WALGA

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Submission on the Exposure Draft of the National Environmental Standard for Data and Information

July 2026

About WALGA

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is an independent, member based, not for profit organisation representing and supporting the WA Local Government sector. Our membership includes all 139 Local Governments in the State.

WALGA uses its influence, support and expertise to deliver better outcomes for WA Local Governments and their communities. We advocate to all levels of Government on behalf of our Members, and provide expert advice, services and support to Local Governments.

WALGA's vision is for agile and inclusive Local Governments enhancing community wellbeing and enabling economic prosperity.

Acknowledgement of Country

WALGA acknowledges the continuing connection of Aboriginal people to Country, culture and community. We embrace the vast Aboriginal cultural diversity throughout Western Australia, including Boorloo (Perth), on the land of the Whadjuk Nyoongar People, where WALGA is located and we acknowledge and pay respect to Elders past and present.

Introduction

WALGA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEE) on the exposure draft of the National Environmental Standard for Data and Information (D&I Standard). In providing this submission WALGA notes that the short timeframe provided for consultation did not allow comprehensive engagement with Western Australian Local Governments. We request that longer consultation periods be provided in future.

Local Government plays a significant role in natural resource management and land development, as a land manager and regulatory authority. Local Governments are responsible for land use planning, provision and maintenance of local road networks and community facilities, and management of parks, reserves and roadside vegetation. Local Governments may intersect with the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) through their role as project proponents ,and input on project proposals led by third parties.

The availability of contemporary and comprehensive data, survey coordination and data sharing between agencies is essential to effective biodiversity planning, protection and decision making. Currently, biodiversity surveys are conducted on a project-by-project basis generally as part of a referral under Western Australia's *Environmental Protection Act 1986* and/or the EPBC Act. Surveys are generally required at specific times of year (August to November) when species are most visible, sometimes across multiple years. This makes surveys difficult to schedule, time consuming to undertake and costly to resource. As a result, Local Governments may face significant delays and financial pressures when seeking the environmental approvals often requirements for essential public works.

In recognition of these challenges, WALGA endorsed Advocacy Position 5.2.1 Native Vegetation Clearing Regulations includes calls for:

> *1d. strengthening environmental data sharing requirements to ensure proponents cannot opt-out of sharing data collected for environmental assessment and monitoring purposes.*
>
> *2d. increased investment in the collection and provision of statewide biodiversity data, including:*
>
> *i. funding and coordinating a state-wide biodiversity survey program to standardise habitat and vegetation mapping*

ii. *making biodiversity data more discoverable, accessible and useable*
iii. *ensuring survey data relied upon for decision making is contemporary and accurate, particularly if there has been a change in environmental condition.*

The Western Australian Government's Native Vegetation Policy and associated Implementation Roadmap also recognises the need to build and share quality data and includes the following actions:

- invest in native vegetation mapping (particularly in highly cleared landscapes such as the Perth and Peel and Wheatbelt regions)
- address legislative and other barriers to data capture and sharing
- improve the aggregation and accessibility of biodiversity data
- coordinate improved data practices
- develop new datasets on WA native vegetation extent (WAVE) using remote sensing
- expand the capture of flora survey data for collation in the Index of Biodiversity Surveys for Assessment.

The D&I Standard gives effect to the Samuel Review recommendation for a shift in the collection, quality and accessibility of data. The Review found that decision-makers, proponents and the community do not have access to the best available data, information and science. The Review considered that better data and information will support:

- faster and evidence-based decision making
- increased community trust through transparency and accountability
- reduced duplication in survey effort
- comparisons over time and detection of long-term changes
- identification of the baseline starting point, setting of clear outcomes, and planning of activities to deliver them
- data driven evaluation of the efficiency of implemented activities and effectiveness of achieving outcomes.

WALGA supports the objectives of the D&I Standard, which are to ensure decisions made under the EPBC Act are based on appropriate data and information and to extend data availability. Consideration of environmental data early in the project planning and design phase is critical to application of the avoidance and mitigation steps of the mitigation hierarchy set out in the Standard for Matters of National Environmental Significance. It will also support streamlined assessments by reducing the risk of late-stage deficiencies in data and requests for additional information, which can result in lengthy delays to projects.

This submission provides feedback on each principle in the D&I Standard, and draws on Local Government challenges experienced in providing data to support project assessments under relevant State legislation and the EPBC Act. The five principles in the D&I Standard focus on data and information that is representative, transparent, comparable, reusable and ethical.

Principles in the D&I Standard

Principle 1 – Representative

WALGA supports Principle 1, which requires use of data and information from authoritative sources to adequately and accurately describe the relevant protected matters and environmental conditions. It also requires capture of data using scientifically rigorous methodologies, consideration of spatial and temporal factors, and clear explanation or mitigation of any data gaps.

Many Local Governments collate and maintain datasets on native vegetation and fauna so consequently are authoritative local data holders. Local conservation plans, such as Local Government Local Biodiversity Strategies, Local Environmental Offset Strategies and Wildlife Management Plans, should be included in the scope of relevant data and information, and proponents should take these plans into account.

The use of historic and legacy datasets where more recent information is not available is generally not supported. These datasets provide a valuable comparison point over time but do not replace the need for contemporary data. This is particularly important if there has been a change in environmental condition (e.g. wildfire or drought) affecting the protected matter since the previous survey was conducted, or if other threats have resulted in the decline or degradation of a species or habitat.

It is critical to account for how data gaps and uncertainty are to be managed, through requiring proponents to explain the implications for affected protected matters. Predictive modelling can be used to forecast how impacts from a proposed action may be amplified by threating processes and review the effectiveness of proposed mitigation measures. For climate change, Australian and State scenario mapping is available and could be used to support planning and risk management.

Adherence to standardised survey processes, based on published methodologies and validated field procedures, will improve data rigour. For example, the Malleefowl Conservation Advice states the National Malleefowl Monitoring Manual provides the agreed survey protocol for this species across the variety of ecosystems this species inhabits.

The D&I Standard should provide guidance on use of emerging indirect survey approaches such as environmental DNA (eDNA) and remote sensing as a tool to gather knowledge on species. These technologies have the advantage of covering large areas of land at lower cost compared to traditional survey methodologies, as well as gathering information on species that are difficult to monitor (e.g. trap shy). However, they have limitations and may function as exploratory or complementary methodologies to other survey approaches.

The provision for a proponent to not undertake data collection because it is impractical to do so (e.g. cryptic species) is not supported. Proponents should take all reasonable steps to build data and information to support informed decision making and the collective building of knowledge.

Given the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence tools in the preparation of referral documentation, data audit and validation is important to ensure that data used in decision making is accurate.

Recommendations

- Require proponents to consider Local Government datasets and plans
- Require use of contemporary data to ensure informed decision making
- Manage uncertainty by requiring proponents to identify data gaps and using predictive tools, such as scenario modelling, to inform avoidance and mitigation measures
- Provide guidance on application of emerging indirect survey methodologies
- Undertake audits of source information to ensure accurate data.

Principle 2 – Transparent

WALGA supports Principle 2, which requires data to be reliable and credible through use of quality control processes, provision of adequate metadata information, and clear custodianship and governance responsibilities.

Appropriate contextual information will ensure that decision-makers and the community can have confidence that the data is scientifically rigorous and traceable, provides accurate information on affected protected matters, and is appropriate to use to inform proposed management activities. Proponents also need to identify where available data and evidence is inconclusive or conflicting, and how this has been addressed.

WALGA supports the proposed recognition of jurisdictional data and information management practices to enable accreditation and support bilateral assessments.

Recommendation

- Require proponents to identify where information is inconclusive or conflicting and how this has been addressed in the application.

Principle 3 – Comparable

WALGA supports Principle 3, which requires use of standardised data formats and measurements to enable data harmonisation and allow comparison across time, locations and projects. In this way, data will support long-term analysis of environmental trends, individual project impacts and cumulative impacts across regions.

The Samuel Review identified that the EPBC Act does not facilitate a strategic approach to managing or restoring the environment, with cumulative impacts on threatened species and communities not adequately considered based on a decision-making process that is focused on individual projects. The ability for decision makers to consider the impacts of a proposal within the context of multiple pressures affecting the protected matter of interest, through the availability of comparable data, will help address the current limitations.

Principle 4 – Reusable

WALGA supports Principle 4, which aims to build collective knowledge through enhanced data and information availability, supported by appropriate licensing and consent arrangements. Building collective data can help overcome cost and time barriers, reduces duplication of effort, prioritises limited resources, and strengthens the evidence base.

There are multiple biodiversity platforms that exist at a jurisdictional and national level. In Western Australia, improving data accessibility and usability is overseen by the Western Australian Government's Biodiversity Information Office, which hosts the Dandjoo biodiversity data platform. This platform collates data from government, industry, research and the community. Many biodiversity spatial datasets are also available via DataWA. Nationally, Environment Information Australia oversees the collection and sharing of data and information about Australia's environment, through the Environment Information Australia Portal and Environment Information Viewer. A consistent approach to capturing, storing and ensuring access to data is essential.

There is also a need for a data management framework that ensures all available environmental data and information is captured and shared. This should include that provided by project proponents through the relevant State or EPBC Act regulatory process, and from entities such as land managers and researchers that do not interact with the regulatory system. This requirement can be implemented as a condition of funding agreements, where the project has received government funding, and encouraging non-government funded projects to share data as part of good data governance processes.

To ensure a streamlined process and reduce administrative burden on data providers, a simple data upload process should be developed and the interoperability of different platforms supported. To increase the use of spatial data outputs, the formats need to be compatible with common GIS software or be provided via accessible spatial mapping platforms. Many Local Government have limited capacity to transfer datasets into internal GIS systems and rely on government-hosted spatial viewers.

Recommendation

- Improve interoperability of data platforms and provide a simple data upload process
- Require data sharing by proponents
- Encourage data sharing by land managers and researchers
- Increase data accessibility on open spatial mapping platforms.

Principle 5 – Ethical

WALGA supports Principle 5, which aims to ensure data and information is collected, managed and used to minimise harm, protect rights and privacy, and incorporate cultural values where possible.

Respecting indigenous rights, cultural sovereignty and ensuring First Nations communities have authority over their data is essential to building trust and strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Aligning the D&I Standard with Indigenous data

sovereignty and governance principles where possible will provide a strong foundation culturally safe and respectful engagement with First Nations people.

Recommendation

- **Align the D&I Standard with indigenous data sovereignty and governance principles where possible.**

General Comments

Bioregional planning

The D&I Standard will be applied to the development of bioregional plans, which are anticipated to have higher prominence under the EPBC Act reforms to better support implementation of the mitigation hierarchy and address cumulative impacts on the environment. Local Governments require clarity on how bioregional plans will be designed and developed to improve confidence that existing local knowledge and data will be incorporated.

Recommendation

- **Provide guidance on how bioregional plans are to be designed and developed to include adequate and appropriate data and information.**

Available resources

As highlighted in this submission, there is limited biodiversity data available and for Local Government limited financial capacity to undertake additional data collection. WALGA is advocating for a comprehensive approach to data collection, including funding for $15 million over four years from 2026-27, to fund and coordinate a statewide biodiversity survey program to standardise habitat and vegetation mapping.

An example of the value of proactive biodiversity surveys is the Shire of Denmark's mapping of the ecological condition of roadside vegetation in 2024. The Shire, located on the south coast of WA, is situated in an area of high conservation significance due to its level of species richness and endemism. The conservation of remnant vegetation on roadsides was identified as a priority for sustaining biodiversity, tourism and ecological values in the Shire. The Shire received financial support through WALGA's 'Local Biodiversity and Native Vegetation Management Project' to update their 2011 roadside vegetation data. The funding allowed the Shire to complete on-ground field data collection of 329 km of rural roadsides. The Shire found 11 new WA priority flora and 35 new priority and TECs, including the *Empodisma* Peatland listed under the EPBC Act. This information has supported the Shire to identify high quality vegetation to protect from development and plan on-ground management action to address threats and improve habitat linkages. This project would not have been possible without WALGA securing State Government funding support.

Australian Government investment and coordination of improved biodiversity data collection would help States, Territories and Local Governments work together to address information gaps.

Recommendation

- **Invest in targeted biodiversity data collection in areas of highest development pressure and critical conservation needs to support Australia's ability to plan, protect and enhance biodiversity.**

Conclusion

The availability of accessible and contemporary data is essential for environmental planning, management and decision making. The D&I Standard represents an opportunity to improve the quality and availability of data used to support robust decision making for protected matters under

the EPBC Act. The new requirements should be effectively communicated to Local Governments to enable early consideration in project planning, the delivery of biodiversity surveys aligned with the principles, and two-way access to data. Third-party proponents should also proactively engage with Local Governments to access local datasets and conservation plans to inform project design. More guidance on bioregional plans will improve confidence that existing local knowledge and data will be considered in their development.