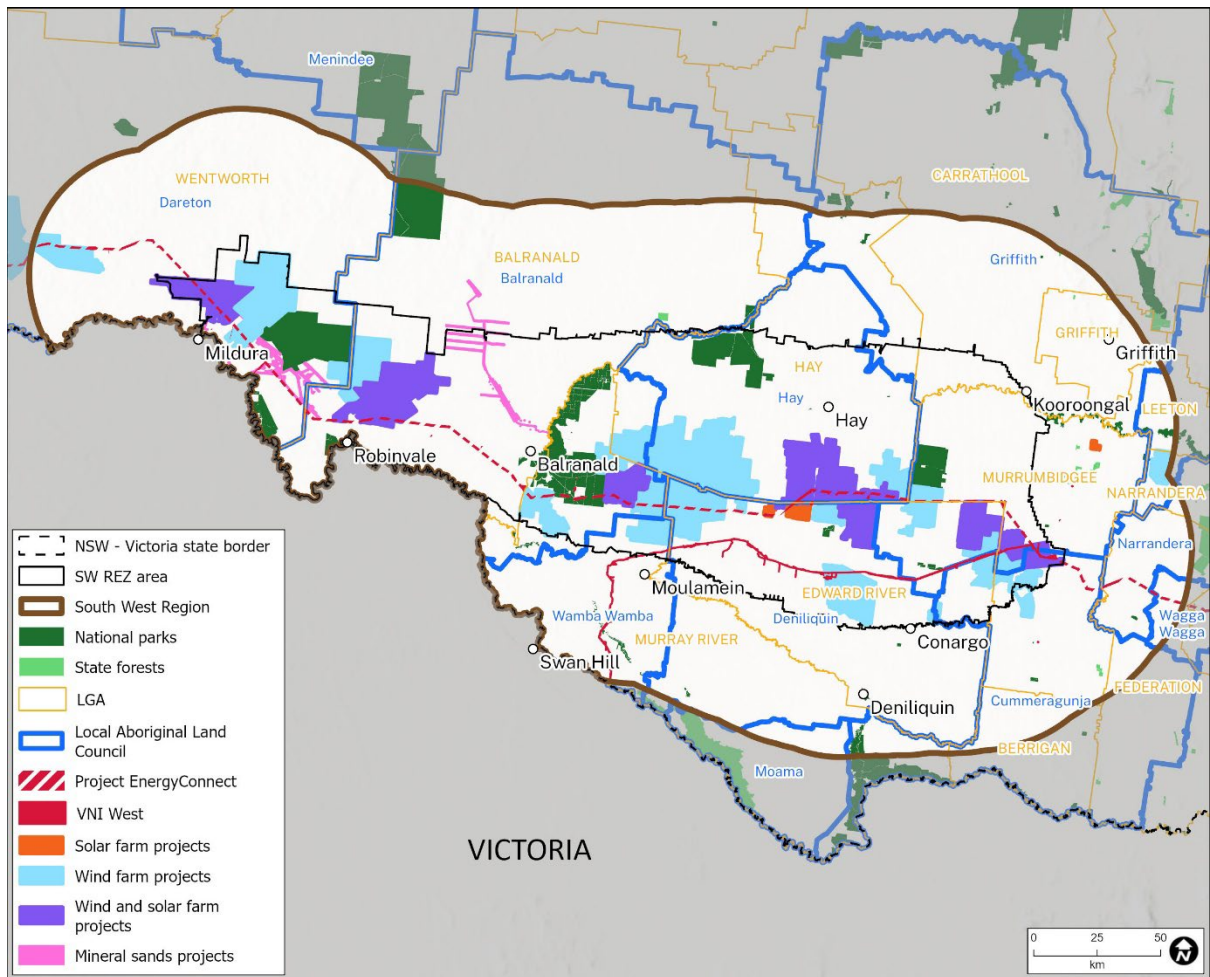


Figure 1 Local Aboriginal Land Councils, local government areas and renewable energy projects in the South West

2. Conservation objectives and priorities

2.1 Strategy objectives

The South West Conservation Investment Strategy has been developed to:

- integrate conservation programs and priorities to optimise delivery of regional conservation outcomes
- protect regionally significant species and ecological communities
- improve connectivity and resilience to climate change
- improve the integrity of degraded ecosystems and habitats
- contribute to a comprehensive, adequate and representative protected area network through enduring conservation arrangements
- deliver social benefits for the region.

To identify areas in the South West that are important to achieve strategic objectives, key conservation assets were selected for analysis. The conservation assets align with the priority conservation values identified in other strategies and programs.

Key conservation assets analysed in the South West include threatened ecological communities, threatened species habitats, important watercourses and wetlands, functional connectivity, areas of climate resilience and the protected area network, as set out in section 2.2.

2.2 Key conservation assets in the South West region

The key conservation assets in the South West inform conservation priorities for investment under the strategy.

Threatened species and ecological communities

In the South West region, 131 NSW and/or Commonwealth listed threatened species have been recorded. Around 17 of these species have not been conserved in the protected area estate. In New South Wales, the protected area network includes national parks and flora reserves (public lands) and in-perpetuity conservation agreements on private lands.

High value habitat has been identified for 16 threatened species that will be impacted by development using habitat suitability modelling (90% likelihood of occurrence). Habitat suitability modelling uses species records to identify associated abiotic factors and predict areas of potential occurrence in the landscape. Areas with overlapping habitat suitability models indicate the potential to support multiple species and are considered in this strategy to be high-value habitats for offsetting (Figure 2).

Populations or habitats of regional and state significance for several species also occur in the region. For example, the persistence of nesting colonies of regent parrots near Euston on the Murray River is critical to securing the wider population (Cameron 2025).

The superb parrot is also significant in the region with key breeding sites located along the corridors of the Murray, Edward and Murrumbidgee rivers (OEH 2024).

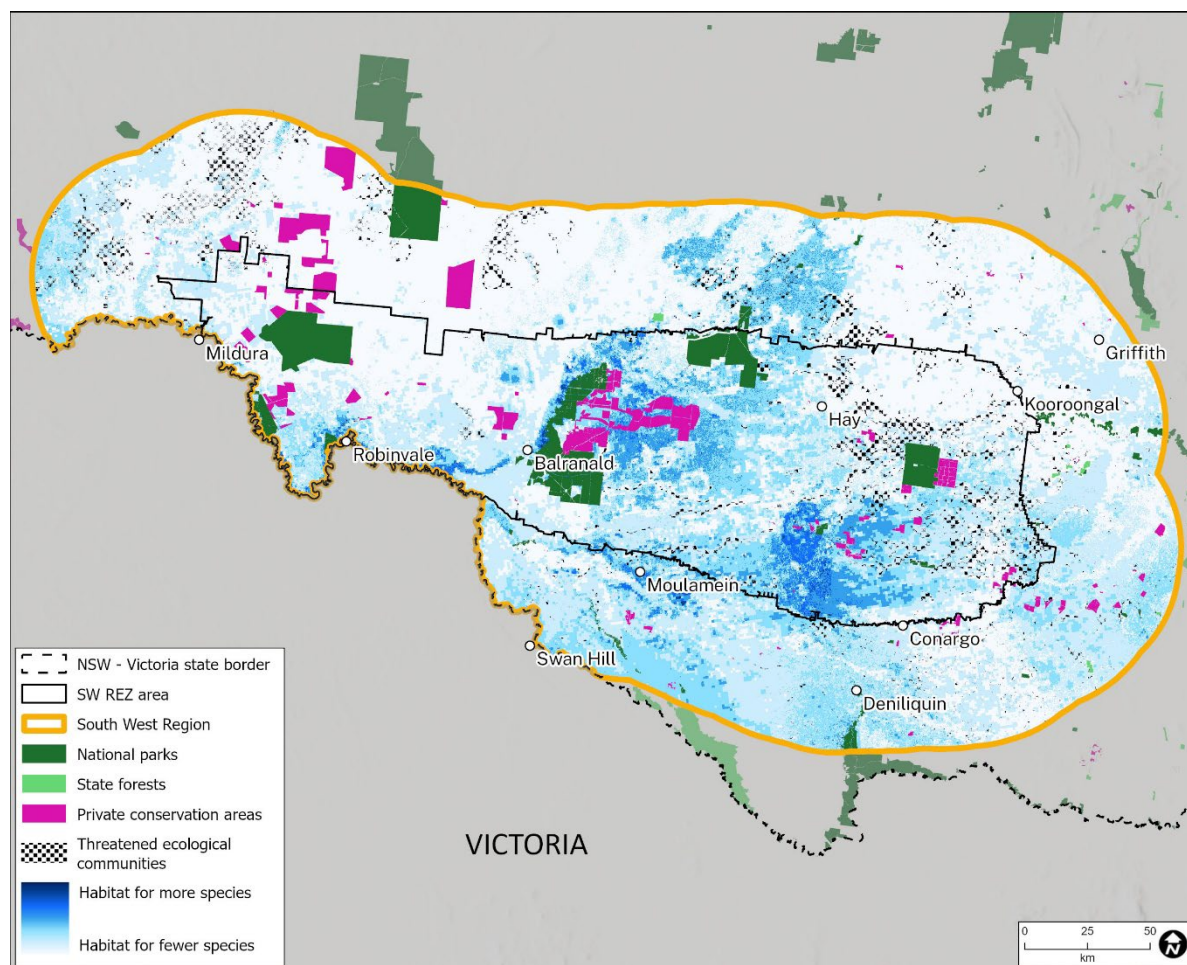


Figure 2 Predicted high-value habitat for 16 threatened species impacted by development in the South West region

Up to 14 ecological communities listed as threatened in New South Wales or nationally are predicted to occur in the South West, based on vegetation type associations and modelled distributions of plant community types (DCCEEW in prep).

NSW listed communities include *Acacia loderi* and *Acacia melvillei* shrublands, *Allocasuarina luehmannii* woodland, inland grey box woodland, myall woodland, sandhill pine woodland, box gum woodland and *Tecticornia lylei*, wiry glasswort low open-shrubland.

Commonwealth-listed communities include plains mallee box woodlands, box gum woodlands, weeping myall woodlands, buloke woodlands, natural grasslands of the Murray Valley plains and the mallee bird community.

The mallee bird endangered ecological community is unique because it is based on an assemblage of up to 20 bird species that are dependent on mallee habitats. It is mostly found in Victoria and South Australia. In New South Wales, the endangered ecological community occurs in the far south-west corner and Central Mallee area between

Hillston and Cobar. While it is represented in the protected area network and in the Southern NSW Mallee Key Biodiversity Area, remaining patches are threatened by clearing, degradation and invasive species.

Figure 3 shows the indicative distribution of 5 NSW-listed threatened ecological communities. The actual distribution of threatened ecological communities is determined through field survey.

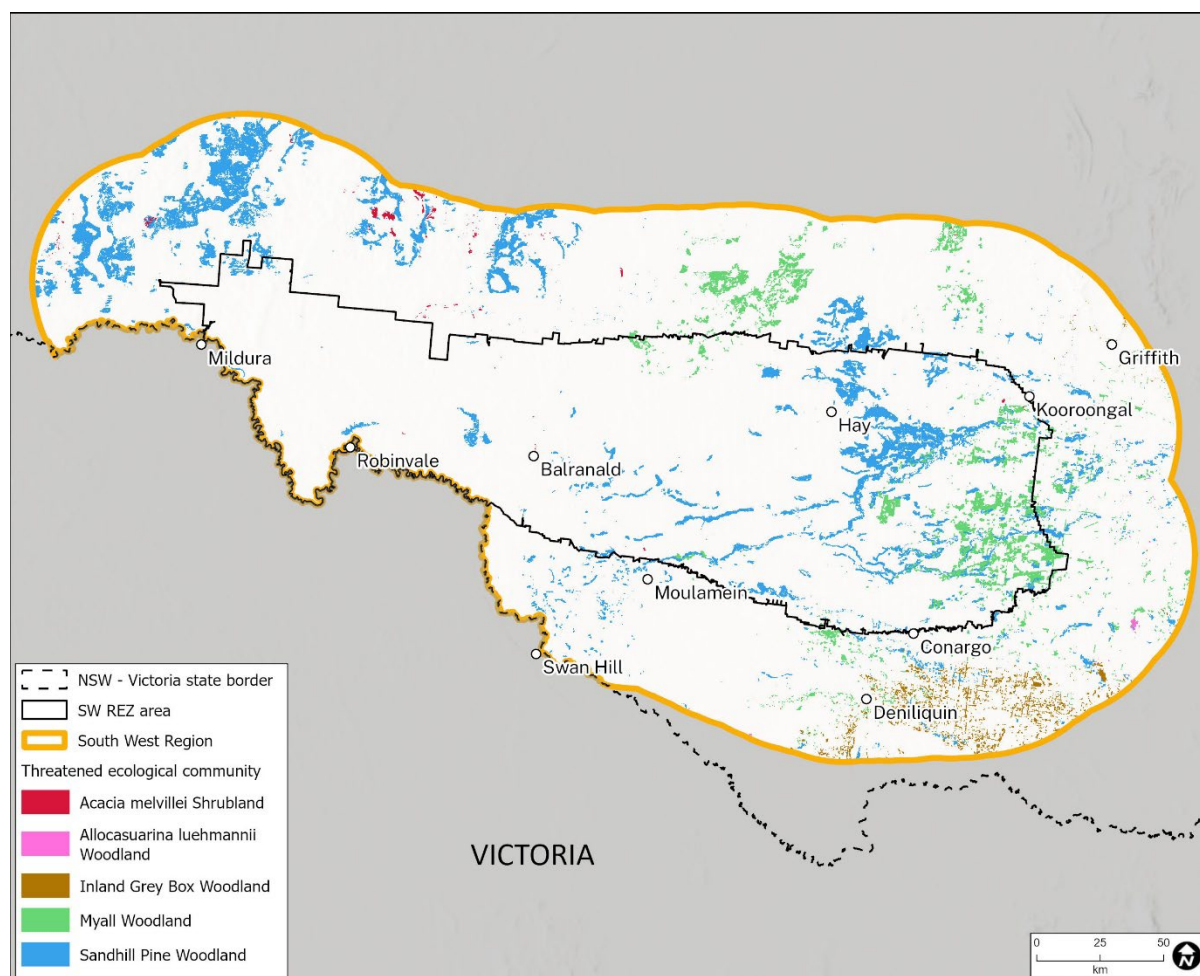


Figure 3 Indicative occurrence of 5 threatened ecological communities in the South West region

Important waterways and floodplains

Major rivers in the region include the Edward, Lachlan, Murray and Murrumbidgee (Figure 4). Anabranches and tributaries such as Yanco and Billabong creeks are important interconnectors between these rivers. Other water-dependent ecosystems in the region include the Great Cumbung and Gol Gol swamps, Dry, Prill, Ita and Yanga lakes. The Great Cumbung Swamp is a wetland of national importance and protects some of the largest beds of common reeds. The Lowbidgee floodplain is the largest remaining area of wetlands in the Murrumbidgee Valley within the southern Murray-Darling Basin (TNC 2018).

While many of the floodplains along the major rivers are highly modified, the NSW River Styles Database (DCCEEW 2023b) identifies high conservation value and priority restoration potential in these areas:

- along the Murray River between Mallee and Ki State Forest
- Robinvale to the junction with the Murrumbidgee River
- Box Creek
- the Edward River between Kyalite and Morago
- Yarrein Creek between Kyalite and Yarrein
- the Murrumbidgee River between Darlington Point and the Mid-western Highway
- Yanco Creek between Conargo and Bundure
- along Curtain, Eurolie, Nyangay and The Forest creeks (Figure 4).

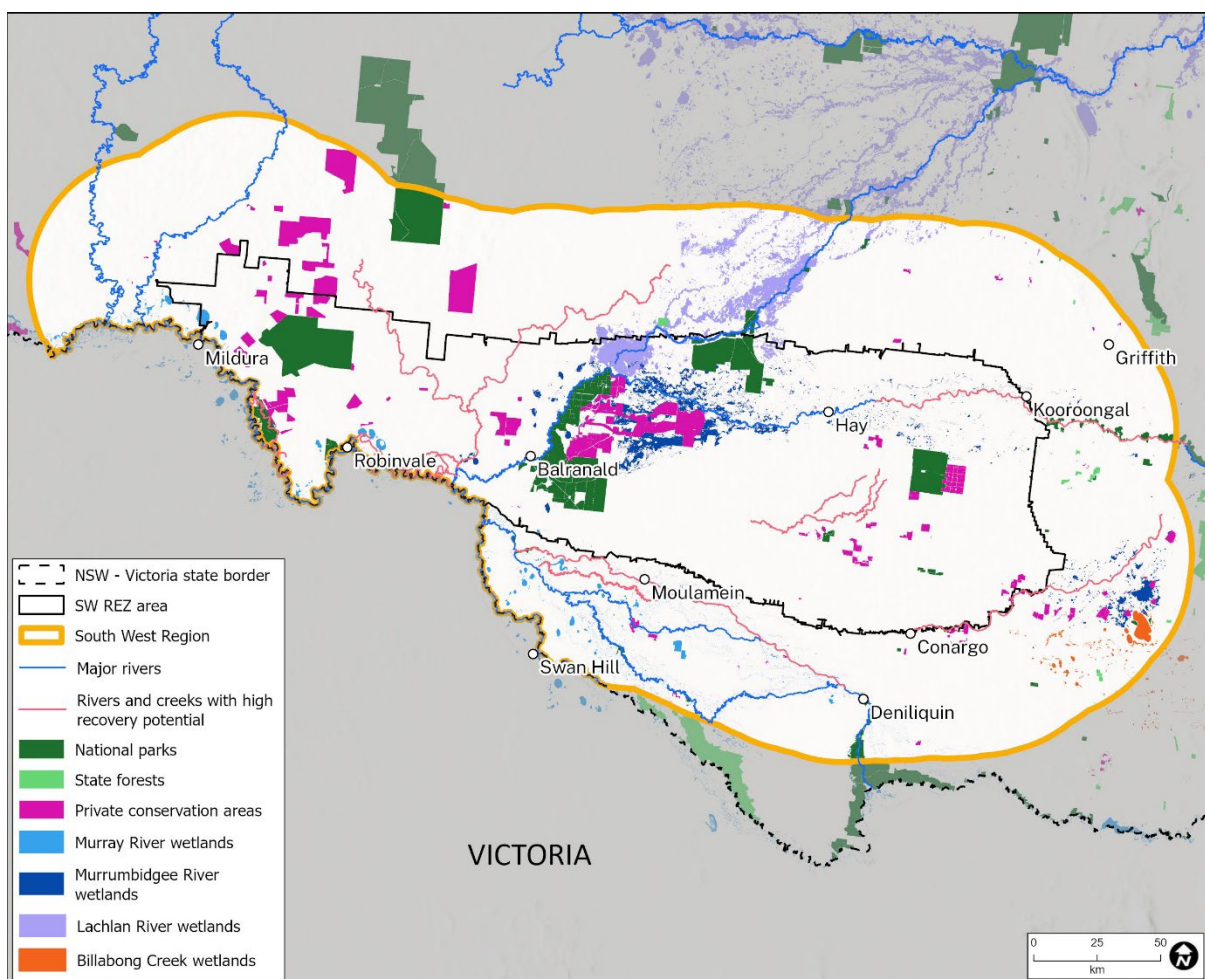


Figure 4 Major rivers, wetlands and priority reaches for strategic conservation and restoration activities in the South West region

Vegetation and connectivity

Compared to other parts of New South Wales, the South West is relatively intact, with around 74% of native vegetation remaining. Remaining vegetation supports a wide range of animal and plant populations but is subject to threatening processes such as climate change, clearing and degradation caused by inappropriate grazing regimes, invasive species, erosion, soil acidity and salinity. Halting further decline in the integrity of this vegetation is critical to support movement across the landscape, maintain genetic diversity and adapt to climate change.

Major rivers, smaller waterways and an extensive network of travelling stock reserves provide a foundation to create high quality vegetation corridors. Of the 256,000 ha of travelling stock reserves in the region, around 15,100 ha are classified as high value and 7,300 ha are medium value (DCCEEW 2020).

Ecological connectivity analysis identifies large areas of the region where opportunities to improve ecological condition and enhance functional connectivity can be achieved (Figure 5).

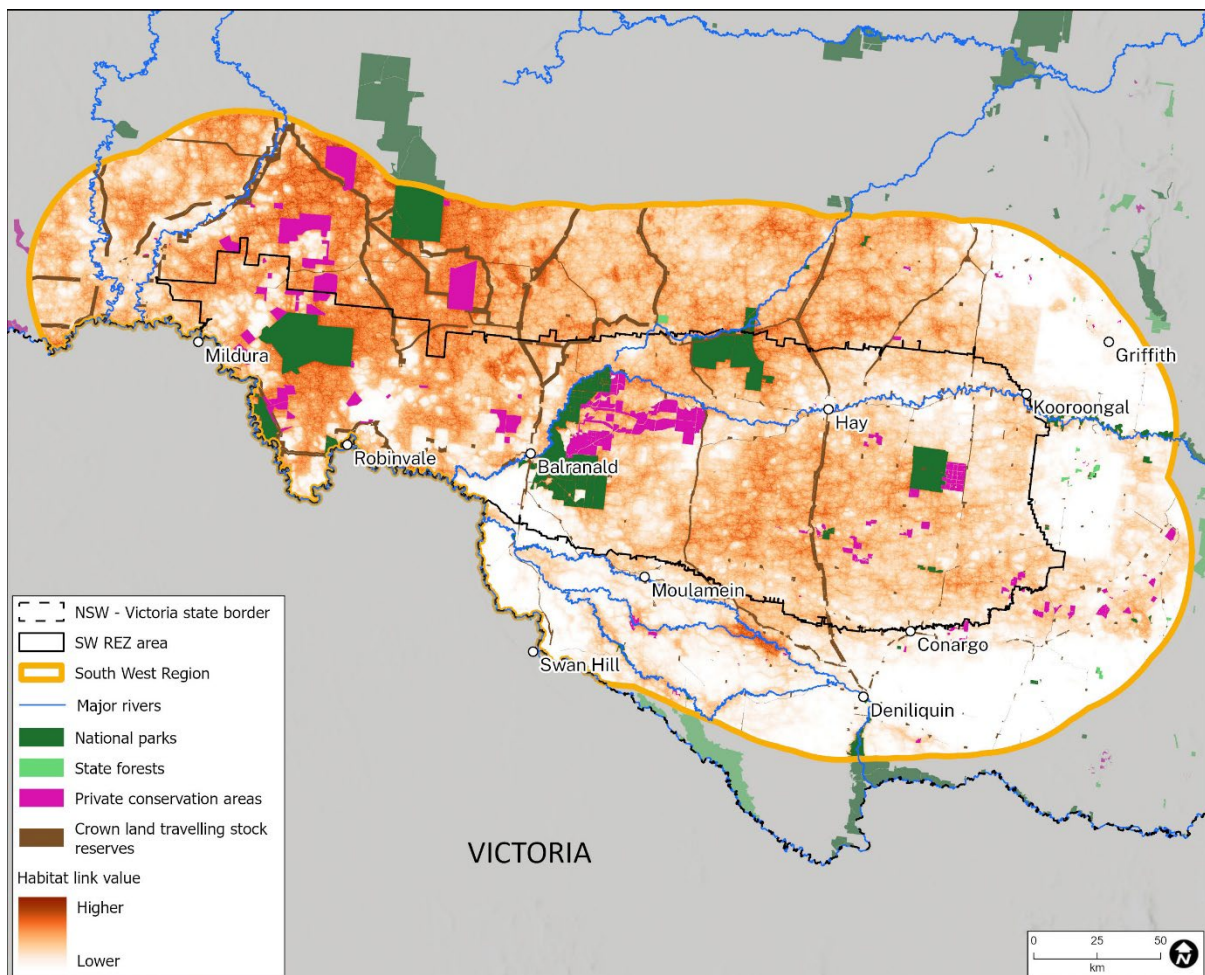


Figure 5 High-value corridors and opportunities for connectivity in the South West region

Protected areas and reserves

The South West contains several large national parks including Kalyarr National Park (40,899 ha), Mallee Cliffs National Park (57,969 ha), Oolambeyan National Park (22,201 ha) and Yanga National Park and State Conservation Area (101,291 ha). These reserves protect some of the flattest landscapes in the world to linear sand dunes, river red gum forests, native grasslands, ephemeral wetlands and swamps. Just outside the region to the north is the World Heritage-listed Willandra Lakes National Park. To the south, is Murray Valley National Park, which hosts part of the NSW Central Murray Forests Ramsar site.

At November 2025, other protected areas on private land within the South West include biodiversity stewardship agreements (BSAs) (7 established and 17 in development, covering around 65,000 ha) and 31 permanent conservation agreements (covering around 91,000 ha), including some owned by Aboriginal organisations.

Toogimbie Indigenous Protected Area and Gayini Nimmie Caira Conservation Area are located between Hay and Balranald. Gayini Nimmie Caira is one of the largest privately held conservation areas and is where the Nari Nari Tribal Council apply cultural land management practices to protect local habitats.

There are also 4 Key Biodiversity Areas in the region: Riverine Plains, Southern NSW Mallee, Lowbidgee Floodplain and Murrumbidgee Red Gums. Within these Key Biodiversity Areas, some habitats are formally protected in national parks and in-perpetuity conservation agreements.

The region is poorly reserved, and achieving more comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) protected areas should be prioritised. The South West is located within the Murray–Darling Depression and Riverina Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IBRA) regions and 6 subregions (Lachlan, Murray Fans, Murray Scroll Belt, Murrumbidgee, Robinvale Plains and South Olary Plain). There are 9 landscapes within the region that are unreserved in an IBRA subregion and a further 26 landscapes that are less than 5% reserved (Figure 6).

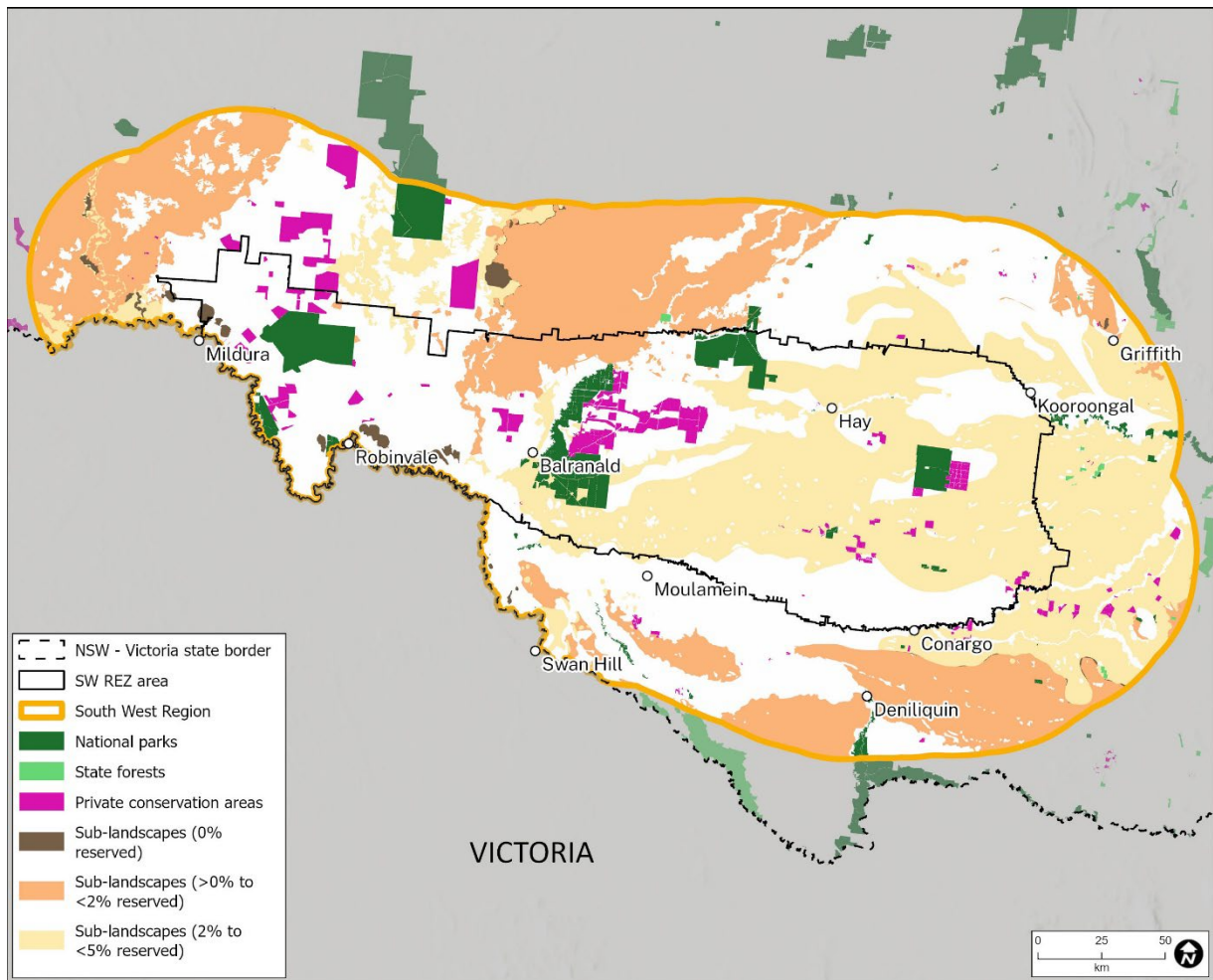


Figure 6 Landscapes that are under-reserved (0 to 5%) in the South West region

2.3 Conservation priorities

The relative conservation value of land in the region has been assessed with a combined analysis of data on the conservation values in the area (Figure 7). A significant proportion of the region has medium to high conservation value. This pattern reflects the dominance of grazing of native vegetation in the region, which is more likely to maintain some natural values than entirely transform ecosystems and habitats.

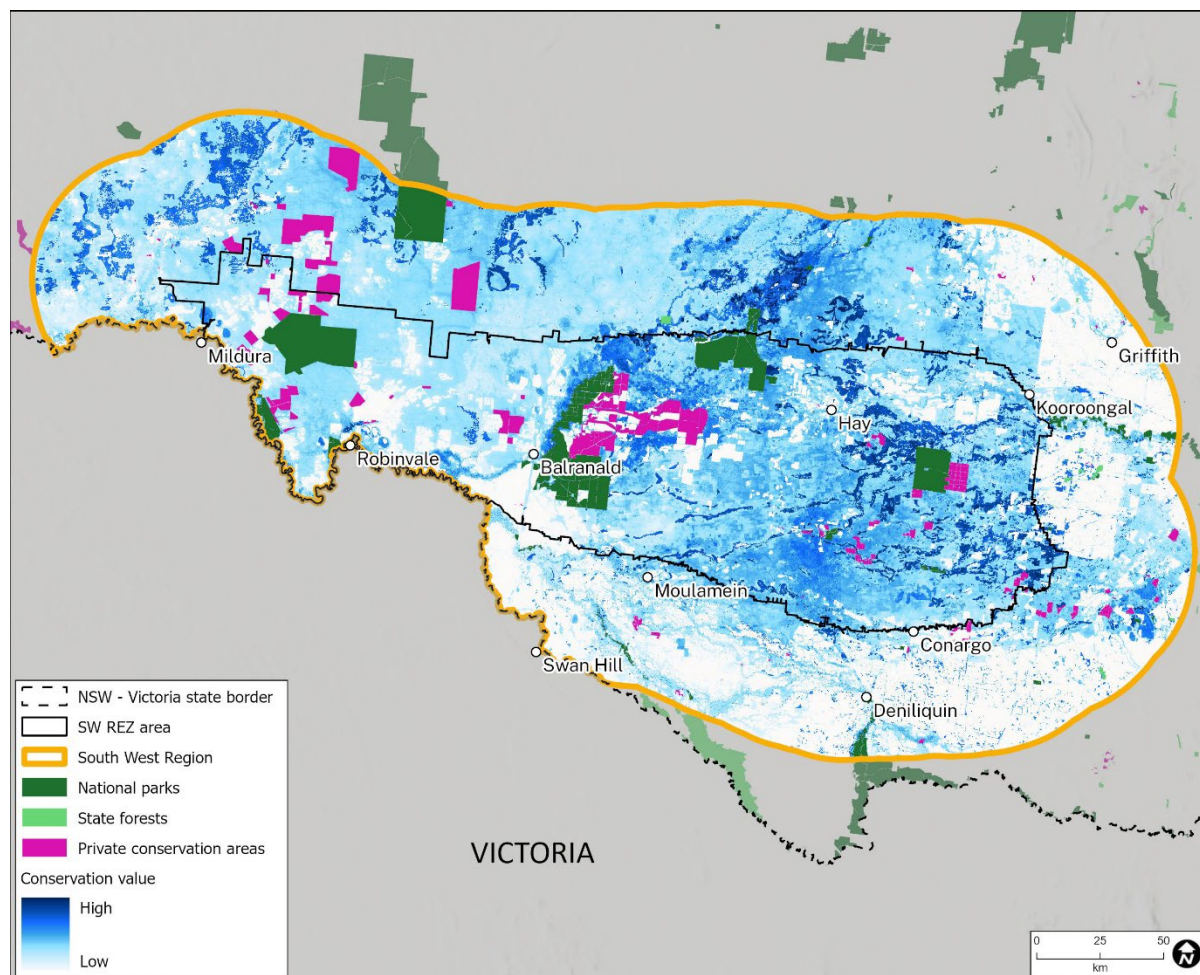


Figure 7 Conservation value of land within the South West region

To facilitate a focus on ecosystems, 4 broad landscapes have been identified, based on dominant vegetation formation and ecosystem characteristics (Figure 8). Indicative conservation priorities and actions have been identified for each of these landscapes. These may be refined as further data becomes available and development outcomes for the region become clearer.

Conservation actions that prioritise the support of natural regenerative processes over habitat restoration are generally preferred in semi-arid landscapes. Scale, cost and limited seed supply coupled with the low productivity of semi-arid landscapes mean actions that maintain and improve ecological integrity are more effective than revegetation or the re-creation of habitats. Habitat restoration, through active

revegetation and improved environmental water flows, will be a focus for the waterways and floodplains landscape.

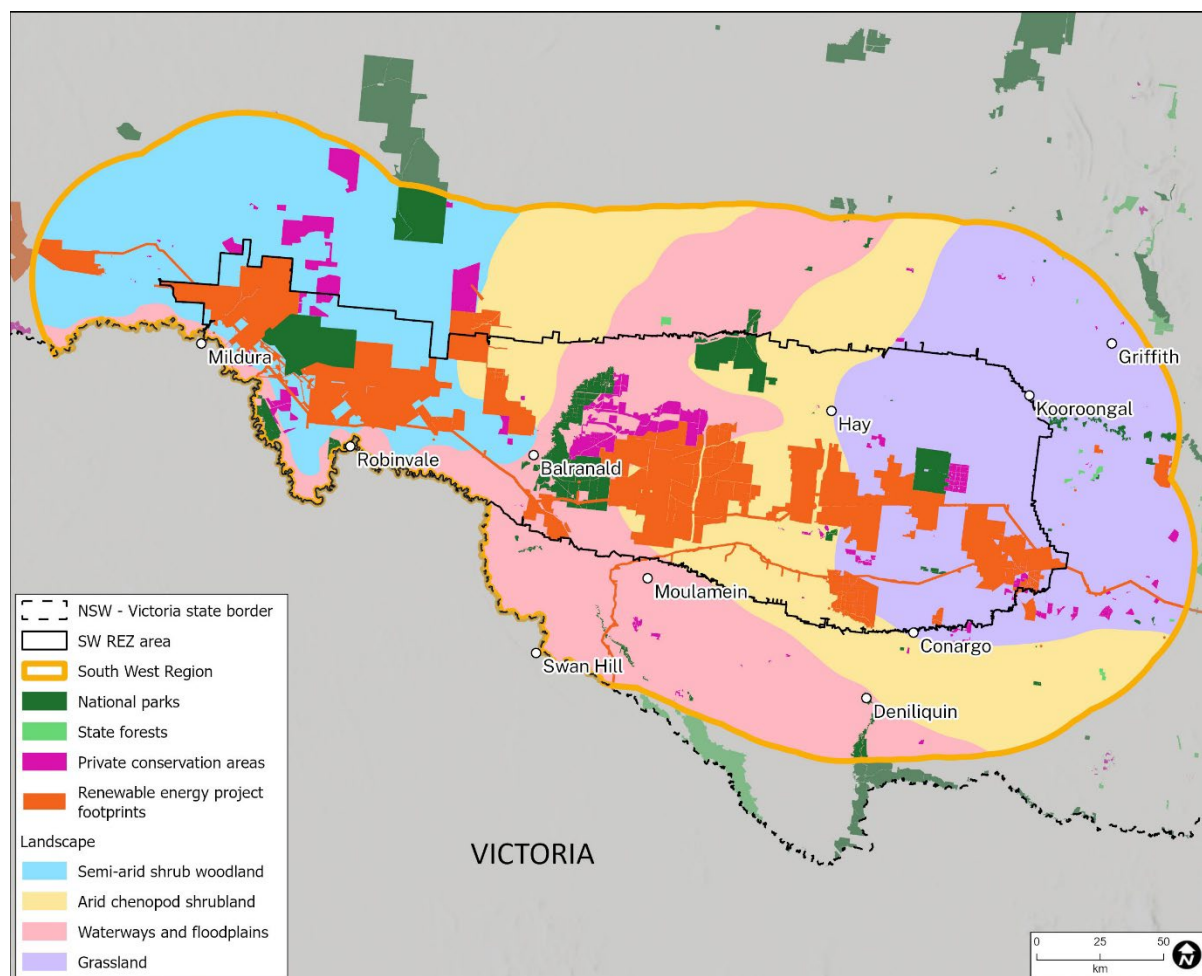


Figure 8 Landscapes in the South West region

Grassland

This landscape is found in the easternmost section of the region and covers extensive riverine plains on clay soils east, north and south of Hay. Trees may be naturally absent or sparse, with tussock grasses and a diverse range of herbs and forbs dominating the ground layer. Scattered chenopod shrubs and *Acacia* are occasionally present. Major threats to this landscape include fragmentation, climate change, inappropriate grazing regimes, invasive species and erosion (OEH 2025a). Examples of this landscape are found in Oolambeyan National Park and the travelling stock reserves in the area.

Within this landscape, smaller areas of other vegetation formations can also be found, including water-dependent ecosystems such as freshwater wetlands and semi-arid woodlands. Parts of this landscape are important habitat for the critically endangered plains-wanderer.

Priority actions include:

1. maintain and improve ecological integrity through appropriate land management
2. protect and manage plains-wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*) habitat
3. secure habitat for threatened species not conserved in the protected area network including bindweed (*Convolvulus tedmoorei*), turnip copperburr (*Sclerolaena napiformis*), claypan daisy (*Brachyscome muelleroides*) and several threatened orchid species such as Oaklands diuris (*Diuris callitrophila*) and sandhill pine orchid (*Caladenia arenaria*)
4. secure habitat for threatened species and ecological communities impacted by development including black falcon (*Falco subniger*), slender darling pea (*Swainsona murrayana*) chariot wheels (*Maireana cheelii*), superb parrot (*Polytelis swainsonii*), lanky buttons (*Leptorhynchus orientalis*), silky swainson-pea (*Swainsona sericea*), plains-wanderer, austral pillwort (*Pilularia novae-hollandiae*), turnip copperburr, Burrabogie rustyhood (*Pterostylis pedina*), sandhill pine woodland, weeping myall woodlands and natural grasslands of the Murray Valley
5. enhance connectivity with new protected areas between Eurolie Creek through Oolambeyan National Park and onwards in a north-westerly direction to the Murrumbidgee River
6. restore and expand the riparian corridor along the Murrumbidgee River between Darlington Point and Hay.

Arid chenopod shrubland

This landscape mostly occupies the middle section of the region between Hay and the floodplains and wetlands associated with the Murrumbidgee and Murray rivers. A small pocket also occurs north of Balranald and west of the Ivanhoe Road.

Limited, sporadic rainfall and low soil moisture mean chenopods and taller shrub species such as *Acacia* dominate. The amount and timing of rain events strongly influence whether grasses or herbs and forbs such as daisy and legume species occupy gaps between the chenopods. Inappropriate grazing regimes are a major threat to this landscape, reducing the ability of soil and vegetation to capture and retain water and nutrients (OEH 2025b). Examples of this landscape are found in Kalyarr National Park.

Within this landscape, smaller areas of other vegetation formations can also be found, including grasslands, grey box woodlands, arid *Acacia* woodlands and water-dependent ecosystems such as saline lakes and freshwater wetlands.

Priority actions include:

1. maintain and improve ecological integrity through appropriate land management
2. protect and manage plains-wanderer habitat
3. secure habitat for threatened species not conserved in the protected area network, including velvet thread-petal (*Stenopetalum velutinum*) previously thought to be extinct

4. secure habitat for threatened species and ecological communities impacted by development including the winged peppergrass (*Lepidium monoplacoides*), Mossgiel daisy (*Brachyscome papillosa*), burr-daisy (*Calotis moorei*), chariot wheels, spike-rush (*Eleocharis obicis*), black falcon, plains-wanderer and pink cockatoo (*Lophochroa leadbeateri*)
5. enhance connectivity with new protected areas from Billabong Creek to the Murrumbidgee River and onwards to Kalyarr National Park
6. protect and enhance semi-permanent wetlands and water-dependent ecosystems along Billabong Creek.

Waterways and floodplains

This landscape fringes the Murray River along the southern boundary of the region between Buronga and Wakool Junction. North of Moulamein, it fringes Billabong Creek through Wanganella and forms the south-eastern boundary of the region along Yanco Creek from Conargo. The largest expanse of the landscape is found along the floodplains of the Murrumbidgee River from its junction with the Murray, through to Balranald, Maude, Hay and Darlington Point.

In this landscape, plants and animals are influenced by the water regime, the timing, frequency, duration, extent, depth and variability of inundation. These affect physical factors such as light availability, nutrients and gases (oxygen and carbon dioxide) as well as biological processes such as microbial activity, seed dispersal, germination, herbivory and reproduction (OEH 2025c).

Water-dependent ecosystems are highly productive environments that support an abundance of micro-invertebrates, crustaceans, fish, water birds and frogs, including the southern bell frog. Threats include fragmentation, changing climate and water regimes and impacts associated with agricultural practices. Examples of this landscape are found in Yanga, Kalyarr and Kemendok national parks and Euston Regional Park.

Within this landscape, smaller areas of other vegetation formations can also be found, including semi-arid grassy woodlands, grasslands and arid chenopod shrublands.

Priority actions include:

1. protect and restore water-dependent ecosystems by reinstating natural water regimes and inter-wetland hydrological processes and managing adjacent terrestrial habitats
2. secure habitat for threatened species not conserved in the protected area network including swamp she-oak (*Casuarina obesa*), yellow gum (*Eucalyptus leucoxylon* subsp. *pruinose*) and spike-rush
3. protect and manage habitats of species impacted by development such as the Menindee nightshade (*Solanum karsense*), grey snake (*Hemiaspis damelii*), austral pillwort, southern bell frog (*Litoria raniformis*), Australasian bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) and square-tailed kite (*Lophoictinia isura*)
4. enhance and expand pink cockatoo and regent parrot habitat through restoration projects to enhance river to mallee corridors

5. enhance connectivity along the Murray River from Buronga through Kemendok National Park to Euston Regional Park and along the Murrumbidgee River to Balranald
6. close the gap between Yanga and Kalyarr national parks with new protected areas and better protect the important wetlands of Lachlan Valley National Park (e.g. Booligal wetlands).

Semi-arid shrub woodland

This landscape is found in the westernmost section of the region and covers extensive plains and ancient sand dunes west of Balranald. Rainfall is limiting in this landscape but there is enough to support sclerophyllous-tree-dominated vegetation and an understorey of drought-resistant shrubs and short-lived grasses and herbs. Spinifex, reptiles, parrots and cockatoos are diverse and conspicuous inhabitants of this landscape, as well as the reclusive ground-dwelling malleefowl (OEH 2025d).

Major threats to this landscape include climate change, inappropriate grazing regimes, invasive species and erosion (OEH 2025d). Examples of this landscape are found in Mallee Cliffs and Mungo national parks.

Within this landscape, smaller areas of other vegetation formations can also be found, including arid *Acacia* shrublands, semi-arid grassy woodlands and saline wetlands.

Priority actions include:

1. maintain and improve ecological integrity through appropriate land management
2. secure habitat for threatened species not conserved in the protected area network including harrow wattle (*Acacia acanthoclada*), bardick (*Echiopsis curta*) and claypan daisy
3. protect and manage habitats of species and ecological communities impacted by development such as the malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*), mallee reptiles, bitter quandong (*Santalum murrayanum*), yellow swainson-pea (*Swainsona pyrophila*), thyme rice-flower (*Pimelea serpyllifolia* subsp. *serpyllifolia*), pink cockatoo and mallee, *Acacia loderi* shrublands, *Acacia melvillei* shrublands and sandhill pine woodlands
4. restore and protect regional ecosystems that are currently poorly represented in reserves such as the mallee bird ecological community, mallee, sandhills, belah-rosewood woodlands and old growth spinifex
5. enhance connectivity with new protected areas from the Murray River between Gol Gol and Kemendok National Park to Mallee Cliffs National Park and beyond to Mungo National Park.

Priority investment areas

Informed by the combined data analysis and taking into account existing and proposed land uses in the region, target areas for investment to support the priorities outlined above are presented in Figure 9.

At the regional scale, improving ecological integrity will be critical to supporting ecosystem processes and providing a network of climate refuges by fostering functional corridors that avoid approved developments and build east-west, north-south and floodplain-mallee ecosystem linkages.

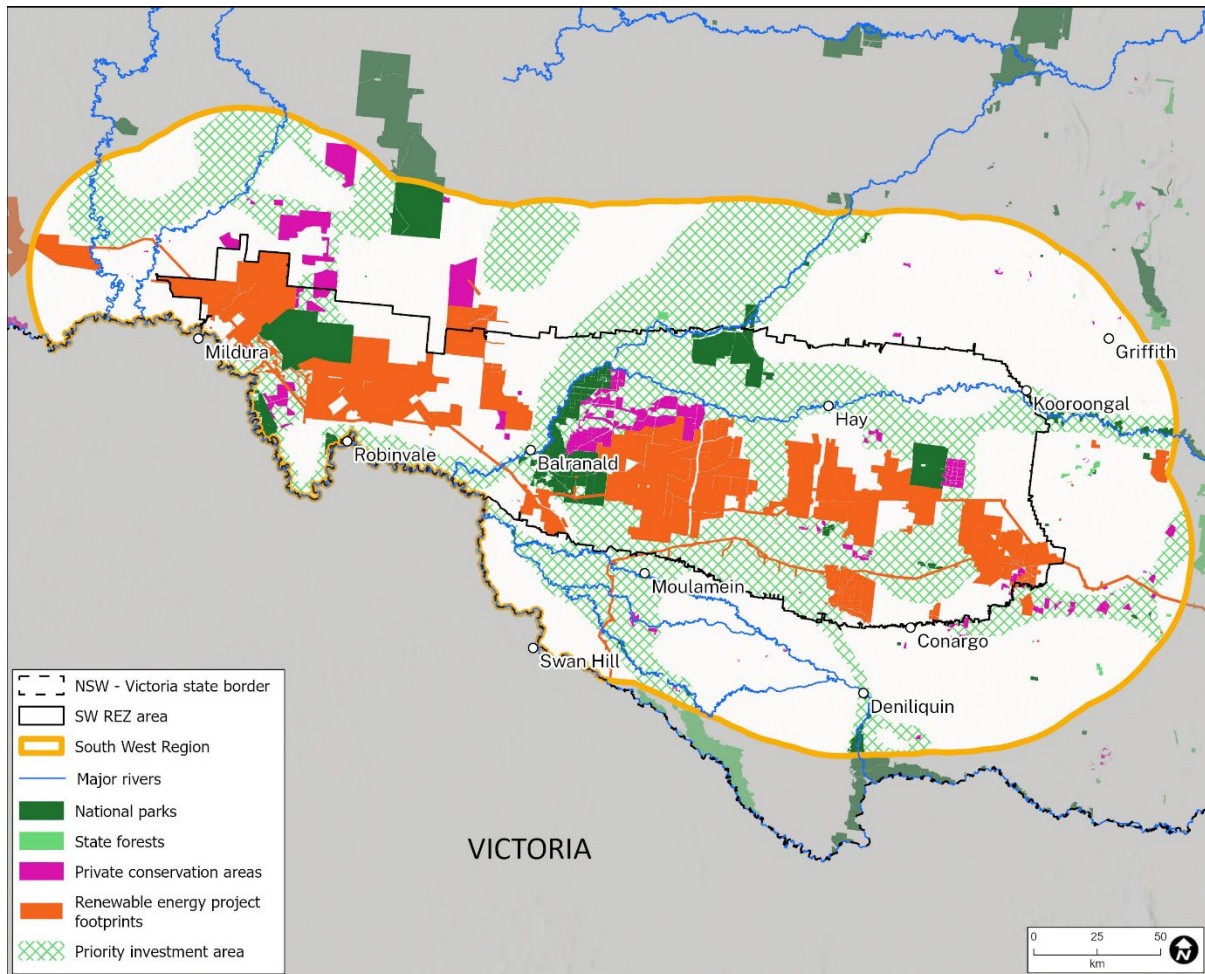


Figure 9 Priority investment areas

3. Implementation

The priorities identified in this strategy will help direct investment in biodiversity conservation, including by encouraging partnerships and collaboration across the public and private sectors.

Significant investment is expected in the region, including as part of biodiversity offsetting associated with development of renewable energy capacity in the South West Renewable Energy Zone. There are also a range of other government programs contributing to conservation. Better coordination of investment across different programs and funding sources will improve conservation outcomes.

By identifying conservation priorities (see section 2.3), the strategy provides a framework for more coordinated investment into conservation. Investment from biodiversity offsetting will be foundational to implementation of the strategy, led by strategic offset delivery agreements (SODAs), which are required to contribute to the outcomes. A clear plan for conservation in the region also has the potential to attract new funding sources and investment, increase efficiency in delivery and reduce duplication to make the most of limited resources.

3.1 Sources of investment in conservation outcomes

Biodiversity offsetting

Transmission, renewable energy generation and storage capacity and critical mineral projects in the South West will involve significant investments in conservation to offset biodiversity impacts. Consistent with the Biodiversity Offsets Scheme (BOS), biodiversity loss must first be avoided and minimised. If biodiversity loss cannot be avoided or minimised, biodiversity loss must be offset with equivalent biodiversity gain for the species and plant communities impacted.

This investment will be particularly useful for funding restoration to improve ecosystem integrity and improve landscape connectivity. It will also increase investment in ecosystems and threatened species, ensuring habitat is managed in ways that increase habitat suitability and address local threats. Biodiversity offsets in the South West could include those delivered by proponents, offsets delivered under SODAs and those delivered by the Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT), where offset obligations have been transferred through payment to the Biodiversity Conservation Fund.

Strategic offset delivery agreements (SODAs)

Renewable energy projects can enter into a SODA to transfer responsibility for offset delivery to the department. Offset selection would be guided by the conservation priorities of the South West Conservation Investment Strategy, while still meeting regulatory requirements, including:

- purchasing and retiring like-for-like biodiversity credits supplied by private, public or Aboriginal landholders with biodiversity stewardship agreements (BSAs)
- acquiring land to create like-for-like credits and retiring these credits
- funding actions that benefit the conservation and recovery of impacted threatened species and ecological communities.

Any BSAs under the Biodiversity Offsets Scheme would ideally be targeted towards conservation priorities identified for each landscape (Figure 9) on land that has capacity to create both ecosystems and species credits that will fund management and restoration. Offset investment outside of these priorities may also be considered if it achieves a like-for-like outcome.

For a limited number of species, some offsetting may be delivered using conservation actions where there are interventions in recovery that would be difficult to achieve through vegetation and habitat management under biodiversity stewardship agreements. Conservation actions would be developed with expert input to deliver enduring, on-ground outcomes for these species.

Under SODAs, offsetting will be prioritised in this order:

1. like-for-like credits created via BSAs in the
 - i. priority investment areas
 - ii. South West Renewable Energy Zone
 - iii. the South West region
2. conservation action (on ground) in the
 - i. priority investment areas
 - ii. South West region
3. like-for-like credits created via BSAs
 - i. outside of the South West region but in accordance with the like-for-like rules
4. conservation action (research) with direct application to on-ground management outcomes.

NPWS reserve acquisition program

Large, existing National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) reserves provide a foundational contribution to regional conservation outcomes, creating core protected areas to build on within the South West. Strategic expansion of the national park estate is guided by the *New South Wales National Parks Establishment Plan 2008* (DECC 2008) which is currently being revised. The NPWS reserve acquisition program could contribute to the conservation priorities where they are best achieved through transfer of public land to the national park estate or acquisition of other available land.

Within the South West, NPWS could prioritise properties for acquisition that can contribute to the conservation priorities (see Figure 7) as well as:

- secure important habitat features and locations
- fill gaps in the reserve system by securing good examples of regional ecosystems under-represented in reserves
- protect threatened species not currently conserved within reserves
- protect landscapes and places of special significance to Aboriginal people.

Private land conservation program

The Biodiversity Conservation Investment Strategy (BCIS) 2018 (OEH 2018) establishes the NSW Government's priorities for investing in private land conservation. As part of this strategy, *Investing in private land conservation: NSW Biodiversity Conservation Trust (BCT) Conservation Management Program 2023–2027* (BCT 2023b) sets out how the BCT is increasing private land conservation.

In the South West, the BCT runs fixed-price offers and conservation tenders targeting threatened species, ecological communities or important wetlands. Proposed future tenders include a fixed-price offer planned for 2025–26 and 2026–27, targeting mallee and box gum woodlands, threatened ecological communities and woodland birds. A Cultural Biodiversity Conservation offer available to Aboriginal landholders is also planned over 2025–26 and 2026–27. These programs are expected to contribute to the South West Conservation Investment Strategy by working with landholders who want to establish a conservation agreement with the BCT.

When evaluating offers in the South West, investment in private land conservation is typically targeted to land with moderate-to-good-condition vegetation, generally greater than 20 ha in size for threatened ecological communities and greater than 50 ha (central or eastern NSW) or 500 ha (western NSW) for native vegetation that supports threatened species habitats.

Addressing threats to biodiversity at the landscape level

Coordinating investment effort to address threats at the landscape scale, through Landscape Ecosystem Restoration Programs (LERPs), could be a signature achievement of the South West Conservation Investment Strategy. In addition to the key priorities identified in section 2, this could include coordination of riparian and waterway restoration efforts, improved fire management for better fire age class distribution and

pest and weed control activities across existing conservation programs, including Local Land Services (LLS) and other government land managers.

The Murray, Riverina and Western LLS regional pest animal and weed committees would be ideal forums for developing specific, coordinated strategies to manage priority threats and targeting on-ground action that will benefit threatened species and ecological communities. For example, landscape-scale fox control programs could minimise threats to multiple threatened species including plains-wanderers, mallee reptiles and the mallee bird endangered ecological community.

Threatened species conservation programs

The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water and other agencies manage various programs focused on protecting and enhancing the viability of populations of threatened species and ecological communities. For example, the Saving our Species (SoS) program works with landholders, the community, non-government organisations and government partners to deliver projects across New South Wales including in the South West. The program also delivers conservation actions relating to the offset obligations of the Biodiversity Conservation Fund and proponents.

Further investment in targeted recovery activities on-ground will be beneficial in the South West. The SoS program could prioritise and support targeted recovery projects that can contribute to the conservation priorities. As part of implementing this strategy, investment could be targeted towards threatened species that need additional support to help secure the viability of populations within the South West.

SoS projects are underway for 7 threatened species including regent parrots, malleefowl and plains-wanderer, across 8 sites in the South West. Another 14 threatened species projects are proposed. The BCT is also funding the SoS program to deliver conservation actions that meet the Biodiversity Conservation Fund's outstanding offset obligations for the following threatened entities: Myall Woodland and Sandhill Pine Woodland.

The Murray, Riverina and Western Local Land Services (LLS) also work to deliver various programs supporting native flora and fauna recovery and conservation programs at the landscape scale. Investment in the conservation of native vegetation and terrestrial ecosystems is guided by their *Natural Resource Management Plans 2023–28*. Programs for threatened species and ecological communities are delivered in partnership with landholders and conservation organisations. The Australian Government is a key funding partner through the Natural Heritage Trust. Partnerships with LLS could help expand and complement existing programs.

3.2 New partnership opportunities

Aboriginal landowners and communities

The South West Conservation Investment Strategy could provide opportunities for Aboriginal landowners, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and communities in the region. This could include participation in existing conservation programs as landowners, in implementing restoration and recovery actions, or as part of offsetting.

It could also include increased incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge into the management of country and strategy priority actions. Further consultation with the Aboriginal community within the South West will help to better identify ways in which the strategy could be adjusted to further outcomes sought by Aboriginal people.

Working with Aboriginal landholders and communities could include:

- targeted work with Aboriginal landowners to maximise opportunities for Aboriginal landholders in private land conservation, including biodiversity stewardship agreements
- partnering with training and education institutions to develop the land restoration and land management workforce, including scholarships for Aboriginal people and funding for Aboriginal ranger programs
- engaging Aboriginal businesses on land management and recovery.

Investing in the local restoration industry

Some areas and landscapes within the region have been extensively modified and would benefit from revegetation and supplementary planting to improve habitat value and connectivity. To meet the scale of this need, it will be necessary to invest in the restoration industry and skills. Organisations such as Landcare and Greening Australia will be important, as will working with local training providers, and businesses that have the potential to provide on-ground delivery. Murray LLS has long maintained a seedbank of native plant species and is exploring options to expand its geographic coverage.

Scaling up the restoration industry could include:

- industry development programs for restoration including the supply chain
- partnering with training and education institutions to develop the land restoration and land management workforce.

Targeting support for landholders

A number of government and non-government organisations regularly work with landholders to encourage activities that could contribute to the South West conservation priorities. For example, LLS works with individuals and landholder groups on feral animal and weed control, supported by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust program.

Overlapping LLS and Commonwealth priorities for the South West include Healing Country on the Lowbidgee Floodplain (Yanga Floodplain and Gayini Nimmie Caira), Special Places and Healthy Rivers programs aimed at the Kolety Edward-Wakool Floodplain and Southern Riverine Plain Grasslands and other projects protecting the plains-wanderer, southern bell frog, Australasian bittern, superb parrot, Australian painted snipe, and sandhill pine, grey box and weeping myall woodlands.

Landcare and Birdlife Australia are also active in the South West, connecting landholders to opportunities to fund land management and conservation activities. Partnerships with some of the NGO networks that communicate opportunities about conservation to landholders could also be considered, as well as those supported by the Australian Government.

Working with New South Wales agencies, local government and the Commonwealth

The NSW Government holds land for a variety of operational, strategic and historic purposes. Other government entities, including state-owned corporations and local councils, are also responsible for public land management. There may be opportunities to increase conservation outcomes on these lands by working with other agencies, including establishing biodiversity stewardship agreements. Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECM) may also contribute to national conservation targets, as outlined in the National OECM Framework. The interaction of OECMs with other strategy actions could also be explored.

Opportunities to seek support or partner with the Australian Government to support the South West Conservation Investment Strategy could provide the basis of a partnership between the 2 levels of government. This could be in relation to Commonwealth offsets under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and the nature repair market, as it becomes established.

There may also be opportunities to investigate partnerships in conservation projects with the new National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Trust.

4. Reporting and review

4.1 Outcomes and progress reporting

Strategy outcomes and implementation progress will be reported publicly on an annual basis. Reporting across contributing programs will demonstrate progress at a regional level and help to measure performance against the strategy's objectives. Reporting will include key performance measures to measure progress based on the conservation priorities identified in the South West Conservation Investment Strategy.

Annual reports on the strategy will support transparency by clearly reporting on the outcomes achieved with investment from biodiversity offsets, and the outcomes achieved with investment from other sources. The reports are additional to those required to be published each quarter for SODAs and could include:

- investment in South West conservation priorities from relevant programs and initiatives
- conservation outcomes from those investments
- progress updates on work to build partnerships for delivery.

The reports could also build on natural capital accounting to ensure there is a consistent and repeatable method that also scales up to the reporting at the statewide level, or in relation to other natural capital assets.

4.2 Review frequency

The South West Conservation Investment Strategy is proposed to be reviewed one year after publication to ensure effectiveness and that conservation priorities and implementation remain appropriate considering progress being made. Significant changes in policy or investment levels may also trigger review of the strategy.

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