

## **Engaging First Nations people in Australia's Agricultural and Land Sector Plan**

The specific inclusion of First Nations people and First Nations managed lands in the Discussion Paper is a welcome acknowledgment of the critical role that First Nations people play in land management.

First Nations people are responsible for managing over 50% of Australia's National Reserve, through the Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) program, and are stewards for a significant proportion of Australia's remaining landscapes and biodiversity, playing an essential role in Australia's ability to meet international conservation and biodiversity protection targets.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Noting the crucial role of First Nations people as landowners, managers, and stewards, as recognised throughout the Discussion Paper, targeted, and supported engagement, including through dedicated face-to-face workshops in appropriate locations with First Nations groups will be essential to ensure First Nations' voices are appropriately reflected in the Agricultural and Land Sector Plan.
2. To support the efficiency and effectiveness of this consultation, DAFF should identify crossovers with related programs and consultations, for example ACCU Review and developing Nature Repair markets among others, and work with other agencies to deliver coordinated collaborative workshops.

## **Reducing emissions and building carbon stores in agriculture and the land: opportunities and barriers**

First Nations people, as landholders or managers, are responsible for either managing or making decisions across 55% of Australia's landmass. As recognised in the Discussion Paper, their knowledge and stewardship will be crucial to Australia's successful navigation of the current climate crisis. However, they are frequently excluded from opportunities to participate in Australia's environmental markets, due to a combination of factors including method eligibility, start-up costs, and the complexity of scheme arrangements which favours project ownership models that shifts benefits away from landowners.

For example, approximately 75% of lands where First Nations people would have the right to undertake a project under the ACCU Scheme are not covered by a suitable method. Conversely, the areas of high ACCU scheme opportunity have relatively limited recognised First Nations rights and interests (Savanna >600mm is the exception to this).

While the carbon potential of a particular landscape will always be dictated by environmental factors, there is nonetheless a number of immediate opportunities to expand the application of the ACCU scheme into larger areas of the First Nations estate, including:

- Expanding the Savanna Fire Management Methods (SFM) to include additional carbon pools, vegetation types and lowering the rainfall boundary. This would increase the total area of First Nations owned or managed land covered by the Method by more than 50%.
- Ensuring the Integrated Land Management Method (IFLM) accounts for all increases in sequestration (as a result of human intervention) along the entire spectrum of vegetation cover and ensuring the activity of fire management is listed as an eligible activity.

A second example of this is the proposed approach to sequestration baselines for transitioning projects under the 2024 SFM Method (as set out in Australia Government communications dated

26 October 2023). If implemented, the proposed approach would exclude existing First Nations savanna fire projects from the benefit of the new method, disproportionately impacting the Indigenous carbon industry.

A final example is in relation to feral animal management. As recognised in this Discussion Paper, emissions from ungulates are a significant contributor to Australia's NGA, but emissions from feral animals, which exist in significant numbers across First Nations lands, are not included in Australia's NGA. Feral animals, including camels, buffalo and pigs not only produce significant methane emissions, but also contribute to indirect emissions through pugging of soils, as well as reduction in vegetation, causing losses of sequestration.

The proposed *Avoiding disturbance of soils and vegetation and rehabilitating soils and vegetation of coastal wetlands influenced by non-native ungulates method* (in development), is a welcome addition to address this issue, but early data suggests that returns from carbon projects, particularly given that the avoided emissions from the removal of feral livestock is not included, is unlikely to support the scale of activity required to implement the method on First Nations lands.

In addition to land area eligibility, another major barrier to First Nations participation in the ACCU scheme is access to start-up funding, with few First Nations landowners positioned to implement carbon projects without government or philanthropic support.

Finally, over the last 10 years, the Australian Carbon Industry has developed in a way that benefits third-party carbon service providers, over landowners, with only 'trickle-down' benefits flowing through to the people on the ground. Shifting this model, so that landowners are able to directly engage with and benefit from the market will help to unlock further opportunities.

### **Recommendations:**

3. There is currently a significant inequity in the (limited) way that ACCU Scheme methods apply to First Nations lands. To reduce emissions from and build carbon stores on First Nations managed lands, there must be ACCU Methods that are applicable to these areas. To address the current inequity, an explicit consideration in the development of all emerging (SFM and IFLM) and new methods should be whether and how the proposed approach will increase the geographic inclusion of First Nations lands under the ACCU Scheme and the participation of First Nations people more broadly.
4. To support First Nations uptake of ACCU Scheme opportunities, dedicated start-up funding should be made available, including through partnerships between the Australian Government and relevant State/Territory Governments.

### **Expanding existing initiatives or programs to build climate resilience.**

There are a number of initiatives underway on First Nations lands which directly and indirectly address and build resilience to climate change. This includes the successful Indigenous Protected Areas program, Indigenous Ranger Programs, as well as Healthy Country Planning, among others. Demand for these programs continues to outstrip available funding, with ongoing opportunity for growth and expansion, particularly through guaranteed long-term funding. These programs deliver on Australian Government commitments under multiple portfolios, highlighting not only the need to continue to support them, but also the opportunity to build and expand on their success through cross-agency support and collaboration.

The ACCU Scheme, as taken up through the SFM method, is another example of a program that could be expanded nationally across First Nations lands. As already noted, the majority of lands where First Nations people would hold the right to undertake an ACCU Scheme project are not currently covered by an applicable method. Concerningly, engagement with DCCEE on the

developing IFLM and SFM methods reveals that addressing this inequity and ensuring these methods will support expanded First Nations participation is not a priority. To expand upon the success of the existing Savanna carbon industry, emerging and new methods under the ACCU Scheme need to explicitly seek to overcome this inequitable coverage.

The Nature Repair Market provides a further opportunity to expand opportunities and build climate resilience in the land sector. Nature Repair projects will deliver direct environmental benefits, such as improved biodiversity, but will also have flow-through benefits for climate adaptation, including increasing building both landscape and community resilience. In order to realise these benefits, it is essential that the Nature Repair market is accessible to First Nations people and applicable to First Nations country.

### **Recommendations**

5. The IFLM and SFM methods are developed to ensure maximum geographic coverage of First Nations lands, as outlined at Recommendation 3.
6. The IPA and Indigenous Ranger Programs are strengthened through ongoing commitments to long-term funding, including through cross-agency support.
7. The Nature Repair Market identifies and explicitly prioritises application to First Nations lands, working with First Nations organisations to collaboratively design and develop the program.

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**List of questions:**

1. *What are the opportunities to reduce emissions and build carbon stores in agriculture and the land? What are the main barriers to action?*
2. *How can we progress emission reduction efforts whilst also building resilience and adapting to climate change?*
3. *Are there initiatives or innovative programs underway that could be applied or expanded on at a national scale?*
4. *How can the Australian Government bring together existing effort and new initiatives into one coordinated plan?*
5. *What are the most important options to be further adopted or supported, looking in the short and the longer-term?*
6. *What are the practical solutions to increase uptake?*
7. *How do you see the agriculture and land sectors contributing over the medium and longer-term? What are the opportunities to deliver emission reductions in parallel with wider goals?*
8. *How can the Australian Government better support agriculture and land sectors to:*
  - a. *drive innovation,*
  - b. *build capacity*
  - c. *ensure the system enables emissions reductions?*
9. *What new initiatives could the Australian Government design that would support emissions reduction and carbon storage in agriculture and land and help ensure a productive, profitable, resilient and sustainable future for the sectors?*
10. *A consistent and trusted approach for assessing and reporting emissions is often raised as a barrier to reducing emissions. Is there a role for the Australian Government in addressing this concern, and how can producers and land managers be supported?*
11. *What skills, knowledge and capabilities do you think producers and land managers need to implement change? What information and data would help them make decisions about emissions reductions and sustainable land management in the short and longer-term?*