

Evaluation response

National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) response to RMCG evaluation of the Land Acquisition (inclusive of Koala Habitat) 2018/19-2022/23 project

#	RMCG recommendations	NPWS response
2	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) should update and formally approve the strategic documents that shape assessment and decision-making for the Land Acquisition Project. These include the: - Draft NSW National Parks System Directions Statement (2017) - NPWS Interim Reserve Establishment Guidelines (2021).	Supported - underway NPWS currently implements the NSW National Parks Establishment Plan (2008) (NPEP). The updated version - the draft 2017 National Parks System Directions Statement was exhibited and revised following public submissions but was not formally adopted. Completing a revision of the NSW National Parks Establishment Plan is a NSW Government election commitment. The Revised National Parks Establishment Plan will set out priority actions for developing a representative system under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 (NPW Act). It will aim to direct investment into areas of highest conservation priority so that the national park estate best represents and protects the state's natural and cultural heritage. The Reserve Establishment Guidelines comprise internal processes and procedures that provide a consistent approach to land assessment, acquisition and reservation. Despite being referred to as 'interim' they are routinely updated to reflect changes in legislation, policy or process to support decision-making.
3	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should ensure the statewide	Supported

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	objectives are clearly reflected in the prioritisation process, including alignment with conservation goals, geographic spread, and assessment of Project performance as a whole.	NPWS land acquisition prioritisation process considers strategic statewide objectives for building the national parks system, within the context of project deliverables, government policy/direction, available budget and land availability within any financial year. Geographic spread of acquisitions is considered in a financial year context as well as across the whole project timeframe. Geographic spread is generally determined by where the most pressing gaps in the national parks system occur, values to be sampled (e.g. koala habitat, CAR), land availability and budget. A review of statewide objectives will be addressed in the revised NPEP, with public consultation providing transparency.
4	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should set a clear threshold for the proportion of funds directed towards acquisitions that make a significant contribution to CAR (e.g. 75%).	Not Supported CAR (comprehensive, adequate and representativeness) contribution is already a major statewide land acquisition prioritisation factor. A fixed budget threshold will reduce NPWS flexibility to respond to the protection of non-CAR values (e.g. targeted threatened species or entities, Aboriginal cultural heritage, public access opportunities); emerging conservation priorities, land availability and financial expenditure within annual budget cycles. NPWS will continue to strengthen CAR delivery through improved processes, including modelling for the new NPEP and explicit consideration of CAR outcomes during acquisition prioritisation.
5	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should continue prioritising underrepresented western bioregions and large landscape purchases that make a substantial contribution to the CAR reserve system.	Supported - underway NPWS will continue to prioritise underrepresented bioregions to fill the largest gaps in the reserve system, and to help contribute to Australia's commitment to protect and conserve 30 per cent of Australia's landmass and marine areas by 2030. This will be subject to considerations such as revised NPEP goals, funding availability, availability of suitable land and the interests

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		and wellbeing of local communities and regional economies.
6	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should build consistent rigorous assessment of social, cultural and economic values into the acquisition process and ensure these are documented alongside environmental metrics.	Being considered NPWS is revising the 2012 longitudinal analysis of local government areas (LGAs) to better understand the socio-economic relationship between growth of the national park estate and rural and regional communities. This information may help inform how LGAs may respond to land-use change and economic diversification.
7	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should improve the consistency and quality of assessment documentation for all acquisitions, ensuring social, cultural, economic, and environmental values are clearly recorded and accessible.	Supported NPWS has progressively refined its land assessment report template over the past five years to improve consistency in content and presentation. The assessment criteria and report template will continue to be refined and improved to ensure it is fit-for-purpose and will be revised again on adoption of the revised NPEP. Some variation will occur based on the type of land being assessed. Land that may establish a new reserve will have more detail than a parcel of land that adjoins or lies within an existing park. Social, cultural and economic values may be informed by the revised longitudinal study, when available (see recommendation 6).
8	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should document and publish lessons from the koala land acquisition prioritisation framework as a replicable model for other threatened species programs.	Supported This is expected to be delivered through the review of the NSW Koala Strategy.
9	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should ensure future prioritisation frameworks integrate climate change scenarios to anticipate shifting habitat resilience and future suitability.	Supported NPWS will integrate key climate datasets (e.g. NARCLiM, accumulated greenness indices) into property assessments, noting climate modelling is not always reliable at property scale. This will be a focus for western acquisitions and sites which may provide potential climate refugia.
10	The Trust should retain budget flexibility across years (within the overall Project timeframe) to allow	Supported -in principle

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	opportunistic acquisitions. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should balance this with clear forward planning to avoid early depletion of funds.	NPWS generally administers project expenditure within its annual budget allocation as accounted for in the NSW Budget. However, budget flexibility within the overall project timeframe is strongly supported as it has enabled NPWS to re-profile funds between years to secure time-critical opportunities where conservation gains outweighed reduced out-year funding.
11	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should formalise guidance for managing cross-financial year deposits and settlements, so that financial reporting pressures do not discourage unique but viable purchase arrangements.	Noted, subject to NSW Government budget constraints NPWS must operate within NSW Government annual budget controls (i.e. appropriation, net cost of services, capital expenditure authorisation limit), which limits cross-year flexibility. NPWS therefore aims to complete each property purchase within a single financial year.
12	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should limit mandatory multiple valuations to large or high-risk purchases. For lower value or low-risk acquisitions, accept a single independent valuation plus internal review.	Being considered Will be considered as part of the ongoing review of the reserve establishment guidelines.
13	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should develop a consistent value-for-money framework for acquisitions. Use existing quantitative and qualitative data to systematically assess the contribution of each acquisition relative to its cost.	Being considered NPWS has been trialling an approach to empirically consider the intrinsic values of land (CAR, threatened species, cultural values, recreational values, protection from threats, management benefits etc) against likely cost to assist with acquisition prioritisation. This approach will be used as a support tool only, as subtle nuances, identified government priorities and the concepts of site rarity and irreplaceability, may override scores. Differences in land condition as well as on-going management liability also need to be considered. The approach will be further developed after adoption of the new NPEP and ranking criteria will be tailored to the objectives of each funding stream (e.g. CAR, koalas).

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14	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should streamline approval pathways for routine and time-sensitive acquisitions by pre-agreed fast track routes, while preserving independent checks for high-value or politically sensitive purchases.	Supported -in principle NPWS is committed to streamlining approval pathways. However, the Minister responsible for the <i>National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974</i> holds the statutory power to acquire land. Streamlining can occur by exercising the power of delegation, subject to the discretion of the Minister or delegate. NPWS ensures due diligence and accountability over faster delivery.
15	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should institutionalise protections against political interference. Establish independent oversight or audit triggers for acquisitions where ministerial interest or external lobbying is apparent.	Noted, regulated by statutory power NPWS is accountable to the Minister. NPWS prepares impartial, documented and evidence-based recommendations to the Minister for decision-making. Notwithstanding this, the Minister may legally exercise discretion to decide on an outcome contrary to departmental advice.
16	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should make reserve category decisions accountable. Require that reserve category recommendations be justified against legislated conservation and cultural heritage objectives and published in decision records.	Supported -in principle NPWS already applies accountable processes for reserve category decisions. Category is typically determined post-acquisition, informed by potential future uses consistent with management principles described by section 30 of the NPW Act. The Government seeks to balance conservation outcomes with other land-use considerations. NPWS consults with relevant land use agencies to identify competing interests. Where necessary, the state conservation area reserve category may be applied to secure conservation outcomes while allowing for potential resource exploration and mining. Reserve category decisions are approved by the Minister and the Governor and documented by an approval briefing (not published). The reservation notice, stating the category, is published in the NSW Government Gazette.
17	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should adopt consistent, evidence-based messaging to the public that addresses misconceptions, highlights ecological and cultural values, and emphasises economic and tourism	Supported

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	benefits of new reserves. Ensure transparency about the acquisition pipeline (e.g., % of properties assessed vs acquired) while maintaining confidentiality where required.	
18	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should resource community engagement as a specific, funded activity alongside land acquisition. Prioritise proactive outreach, relationship-building, and targeted engagement campaigns to attract suitable properties for acquisition.	Noted Privacy and commercial-in-confidence nature of land acquisition generally precludes community engagement in private land acquisition proposals. The Revised National Parks Establishment Plan will set out priorities and will include community consultation.
19	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should create a structured, representative Native Title and Traditional Owner input pathway into prioritisation and acquisition. Formalise regional committees with elected representatives and clear confidentiality protocols so input can occur early without jeopardising negotiations.	Supported Through the revised NPEP, NPWS is consulting with key Aboriginal stakeholder groups (i.e. statutory boards of management, Aboriginal Custodians Network, Aboriginal representatives on Regional Advisory Committees etc) to identify broad cultural heritage priorities. NPWS will seek opportunities to refine these priorities, at a finer scale, with input from relevant members of the Aboriginal community. Where possible and appropriate, NPWS invites Traditional Owners to attend property inspections to help identify cultural values and inform their significance; noting consultation is legally required for land acquisitions proposed for Aboriginal-ownership and leased-back parks.
20	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should recognise and value cultural outcomes as core benefits of reservation.	Supported The conservation of cultural values is a fundamental object (section 2A(b)) of the <i>National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974</i> that is, and will continue to be, recognised in the NPEP. NPWS includes Aboriginal and European cultural heritage (physical and spiritual), and social value as part of its land assessment process and acquisition prioritisation criteria, reservation and land management programs.
21	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should require that every acquisition that forms a new reserve	Noted

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	is accompanied by an explicit establishment and first three-year management budget. Allocate that funding directly to the Area Manager at the time of purchase. A practical minimum is the equivalent of 10 percent of the purchase price or a defined per-hectare establishment figure to be endorsed by NPWS executive.	NPWS recognises that adequate resourcing for on-going land management is important. As part of the NPWS budget and service delivery planning cycle, funding is allocated to reserve management activities in response to government, organisational, program and geographical priorities.
22	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should secure dedicated funding streams for ongoing management of acquisitions, ensuring budgets scale with the growth of the reserve estate.	Noted NPWS is a government agency and funded through NSW Government and Treasury. Funding NPWS receives is based on NSW Government priorities across its portfolio. At appropriate points in the Budget cycle NPWS provides supporting material to Government to demonstrate the ongoing resourcing requirements for NPWS.
23	NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service should conduct retrospective review to evaluate the environmental, cultural, social and economic outcomes of land acquisition over the last 20 years.	To be considered NPWS recognises the value in this, subject to appropriate resourcing.