

Better planning for the environment in the Lower Hunter: have your say



Planning & Infrastructure

Frequently Asked Questions

June 2013

WHAT IS THE LOWER HUNTER STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT?

On 14 August 2012, the Commonwealth and NSW Governments signed an agreement to undertake regional sustainability planning and a collaborative strategic assessment of the Lower Hunter, in line with the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act).

A strategic assessment looks at the impact of a broader set of actions across a region, as opposed to individual assessments conducted on a project-by-project basis.

The Lower Hunter Strategic Assessment will investigate ways to protect, enhance and manage the nationally significant environmental features across the Lower Hunter region, while also enabling urban development.

This information will be used to develop a program to avoid, mitigate or offset the cumulative impacts of urban development on nationally significant environmental features identified in the Lower Hunter. This is referred to as a "Program for the protection of Matters of National Environmental Significance in the Lower Hunter Region".

Once finalised, the program and a report on the findings of the Strategic Assessment will be submitted to the Commonwealth Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities for endorsement.

The result will be a joint agreement between the Commonwealth and NSW Governments about how to conserve significant environmental features in the Lower Hunter, as urban development takes place.

WHAT AREAS ARE INCLUDED IN THE ASSESSMENT?

The Strategic Assessment covers the Lower Hunter region, defined as the Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens, Maitland and Cessnock local government areas.

This area is a high growth region which contains significant environmental features and areas of high biodiversity value. The Strategic Assessment will identify features of National Environmental Significance within the Lower Hunter region and which areas should be conserved and protected.

WHAT ARE MATTERS OF NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL SIGNIFICANCE?

The Commonwealth EPBC Act identifies and protects a range of matters of national environmental significance, including:

- world heritage properties
- national heritage places
- wetlands of international importance (listed under the Ramsar Convention)
- listed threatened species and ecological communities, and
- migratory species protected under international agreements.

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WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?

The Lower Hunter Strategic Assessment process will identify actions that provide upfront protection for nationally significant environmental features, and make those actions legally enforceable.

The strategic assessment will allow a more streamlined development application assessment process by reducing the environmental assessments required and minimising duplicate assessments.

The strategic assessment will result in better environmental outcomes by addressing the cumulative impacts of development on the environment. It will achieve better conservation and planning outcomes on a larger scale than can be achieved through project-by-project assessments.

WHAT IS “OFFSETTING”?

“Biodiversity offsetting” may be one of the activities proposed to mitigate and protect environmentally significant areas in the Lower Hunter region from development.

Offsetting considers the impact of development on the environment and typically means the purchase and protection of large parcels of high value environmental land to compensate for the loss of environmental land elsewhere.

Traditionally, offsetting has been done on a project-by-project basis. A strategic assessment allows offsetting to be considered on a larger scale.

HOW DOES THE STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT RELATE TO THE LOWER HUNTER DISCUSSION PAPER AND THE REVISED LOWER HUNTER CONSERVATION PLAN?

The discussion paper is the start of a process to review the current regional strategy and prepare the Lower Hunter Regional Growth Plan. The outcomes of the strategic assessment will help inform the growth plan.

The revised Lower Hunter Regional Conservation Plan will outline future conservation outcomes, and will also be informed by the strategic assessment.

HOW CAN I COMMENT ON THE DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE?

The public has an opportunity to have a say on the draft Terms of Reference for the Strategic Assessment, which sets out what will actually be assessed and what supporting information is required.

The draft terms of reference will be on exhibition to the public until **Time/Date**. They may be viewed on the department’s website: www.planning.nsw.gov.au/proposals

Comments can be made during the 30 day exhibition period:

- online at www.planning.nsw.gov.au/proposals
- by email to lowerhunter@planning.nsw.gov.au

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- by mail to Department of Planning and Infrastructure - Newcastle office, PO Box 1226
NEWCASTLE NSW 2300
- All submissions received will be made public, in line with the department's objective to promote an open and transparent planning system. If you do not want your name, contact details or other personal information to be published, please do not include those details in your submission or on attachments. Before making a submission, please read our privacy statement at www.planning.nsw.gov.au/privacy
- Further information is available by calling 1300 305 695 or at www.planning.nsw.gov.au/proposals