



# A Fresh Start for Private Protected Areas

Discussion Paper



*Cobbold Gorge Nature Refuge billabong.  
Photo © Tourism and Events Queensland.*



Prepared by: Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation

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**August 2025**



# MINISTER'S FOREWORD



**Queensland's protected area system currently covers just 8.59 per cent of the state, the lowest proportion of any state or territory in Australia.**

**The former Government committed to protecting 17 per cent of Queensland but, over nearly a decade, delivered only around one per cent growth. This slow rate of expansion has left Queensland well behind.**

The new Queensland Government is committed to supporting farmers and other landholders as environmental stewards of their land and boosting Queensland's protected area estate through strategic acquisitions and voluntary partnerships with landholders.

We are determined to partner more meaningfully with landholders to expand the protected area system and unlock new opportunities on productive and manageable private land. That is why the Premier has tasked me and my department to deliver an increase in Queensland's protected areas, within this term of government, at least equivalent to what the former Government delivered in three terms of government.

*A Fresh Start for Private Protected Areas – Discussion Paper* is about how we can expand the protected area system more effectively, particularly through private land partnerships. It is also the first step in establishing a refreshed Protected Area Strategy.

I look forward to working with you to grow Queensland's protected areas and to conserve Queensland's incredible landscapes and biodiversity.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Andrew Powell'. The signature is stylized and fluid.

**Andrew Powell**

Minister for the Environment and Tourism  
and Minister for Science and Innovation

# INTRODUCTION

## PRIVATE PROTECTED AREAS

### Voluntary. Productive. Manageable.

This Discussion Paper marks the beginning of *A Fresh Start for Private Protected Areas* in Queensland.

It is an opportunity to take the existing model to the next level by developing a better approach to private protected areas.

It highlights the Queensland Government's commitment to working in partnership with landholders and stakeholders to co-design a more practical and effective private protected areas model. It also builds on other commitments including *More Rangers, Better Neighbours*, delivering more rangers on the ground to support landholders and conserve our environment.

It sets out the current state of private protected areas in Queensland and asks for feedback on how protected areas can be expanded and barriers to growth removed, ensuring that farmers and other landholders can be rewarded for protecting land of high conservation value whilst also ensuring land of high agricultural production value can continue to support our economy and communities.

Through this process, we will work closely with farmers, landholders and other key stakeholders to shape a new approach to private protected areas. We are committed to expanding Queensland's protected area estate and delivering better environmental outcomes by working hand in hand with landholders.

 Boomerang Lagoon, Abingdon Downs North Nature Refuge



# KEY FOCUS AREA

## PROTECTED AREA LANDSCAPE

Queensland's terrestrial protected area system includes both public and private protected areas, safeguarding unique landscape and natural and cultural heritage for current and future generations.

Protected areas play an important role in conserving biodiversity, attracting tourism, facilitating recreational activities and providing ecosystem services to support our primary industries, as well as generating clean air and water. Protected areas also support our economy and our health and well-being. The terrestrial protected area system covers nearly 14.9 million hectares – 8.6% of Queensland, which is more than twice the size of Tasmania.

Public protected areas, such as national parks and conservation parks, are managed by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS). They provide opportunities for Queenslanders to get outdoors and enjoy nature, including hiking and camping, with some parks also open to mountain biking, horse riding and kayaking.

Private protected areas, including nature refuges and special wildlife reserves, are

established through voluntary binding agreements with eligible landholders under the *Nature Conservation Act 1992* (NC Act). These areas account for approximately 34% of the terrestrial protected area system and complement the State's public protected areas, often connecting tracts of national park and conservation park separated by freehold land, and provide essential habitat protection for critically endangered species.

Nature refuges can be established on a variety of land types and provide farmers and other landholders with an opportunity to protect the biodiversity values on their land, where that land contains essential habitat or threatened and under-represented ecosystems. They also allow compatible and sustainable land uses to continue.

The suitability of the land for a nature refuge is determined based on its conservation values and the commitment of the landholder to manage the land for conservation purposes. Nature refuges are compatible with, and often complement, other income streams for landholders such as carbon farming, sustainable beef production and ecotourism.

### SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON:

1. What factors have held Queensland back from expanding its private protected area system?
2. What role can all levels of government play in supporting its growth?
3. How could other land uses, such as stock routes, be better integrated?

# KEY FOCUS AREA

## EXISTING PROGRAMS

The Queensland Government currently offers programs to support landholders in delivering environmental outcomes.

### **PRIVATE PROTECTED AREAS PROGRAM (PPAP)**

The Queensland Government supports eligible landholders with nature refuges by offering technical advice, help with management planning and financial grants for conservation activities.

NatureAssist offers funding to incentivise the establishment of new private protected areas and support landholders to manage and maintain their ecological values. The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (Cwlth) currently co-invests in this program.

Nature Refuge Landholder Grants provide financial assistance for ongoing management activities within nature refuges and special wildlife reserves. Establishing a nature refuge can also open doors to new opportunities in conservation markets.

Investment in, and growth of, private protected areas over the past decade has been inconsistent, with periods of high growth as well as periods of contraction. This government aims to promote consistent, sustained growth in private protected areas, and to better support landholders who choose to manage their land as a formal protected area.



 Artemis Antbed Parrot Nature Refuge



## OTHER EFFECTIVE CONSERVATION MEASURES (OECMS)

One new way to protect more of Queensland's environment is by recognising Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs), also known as Conserved Areas. OECMs are areas outside protected areas that provide effective and long-term in-situ biodiversity conservation. While not currently part of the state's protected area target, OECMs contribute towards the national target to protect and conserve 30% of Australia's landmass and 30% of Australia's marine areas by 2030 (the '30 by 30' target), which aligns with Target 3 under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Conserved areas allow for the formal recognition of areas that achieve long-term biodiversity conservation outcomes, even if biodiversity is not their primary land use objective. Land must meet the criteria set out in the National OECM Framework to be eligible for recognition.

Examples include, privately owned land, travelling stock routes, local government reserve and water catchment areas.

Queensland is currently piloting an OECM recognition program and officially recognised Australia's first OECM.

Some of the benefits of recognising an OECM include:

- Formal acknowledgement of a landholder's contribution to protecting important biodiversity values
- The ability to credibly market a landholder's environmental credentials
- Conservation of biodiversity that provides flow-on benefits for the primary purpose of the land
- National and international recognition of the area, and its contribution towards global biodiversity targets.

### SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON:

1. What are the key barriers preventing private landholders from entering into or expanding private protected area agreements?
2. Have you considered establishing a nature refuge or special wildlife reserve on your property? If not, what has influenced that decision?
3. How could current programs be improved to better support private landholders in protecting high-conservation-value land?
4. What incentives or support would make it more viable for you or others to commit land to long-term conservation?
5. How could the recognition of OECMs help support landholders who are already delivering conservation outcomes but are not part of a formal protected area agreement?

# KEY FOCUS AREA

## EXISTING SUPPORT

We are also interested in feedback on how best to improve access to science, data and information that supports farmers and other landholders in making informed decisions on land management.

There are already several tools in place aimed at reducing the cost and complexity of participation in environmental stewardship initiatives, including:

- The CARE Program: Customised support delivered under the Private Protected Area Program to existing nature refuge landholders, such as site visits, assistance to prepare property management plans and capture of drone imagery showing changes to property.
- Market support tools developed by private sector, university and other organisations to measure environmental outcomes from targeted land management.



 Crystalvale Nature Refuge

### SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON:

1. Do you feel you have the tools and information you need to support decisions to improve environmental outcomes for your land?
2. How can existing landholder tools and advisory networks be better coordinated and promoted?
3. Are the current tools available fit for purpose? If not, what data or information is needed that is not currently available?



# FEEDBACK

This Discussion Paper marks the beginning of *A Fresh Start for Private Protected Areas* in Queensland. It is an opportunity to take this to the next level by developing a more integrated, collaborative and outcomes-driven approach to conservation on private land.

This work will be progressed through co-design with industry and key stakeholders, ensuring Queensland Government policy is shaped by those with on-the-ground experience and a shared interest in Queensland's future.

A six-week public consultation process will now commence to gather feedback on the ideas and opportunities raised in this paper. This will include an online feedback form, submissions page and series of roundtables.

All feedback will be carefully considered as we work toward the future of private protected areas in Queensland.

 Edgbaston Special Wildlife Reserve. Photo © Rowan Hinchley.



