



Soil and Land Conservation Council

Our reference: SLCC letter – AG Ag Land
sectoral plan submission
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cc: Commissioner of Soil and Land Conservation

Soil and Land Conservation Council's submission on the Australian Government's draft Agricultural and Land Sectoral Plan

The Soil and Land Conservation Council Western Australia (SLCC) has considered the DAFF 2023, *Agriculture, land and emissions: discussion paper*, and provides its submission below.

Background

The SLCC advises the Minister for Agriculture and Food and the Commissioner of Soil and Land Conservation (the Commissioner) on policy, management and conservation of Western Australia's soil and land resources.

The Commissioner's key function is preventing and mitigating land degradation, including erosion, salinity, flooding, eutrophication and loss of vegetation. This function includes responding to situations where management threatens or causes land degradation, as well as compliance with the *Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945* (SLC Act) and Regulations.

Submission

The SLCC supports the Australian Governments' commitments the Paris Agreement and the emission reductions goals including reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Western Australian Government is also due to release the first state *Agricultural and Land Sectoral Plan* at the end of 2023. It is important that both SERS plans reduce barriers to emissions reduction and support the industry and community to meet the goal of net zero emissions by 2050. We note that agricultural and pastoral sector industries, notably Meat & Livestock Australia and the National Farmers Federation have also set targets for carbon neutrality.

Our soils are vulnerable to degradation associated with climate change; we must not lose sight of the need for complementary efforts to assist producers to adapt to future climates.

Ensuring the system enables emission reductions

SLCC notes that for the agricultural and pastoral sector carbon storage in the land (LULUCF) has emerged as having a significant potential role in bio-sequestration with practices including human-induced (vegetation) regeneration, savanna fire management, soil carbon sequestration and avoided deforestation.

SLCC recognises importance of promoting the co-benefits of protecting soils, biodiversity habitats, enhancing productivity, and safeguarding cultural sites and activities. *Western Australia's Soil Health Strategy* ([link](#)) notes the co-benefits of carbon storage in the land extends beyond emissions reduction, encompassing benefits for proponents, the community, and the environment. To achieve these outcomes there are 3 important considerations:

- **Appropriate policy drivers**

SLCC considers that there is a place for both carbon and biodiversity plantings with a preference for carbon fixation within productive farming and pastoral systems or high quality biodiverse plantings. Where carbon plantations are not linked to agricultural productivity, the policy should support appropriate high-quality ecological restoration, guided by science-based restoration standards. This enables a shift from carbon and environmental plantings to comprehensive ecological restoration. Reporting on restoration and carbon plantings quality and condition need to be in the form of appropriate nature and climate related financial disclosure reporting.

Recognition of First Nations' cultural roles in land management ensures economic and social opportunities will also drive on-ground change. Enhancing training programs for ecological restoration practitioners is crucial for positioning Australia as a leader in upskilling and capacity building.

- **Appropriate identification of priority areas for carbon plantings and restoration at a regional scale.**

Our soils support a significant amount of food production, and it is important that changes in land use are fit-for-purpose and do not undermine our future prosperity. SLCC emphasizes minimising impact on high-quality agricultural land, especially given climate change and declining water availability. The benefits of a landscape, catchment or regional planning approach should encompass pre-emptive actions addressing the protection of productive agricultural and pastoral lands.

For carbon farming and human-induced (vegetation) regeneration, there needs to be coordinated community and government decision making on where to invest. Ideally, investments will have a dual purpose and activities will link carbon neutrality to reversal of land and soil degradation. SLCC would like to see alignment with State priorities for revegetation/carbon farming, ensuring clarity on priority carbon farming locations, community involvement in plan development, appropriate ownership of outcomes, and directing investments for optimal environmental outcomes such as soil and land conservation and restoration.

Identification of priority lands for restoration and carbon plantings needs to be based on the best available scientific, economic, social, and cultural knowledge, determined at an appropriate scale, developed collaboratively with the community and stakeholders. integrated with other national, jurisdictional, and regional plans, adaptable to changing circumstances, adequately resourced and funded for conservation measures, and capable of quantifying and demonstrating progress through regular monitoring, evaluation, and reporting to guide improved practices.

The influence of carbon farming on farmland values is becoming evident in WA, with the promise of an additional income stream likely to attract potential buyers. Other sectors are seeking land to offset emissions. There is concern that this is driving up the price of agricultural lands, and the purchase of land for offsets is often opportunistic and not in the optimal locations in a landscape. Carbon farming can have unintended consequences for rural communities if the need for agricultural labour is reduced.

- **Competition in decarbonisation sector strategies**

Habitat investment and regeneration (HIR) involves native vegetation regeneration due to changes in pastoral practices. It does not require new plantings or de-stocking but poses challenges for Crown land and competing uses. The expansion of renewable energy, such as large-scale solar arrays, wind farms, and hydrogen projects, has implications for farming and pastoral lands. The Western Australian government requires consent from eligible interest holders for projects on Crown land. The consent mechanism is important for primary industry and other land managers to have a say in the ongoing and future use of these valuable pastoral landscapes.

Enabling change

- **Support for land managers**

The SLCC considers that attribution of co-benefits to carbon storage in the land is not mature, weakening incentives for land holders and wider market participants to invest. Carbon farming, initially aimed at reducing emissions, has seen adoption driven by the search for increased productivity and profitability. At the property scale, SLCC notes that farmers are more likely consider appropriate carbon farming and biodiversity plantings when they understand positive relationships between soil organic carbon, farm productivity and landscape health, with the potential to earn carbon credits seen as a co-benefit.

Council notes that there is a strong demand for support/information/decision making tools for farm level assistance to determine whether factors such as perceived complexity, risks, the cost of soil sampling and analysis, uncertainty about trusted information, and challenges in communication can be overcome. Ideally, activities such as carbon farming can offer additional income stream for farms that is not contingent on seasonal conditions or commodity prices and help can provide income stability. Assistance is needed to evaluate potential negative trade-offs, including restrictions on land use, potential reductions in agricultural productivity, and income risks due to bushfires and extreme weather events.

- **Data for decision making, monitoring and reporting**

The government plays a crucial leadership role in providing land condition monitoring data. There needs to be appropriate data collection and ensure its accessibility for landscape-scale decision-making and property-level use. Data access is fundamental for establishing baseline information, guiding investments, and allocating resources effectively. Monitoring and assessing changes in land condition, particularly at a landscape scale, should be efficiently led by government, leveraging existing national and state land condition monitoring programs such as those in the rangelands. Collaboration across government agencies and between government and the private sector, is essential to consolidate resources, focusing on priority areas for offset initiatives.

Driving innovation

Innovations and rapid advances in farming systems and practices can come from many sources and can contribute to emissions reductions. They are often novel to Western Australian agriculture and the applications can range in viability and scalability. Equally, our weathered soils provide some unique challenges in carbon storage. Research and development require assessment of new practices which should be scientific, economically rigorous and applicability to local conditions. This requires engagement of producer and industry grower groups, regional NRM organisations and government, together with farmers and pastoralists who will have a role in shared learning, field trials, case studies and practice demonstration.

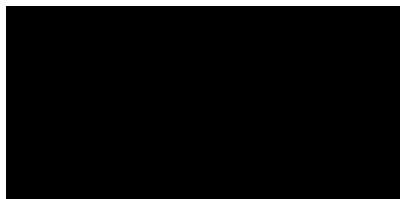
Innovation in the adaptation of production systems to future climates needs to progress alongside innovation in emissions reductions. They must be considered together to optimise outcomes for our soils and rural communities.

While methane from livestock is a significant source of agricultural and pastoral emissions, it is important to consider other values that are generated from the livestock sector. This includes use of rangelands for high-quality protein production, managing risk associated with future climates, motivation to revegetate salinised and degraded soils for livestock, and other practices such as regenerative farming that rely on livestock to improve soil health.

In conclusion, the SLCC can see significant value in improved planning and policies that enable land managers to improve soil health and condition while reducing emissions. We encourage consideration of a wide range of benefits to soils, landscapes and rural communities beyond carbon neutrality. Where appropriate, long-term carbon plantations should seek to improve soil health and landscape function and consideration of ecosystem restoration. Policies that impact land use need to carefully consider high-quality science, impacts on rural communities and future food production.

The Council appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the Australian Government's *Agriculture, land and emissions: discussion paper*.

Yours sincerely



Dr Hayley Norman
Chair

Reference: DAFF 2023, *Agriculture, land and emissions: discussion paper*, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Canberra, October.