

Local Government Rebates for Private Land Conservation: A National Review

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Summary

This review compiles publicly available information about local government rebates for private land conservation across Australia, as requested by the Australian Land Conservation Alliance (ALCA). Research methods are explained, and findings are given by state/territory. In summary, it finds that Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania have extensive LGA rate rebate schemes to incentivise private land conservation across their municipalities. Both Territories (ACT and NT) have no LGA equivalent rate rebate schemes. ACT has territory level programs and incentives to support conservation on private land, particularly on farming and agricultural properties, while NT does not have any information publicly available on rate rebates for private land conservation. Finally, South Australia and New South Wales have very little information about rebates for private land by LGA that appeared in the publicly available desktop research.

Table of Contents

Summary	1
Introduction	2
Methods	2
Findings	2
Australian Capital Territory	2
New South Wales	3
Northern Territory	3
Queensland	4
South Australia	5
Tasmania	6
Victoria	8
References	10

Introduction

Local government conservation regulation and policy are connected to the Federal biodiversity and conservation law, the EPBC Act 1999. The Act 'provides a legal framework to protect and manage nationally and internationally important flora, fauna, ecological communities and heritage places' protected under the legislation's definition of national environmental significance (Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2021). The EPBC Act has a strong focus and applicability where private land crosses over with or connects to:

world heritage properties; national heritage places; wetlands of international importance...; migratory species protected under international agreements; listed threatened species and ecological communities; [and] Commonwealth marine areas... (Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2021).

Activities led by local government authorities can require Federal approvals where the particular activity is likely to have a significant impact on environmental values included in the EPBC Act. The Federal Environment Minister can review relevant activities, such as native vegetation clearing, altered water flows or pest and weed management if they are thought to be causing significant impact as outlined within the EPBC Act. The Act outlines information for local government activities ([Significant impact guidelines 1.1](#)) on the associated risks of impacting nationally protected matters.

There is no known existing summary of information about local government rebates for private land conservation across the nation. This review compiles publicly available information about rebate programs by state/territory.

Methods

Searches were conducted through public internet browsers for 'local government' AND conservation AND rebates AND [state/territory]. Additional searches included the phrase 'conservation rebates', 'conservation incentives', and the name of covenanting organisations active in the state jurisdiction. The first 10 hits for each state were scanned to assess relevance and each relevant hit was then analysed in detail with thorough notes taken. These searches were carried out for each of the six Australian states and two territories. The scope of the project time and resources determined how many case studies were able to be included.

Findings

Australian Capital Territory

Agriculture plays an important role in the ACT, with 160 farming families managing 15% of the ACT's land area (40,000 ha) for sheep and wool production, cattle, horse and equestrian enterprise. Other ACT agricultural production includes 'eggs and free range eggs; chickens; alpacas and lamas; fruit and vegetables; wine; olives; truffles' (ACT Gov 2021a). Within these enterprises, private landholders are provided with a range of diverse opportunities to pursue sustainable farming and align agricultural and conservation objectives. ACT's primary program

for supporting healthy and sustainable farming landscapes and ecosystems is the ACT NRM Sustainable Agriculture program which aims to 'improve productivity and farm income by assisting landholders to address a range of challenges facing ACT farmers which impact on farm resilience and productivity' (ACT Gov 2021b). Program activities that the government supports include pest and weed management, erosion control, climate and drought and biodiversity loss. ACT NRM addresses these key areas through provision of skill development and training, access to finance, and stakeholder and peer-support networks for landholders (ACT Gov 2021).

Case Study – ACT programs available

Individual landholders in the ACT are eligible to apply for funding up to \$10,000 to implement weed management initiatives through the ACT [Rural Resilience Grants](#) (ACT Gov 2021b).

The ACT Government has administered the [National On-Farm Emergency Water Infrastructure Rebate Scheme](#) for the Federal Government. The program is focused on animal welfare, farm productivity and water efficiency, however, there are components associated with conservation such as 'assisting in mitigating the degradation of natural watering points' (ACT Gov 2021b). The Scheme offers a 25% rebate to eligible rural landholders for the costs associated with the purchase and installation of on-farm stock water infrastructure and/or permanent planting needs.

The ACT Government has Indigenous conservation funding available to support collaboration between landholders and conservation agencies with Traditional Owners to enhance protection of Country and key cultural landscapes. The scheme funds a range of Indigenous led conservation initiatives across water management, native flora assessments and fire management (ACT Gov 2021c).

New South Wales

New South Wales covers almost 81 million hectares with 9%. This is made up by 7 million hectares protected in NSW national parks, 16,000 ha across 10 Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and permanent private protected areas (Biodiversity Conservation Trust 2021).

For NSW, no publicly available information could be found in allocated searches about conservation rebates within LGAs. While this does not mean they do not exist, it does say something about information, knowledge and access. Further research is required to identify available programs.

Northern Territory

Similarly, for NT, no publicly available information could be found in allocated searches about conservation rebates within LGAs. Again, while this does not mean they do not exist, but that if they do, they are not widely publicised or encouraged. Further research is required to identify available programs.

Queensland

In Queensland, conservation agreements can be negotiated between landholders and the State Government (EDO 2021; QLD Gov 2021a). 'Conservation agreements govern the permitted uses of the land to ensure that all land uses are consistent with conservation outcomes' (EDO 2021). Long-term conservation objectives fit under Queensland's programs, the Nature Refuges Program focusing on protecting environmental values on private properties and the Special Wildlife Reserve providing protection at the National Park level (EDO 2021).

In 2019, the Queensland State Government passed an amendment to the Nature Conservation Act 1992 which effectively makes private protected areas equal to national park level protections through a new protected area classification, Special Wildlife Reserves. Nature Refuge, legally binding private conservation agreements in perpetuity now comprise over 2.5% of Queensland's land area (QLD Gov 2021b).

Incentives available for landholders across multiple Queensland LGAs include Habitat Gardens (City of Ipswich 2021) which offers 20 free plants per year, Land for Wildlife (Brisbane, Logan, Moreton Bay, City of Gold Coast and Ipswich) which offers 3-4 free conservation education and training workshops, free plants and advice from council officers every 1-2 years, and a range of conservation and restoration agreement types that offer free plants, workshops, site visits and advice from council and eligibility for grants up to \$8,000 under each agreement (City of Ipswich 2021).

Case Study - Sunshine Coast Council

The Sunshine Coast region is one of the most biologically diverse and significant ecological areas in the country. The Council works with local landholders to conserve biodiversity and ecosystems outside of formal conservation reserves and national parks (Sunshine Coast Council 2021).

Voluntary Conservation Agreements (VCA) are used by the Council to operationalise the partnership between government and private landholders through permanent protection of bushland areas of ecological significance (Sunshine Coast Council 2021). The land stays under the control and ownership of the landholder, areas within the agreement can be exempt such as orchards, open space and grazing areas, is voluntary and provides incentives to the property owners. VCAs use conservation covenants under the Queensland Land Title Act 1994 (Sunshine Coast Council 2021).

VCA benefits include annual financial incentives from Council, depending on the size of the conservation area. 'Funds are made available primarily for on-ground conservation work...[with] a portion of this...available as a rate rebate' (Sunshine Coast Council 2021, para 7). The VCA is free with the associated surveying costs covered by Council and properties with a VCA have a greater chance of attracting other government grants and funding.

'The landholder and council conservation officer work together to develop a specific management plan for the VCA area. Ongoing access to management advice is also provided' (Sunshine Coast Council 2021) but this plan can be altered and amended at any time.

Case Study - Brisbane City Council

The Brisbane City Council's [Bushland Preservation Levy](#) is exempt under a Voluntary Conservation Agreement or Land for Wildlife Agreement. A formal process between the landowner and council including consultation and independent assessment is required for establishing either of these conservation agreements in the municipality. 'The Bushland Preservation Rebate is automatically applied to eligible owners' rate accounts, no application is required' (Brisbane City Council 2021).

Case Study - City of Logan

The City of Logan partners with local landholders in managing and protecting environmental values on their land through 'conservation partnerships (formerly the Conservation Incentives Program)' (City of Logan 2021). The program provides landowners with herbicide, nesting boxes and plants at no cost and training, advice and educational materials regarding land management. The [Environmental Conservation Partnerships](#) (ECP) include several types of conservation approach:

- Habitat Connections: free materials, advice, and education
- Land for Wildlife: for properties of at least 1 hectare - free materials and expert advice each year
- Voluntary Restoration Agreement: access to Council grants and free native plants
- Voluntary Conservation Agreements: access grant funding for conservation work, and the Environmental Levy exemption from their Council rates
- Voluntary Conservation Covenants: same as VCAs above.

Case Study - Moreton Bay Regional Council

Similarly to the City of Logan, Moreton Bay uses Land for Wildlife and Voluntary Conservation programs to provide opportunities for private landowners in their municipality to protect native flora and fauna. They also provide opportunities for community conservation efforts through their Bushcare program that gives community members hands-on conservation and restoration opportunities.

South Australia

Heritage Agreements in South Australia have protected biodiversity on more than 1,600 private properties since 1980. The South Australian Government has invested in PLC through its Revitalising Private Conservation grants program which aims to deliver small grants of under \$10,000 in 2020 and large grants over \$10,000 from March 2021. The conservation work funded through this scheme is and will be delivered through a partnership between the Nature Foundation, Trees for Life, the Conservation Council, Livestock SA and the Nature Conservation Society (Department of Environment and Water 2020). This investment has been made by the South Australian Government through a \$3 million grants program focused on private land conservation (Steven Marshall 2020).

Case Study - Kangaroo Island Council

Kangaroo Island has the largest proportion of property owners with [Heritage Agreements](#) in South Australia with 162 agreements covering of 25,632 hectares of bush, equating to over 5 percent of the Island (SA Gov 2021; The Islander Online 2019). The Heritage Agreements focus on conserving important ecosystems and involve small grants of up to \$10,000 and linking Landscape grants of more than \$10,000 for a range of conservation activities (SA Gov 2021). However, a recent review of the State's Heritage Agreement program found that its funding has reduced by 99% over the last 10 years (The Islander Online 2019).

Tasmania

Tasmania's Private Land Conservation Program (PLCP) was set up in 2006 to support landowners to 'sustainably manage and conserve natural values...on private land' (Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania 2021).

Similarly to other states, the PLCP includes conservation covenants, Land for Wildlife and Gardens for Wildlife, monitoring and stewardship of covenanted lands and access to expert advice and support from the government (DNRET 2021).

In 2019, the Tasmanian Land Conservancy identified that there were 886 Conservation Covenants protecting 109,325 hectares of Tasmanian biodiversity on private land (Tasmanian Land Conservancy 2021). These covenants have been enabled through a range of programs including: Protected Areas on Private Land, Private Forests Reserve Program, Forest Conservation Fund, Biodiversity Hotspot Project, Non-Forest Vegetation Program and Midlands Biodiversity Hotspot Tender (Tasmanian Land Conservancy 2021).

Case Study - Kingborough Council & Tasmanian Conservancy partnership

The Tasmanian Land Conservancy and Kingborough Council have partnered to deliver conservation on private land across the municipality. The Conservation Covenants under the program have been funded through the Council's Environmental Fund which accumulates financial offsets to support biodiversity conservation. Landholders who set up a Covenant in the Council receive stewardship payments that cover management costs such as revegetation, weed control and fencing (Tasmanian Land Conservancy 2021; Kingborough Council 2021). This fund has been receiving offsets from the removal of vegetation since 2004, with currently over \$800,000 available to invest in environmental conservation projects on private land (Kingborough Council 2021).

This program specifically focuses on protecting threatened flora and habitat including habitat associated with the endangered forty-spotted pardalote and swift parrot as well as threatened vegetation communities such as black peppermint forests (Tasmanian Land Conservancy 2021).

The rate rebate offered by Kingborough Council is \$6 per hectare per year at a minimum of \$100 and maximum of \$600 per annum (Kingborough Council 2021, p.1).

Case Study - Central Coast Council

The Central Coast Council of Tasmania has a formal conservation rates rebate policy that highlights the purpose, scope and standards for conservation covenants under the Tasmanian Nature Conservation Act 2002 for conservation efforts on private land across the Central Coast municipality (Central Coast Council 2021). As explained:

[a] rate rebate is to be provided to ratepayers that have registered conservation covenants within the municipal area of Central Coast under either the Private Forest Reserves Program or the Private Land Conservation Program. The rebate is set at \$5 per hectare per annum with a minimum of \$50 and a maximum of \$500.
(Central Coast Council 2021, p.2)

Case Study - City of Hobart

Private landholders in the Hobart City Council area who establish a conservation covenant on their property are eligible to receive council rates rebates. The rebate scheme has a particular focus on protecting patches of remnant vegetation including both wet and dry eucalyptus forest and woodland (City of Hobart 2021). As explained:

[t]he annual rates rebate is \$6.04 per hectare protected, with a minimum rebate of \$60.40 per property and a maximum rebate of \$604 per property. Participating property owners will automatically receive a reduced rates bill each year.
(City of Hobart 2021)

Case Study - Break O'Day Council

The Break O'Day Council, located in north-eastern Tasmania has a conservation covenant support policy with the objective of assisting 'the conservation of significant flora and fauna and habitat values on private land' (Break O'Day Council 2020, p.1). The council offers rate relief to private landholders who engage with conservation efforts and agreements:

The annual amount of rate relief will be calculated from the area of eligible land under a conservation covenant. The rate relief is \$5.00 per hectare. No eligible property will receive conservation covenant support rate relief of less than \$50 or more than \$500 per annum. The amount of general rates paid each year for a property with a conservation covenant cannot be lower than the minimum rate set by Council for that year, less \$50. The maximum amount payable to all eligible properties, in any financial year is \$10,000 and support will be reduced on a pro-rata basis to all properties accordingly.
(Break O'Day 2020, p.2)

Victoria

Over 30% of the 48 Victorian regional and rural municipalities provide rate rebates or concessions for conservation covenants (Trust for Nature 2021). 'These rebates can make a difference to landowners' ability to take care of their land as they recognise the cost it takes to steward land' (Trust for Nature 2021). Some examples include:

- City of Greater Bendigo and Macedon Ranges Shire Council provide a 100% rebate on property rates for conservation efforts on private land
- Pyrenees Shire Council offers 50% rebate
- Cardinia Shire Council, Mansfield Shire Council and the Greater Shepperton City Council offer 'a per hectare rebate of between \$20-\$50 up to a specified capped amount' (Trust for Nature 2021)
- 'The City of Greater Geelong calculates covenanted land at the lowest 'farm rate' (37% deduction)' (Trust for Nature 2021).

Case Study - Mornington Peninsula Shire

The Mornington Peninsula Shire provides a Conservation Land Rate for eligible land holders to 'encourage best practice conservation land management and engage the community in the protection and enhancement of the natural environment and biodiversity of the peninsula' (Mornington Peninsula Shire 2021). The rebate is 75% of the general property rates, or 25% reduction in rates, and properties must be greater than 2 hectares, cannot already receive the Agricultural rate, commit to conservation land management actions, allow Shire officers to inspect the property initially and ongoing where necessary and keep records of works carried out.

Western Australia

There are a range of conversation programs and legal mechanisms available to landholders in WA, including conservation covenants, private restrictive covenants and statutory covenants such as established under the Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945, National Trust of Australia (WA) Act 1964 and the Transfer of Land Act 1893.

The State's Conservation Covenant Program provides property owners with a legal mechanism for protecting biodiversity on their land through a binding in-perpetuity arrangement. There are a range of benefits of entering into such initiatives including up to \$500 for legal advice, tax concessions, some funding for fencing and management activities, conservation advice on an ongoing basis and potential rate relief in some council areas (Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions 2021). 'Some local government authorities specifically encourage conservation through re-zoning or other incentive schemes, such as rate rebates' (EDO WA 2006, p.5).

Case Study - Shire of Augusta-Margaret River

The Shire offers a range of incentives to encourage biodiversity conservation on private land including through its stewardship program, grants and subsidies program, rate rebates and subdivision and developer incentives (Shire of Augusta-Margaret River 2010).

The grants program is financed through the Shire's Environmental Fund with \$15,000 being made available per year in 2010 to fund 5-6 individual private land conservation projects for \$1,000 to \$3,000 each (Shire of Augusta-Margaret River 2010).

The Shire's rate rebate incentive requires the landholder to enter into a 'voluntary management agreement (VMA), conservation covenant or rezoning of the property to Natural Area Protection zone' (p.iii). The Shire provides 'a 50% rate rebate proportional to the area being protected by a conservation covenant and 35% proportional to the area being protected by a 10-year VMA or is rezoned to the Natural Area Protection zone' (p.iii). The minimum benefit for a rate rebate under this scheme is \$300 per year and the maximum is \$1,000 (Shire of Augusta-Margaret River 2010).

Case Study - Shire of Mundaring

Mundaring is a unique local government area with over 6,700 hectares of bushland on private land which includes State forest, public conservation areas, conservation reserves, and biodiversity corridors on private land (Shire of Mundaring 2009). The Shire of Mundaring provides rate rebates, or discounts, to provide 'ongoing financial recognition of the conservation efforts of landholders on behalf of the wider community. In return for a reduction in rates the landholder agrees to maintain the land, conserve remnant vegetation or take other agreed conservation measures' (Shire of Mundaring 2009, p.5).

Case Study - Busselton Shire

Like Mundaring, Busselton is home to a diverse and extensive range of 'biodiversity values of regional, state, national and international significance' (Busselton Shire 2011, p.1). The Shire's Rate Rebate Incentive provides eligible property owners interested in protecting these biodiversity values on their land with rate relief. In the Busselton Shire, landholders can enter into either a voluntary conservation covenant or a 10-year Rate Rebate Agreement with the Shire. They then 'receive a 50% rate rebate proportional to the area of bushland and/or wetland protected' (Busselton Shire 2011, p.2).

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Local Government Rebates for Private Land Conservation: A National Review

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