

June 2025

Senator the Hon. Murray Watt
Minister for the Environment and Water
Via email: senator.watt@aph.gov.au



Environment Institute
of Australia and
New Zealand Inc.

Re: Advancing regional planning and strategic environmental assessment to deliver nature positive outcomes

Dear Minister Watt,

Following our [earlier letter](#) congratulating you on your appointment as Minister for the Environment and Water – and highlighting the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ) as a key voice for environmental professionals – we write now to provide an example of the policy advice the Institute can provide.

In particular, we wish to highlight the vital role of regional planning and strategic environmental assessment (SEA) in delivering both improved environmental outcomes and more efficient environmental assessment processes.

The case for regional planning and strategic assessments

Australia’s environmental framework has long relied on project-by-project assessments under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act). While important, this approach can be reactive and fragmented. Alone, it cannot halt biodiversity decline or support the scale of transition needed to meet national goals. Strategic assessments and bioregional planning offer a more integrated and proactive approach, as recognised by Professor Graeme Samuel’s 2020 EPBC Act review and your government’s previous policy and reform agenda.

Regional planning allows for the identification of priority areas for protection, landscape-scale connectivity, and the preservation of ecological processes that are invisible at the project scale. Without this broader lens, fragmented approvals risk undermining population viability for threatened species and the resilience of ecosystems.

Regional planning establishes an overarching spatial vision for where development and conservation should occur in a given region, meaning individual projects can be assessed as part of a broader, integrated plan. Similarly, SEA recognises that assessments of individual projects are typically unable to sufficiently address cumulative impacts, regional losses of biodiversity and threatening processes. Strategic assessment of policies, plans and programs ensures environmental concerns are more proactively taken into consideration.

Employed together, regional planning and SEA:

- Provide certainty by clarifying development and conservation priorities, making nature positive outcomes achievable
- Reduce duplication and delays, supporting early decisions (e.g. an ‘early no’ in sensitive areas and ‘early go’ in low-risk zones).

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- Apply the mitigation hierarchy (avoid, mitigate, restore, offset) at a regional scale
- Enable large-scale restoration aligned with ecological and social priorities.
- Address cumulative impacts across landscapes, avoiding ‘death by a thousand cuts’.
- Facilitate integration of ecological processes with other national priorities such as housing, energy, and infrastructure planning, ensuring trade-offs are transparent and biodiversity outcomes are not compromised.

As outlined in [EIANZ's 2024 submission on EPBC Act reforms](#), regional planning must integrate restoration, cumulative impact assessment, and strong governance to ensure that nature positive outcomes are not only aspired to, but delivered. We provide additional resources, including case studies and practitioner guidance, to support implementation.

Engaging environmental practitioners for success

Regional planning and SEA are complex processes that rely on skilled environmental practitioners who can assist governments in designing robust plans and help proponents implement them effectively.

As the peak body for the profession, EIANZ promotes high standards, ethics, and capacity building across the sector. Our Strategic Environmental Assessment Community of Practice (SEA CoP) has provided targeted advice and training to both the federal Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water and several state environment departments, supporting legislative reforms, policy development, and pilot bioregional planning initiatives.

We welcome the opportunity to continue providing an advisory role to you and your Department.

A roadmap for regional planning reform

To ensure regional planning delivers the intended outcomes and aligns with your government’s broader reform agenda, we recommend the following roadmap:

1. *Legislative clarity*: Embed strong statutory foundations for regional planning and SEA, with clear mandates for cumulative impact assessment, consultation, and implementation.
2. *Progress National Environmental Standards (NES)*: NES should cover regional planning and biodiversity, restoration, data and engagement, with internal coherence and complementarity between each NES.
3. *Co-governance with states*: Build formal partnerships with states and territories to co-design plans, share data, and align decisions – leveraging existing pilot projects.
4. *Early engagement*: Mandate early consultation with communities, First Nations, industry, and practitioners from the outset of planning, not just on draft documentation.
5. *Support and resourcing*: Ensure adequate funding for data, governance, and monitoring. Establish a standing stakeholder advisory group, including representatives from the environmental profession, to support plan development, oversight, evaluation and review.
6. *Implementation frameworks*: Require that bioregional plans outline roles, provide genuinely sufficient funding, compliance, and review processes.
7. *Professional recognition*: Support the use of qualified practitioners (e.g Certified Environmental Practitioners) in plan development and delivery.

Conclusion

Minister, your leadership is a chance to move environmental policy toward a more coherent and effective model – one that integrates strategic planning, strengthens biodiversity protection, and enables truly sustainable development. Regional planning and strategic assessments are essential, complementary tools to achieve these goals. We encourage you to embed them in law and practice, in partnership with environmental practitioners and other partner institutions.

Australia's biodiversity continues to decline, and the consequences of fragmented decision-making are visible across our landscapes. Now is the time to embed regional and strategic planning frameworks that support long-term ecological resilience and genuinely sustainable development.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further and contribute to the implementation of your reform and policy agenda.

Yours sincerely,



Vicki Brady
President
Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand



Dr Ailsa Kerswell
Chair
Strategic Environmental Assessment
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Additional Resources

[Strategic Environmental Assessment – Information sheet](#)

[Strategic Environmental Assessment case studies](#)

[Regional planning and the mitigation hierarchy: A guide](#)

