

# Illawarra and south coast lowland grassy woodland ecological community: listing assessment consultation guide

March 2016



This information guide explains why the Illawarra and south coast lowland grassy woodland ecological community is being assessed as potentially threatened under the national *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and what a listing would achieve and mean for people in the region.

Summary	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Illawarra and south coast lowland grassy woodland ecological community is being assessed as potentially threatened under Australia's national environment law, the <i>Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999</i> (EPBC Act).</li> <li>• A scientific assessment is being undertaken to define and gather evidence on its current threat status.</li> <li>• Public consultation and input from land owners and managers, the Indigenous community, councils and other interested parties is an important and valuable part of the assessment process.</li> <li>• Public consultation is open until <b>5pm Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2016</b>.</li> <li>• The Minister for the Environment will decide whether to list the ecological community in 2016.</li> <li>• If listed under the EPBC Act there would be benefits to the environment and to associated ecosystem services; listing would also have benefits and opportunities for land managers and groups with an interest in conserving the ecological community's values.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listing would help promote a co-ordinated, ecosystem-scale approach to threat abatement in the region and for many threatened species that are found within the ecological community.</li> <li>• Listing the Illawarra and south coast lowland grassy woodland ecological community under the EPBC Act would mean that an activity that is likely to have a significant impact on the ecological community would need to be considered and approved at the national level before proceeding</li> <li>• National listing includes minimum condition thresholds to help identify where an approval may be necessary.</li> <li>• The EPBC Act is not designed to stop people using their land. Existing and routine landholder and agricultural activities and actions previously approved under other legislation are generally exempt from the EPBC Act.</li> <li>• Some new activities or developments do require approval under national environment law, such as large developments, works or infrastructure that permanently clear significant areas of intact or high-quality native vegetation for new residential or industrial areas, new roads or energy infrastructure.</li> </ul>





## Public consultation on the Illawarra and south coast lowland grassy woodland ecological community

The ecological community was placed on the 2014 Finalised Priority Assessment List and the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (the Committee) is assessing its eligibility for listing. The Committee is an independent group of scientists appointed to provide advice on threatened species and ecological communities to the Australian Government Environment Minister.

To consider the views of stakeholders is a vital part of the listing assessment process. The Committee is seeking comments on the draft description for the ecological community and the proposal to list the ecological community as 'Critically Endangered'. We are able to accept these comments until **5 pm Wednesday 11th May 2016**. They will be forwarded to the Committee and to the Minister for consideration.

Once the Committee has completed its assessment, its advice on the conservation status will be forwarded to the Minister who will decide whether the ecological community should be listed and in which conservation category. Under the EPBC Act, the Minister's decision is made on whether the ecological community meets the listing criteria and whether the listing will benefit its survival. The Minister's decision is due in 2016.

## What is an ecological community under national environmental law?

Australia's national environmental law, the EPBC Act, protects what are known as Matters of National Environmental Significance. The protection provisions of the Act are only triggered if there is likely to be a significant impact on any of these matters.

Threatened species and ecological communities are Matters of National Environmental Significance. The EPBC Act defines an ecological community as an assemblage of native species that inhabits a particular area in nature. They often relate to types of native vegetation, such as a certain kind of grassland, woodland or forest.

The native plants and animals within an ecological community have various roles and relationships that together contribute to the healthy function of the environment. Protecting native ecological communities also protects ecosystem services such as: good quality air and water; healthy soils; natural prevention or control of erosion and salinity; shelter and feed for stock; and the storage of carbon. These all contribute to better productivity of our land and water, which benefits people and society.

Human settlements and infrastructure where an ecological community formerly occurred do not form part of the natural environment and are therefore not part of the ecological community — for example, sites where an ecological community has been cleared and replaced by developments. This also applies to sites where the ecological community exists in a highly-degraded or unnatural state. For instance, cropping lands and exotic pastures, or areas where much of the native vegetation has been replaced by exotic species, are no longer part of a natural ecological community.



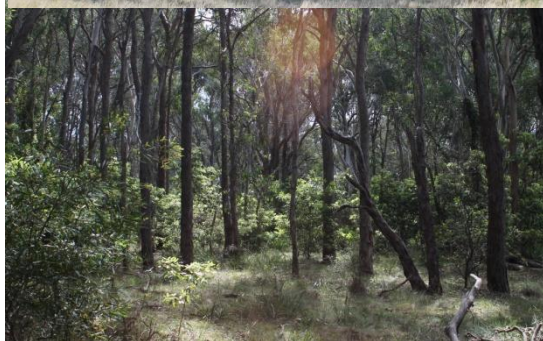
The ecological community provides habitat for the endangered orchid *Pterostylis gibbosa* (Illawarra greenhood) Photo :T. O'Connor

## What is the listing assessment process?

The assessment by the independent Committee involves clarifying the definition of the ecological community, determining where it occurs, and rigorously assessing its eligibility for listing as nationally threatened. An ecological community must be demonstrated to be significantly impacted by identified threats. It should also be shown that if these threats are not managed, there is a risk that the ecological community may be changed irreversibly across its range and its natural composition and/or function could be lost forever. Three categories exist for listing ecological communities, depending on the level of extinction risk: vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered.

## What is the Illawarra and south coast lowland grassy woodland ecological community?

- The typical form of the ecological community is a woodland with a tall shrub layer and/or a grassy ground cover.
- The ecological community occurs on the coastal plains and low foothills below the Great Escarpment between Wollongong and just south of Moruya. The ecological community is known from the Wollongong, Shellharbour, Kiama, Shoalhaven and Eurobodalla Local Government Areas (LGAs).
- The composition of the ecological community at a particular site is influenced by many factors including the size of the site, aspect, rainfall and drainage and by its disturbance history (including clearing, grazing and fire).
- *Eucalyptus tereticornis* (forest red gum) is present and often dominant in the mature tree canopy. Other co-occurring tree species include: *Angophora floribunda* (rough barked apple); *E. bosistoana* (coast grey box); and *E. eugenioides* (thin-leaved stringybark), *E. botryoides* (bangalay), *E. globoidea* (white stringybark) and *E. longifolia* (woollybutt) and *E. quadrangulata* (coastal white box). A sub-canopy is sometimes present including *Melaleuca decora* (paper bark); *M. styphelioides* (prickly leaved tea tree) or *Casuarina glauca* (swamp oak).
- The understorey varies between sites and contains either a dense ground layer containing grasses, herbs and sedges to a height of 1m; or a shrubby layer, sometimes including mesic plants such as *Pittosporum* species, to a height of 2m.





## Why is the ecological community important?

Much of the vegetation on the coastal plain of the Illawarra and south coast regions has been cleared, fragmented or heavily modified, and with this, many species have become locally, regionally or nationally threatened. In particular, fewer mammal species are now found in this area. For many of the plant and animal species that remain, remnants of ecological communities such as Illawarra and south coast lowland grassy woodland are critical for their survival. For example, it provides habitat for woodland birds and bats, many of which are threatened.



At least 75% of the ecological community has been cleared and what remains is subject to ongoing pressures including further clearing and fragmentation mostly associated with coastal development activities. Other impacts are associated with human activities including stock grazing, changes to fire regimes and recreational activities. Further threats to the ecological community include displacement by invasive species and climate change.

## What are the benefits of listing an ecological community as nationally threatened?

There are a number of benefits of listing ecological communities under Australia's national environment law:

- Listing an ecological community can help protect the landscape that provides natural connections and refuges essential to the ecological function, health and biodiversity of the region. It can protect critical habitat for threatened species and for other species under pressure in the region. In turn, this helps conserve the ecosystem services associated with an ecological community.
- Listing threatened ecological communities helps protect them from future significant human impacts that may cause further decline. The aim of the national environment law is to ensure the matters of national environmental significance are given due consideration, along with broader economic, social and other issues, in the planning of any large projects. Where possible, significant adverse impacts to the environment should be avoided; or the impacts mitigated, reduced or offset, when unavoidable.
- National listing encourages agencies and community/Landcare groups to apply for environmental funding opportunities for conservation and recovery works. The Australian Government has a variety of programmes to encourage land managers to continue to conserve biodiversity and ecosystem services on public and private land.
- A conservation advice, published at the time of listing, provides guidance and options for environmental decision-making, including rehabilitation and conservation initiatives in the region.
- In the case of this ecological community, a listing would:
  - provide landscape-scale protection that complements the existing national protection of threatened plants and animals found within the ecological community;
  - protect environmental values, including ecosystem functions and services associated with the ecological community, which contribute to long-term landscape productivity and human wellbeing.

## Will activities that happened before listing, or ongoing and routine activities, need to be referred?

No. Activities that were routine, or began before 2000 may generally continue without referral/approval. Such exemptions apply to activities that were either already legally approved (termed 'prior authorisation'), or are ongoing (termed 'continuing use').

Land management and other practices undertaken in line with the State native vegetation laws and guidelines are also typically exempt from the EPBC Act.

Council, farming and other practices that are unlikely to require approval from the Australian Government include the following:

- ongoing grazing, horticultural or cropping activities
- maintaining existing fences, internal access tracks and firebreaks
- maintaining existing gardens and orchards
- maintaining existing farm dams or water storages
- replacing and maintaining sheds, yards and other existing buildings
- controlling weeds and spraying for pests on individual properties
- management of feral pest species; and
- minor road maintenance

In all these cases, impacts on important patches of the ecological community (e.g. high quality patches or important corridors for wildlife) should be avoided.



## Consideration under national environment law is required for actions likely to have a significant impact

The EPBC Act is triggered if an action is likely to have a significant impact on the ecological community. If you consider that a proposed action is likely to have such an impact, or you are unsure, you should contact the Department to help you determine whether or not a proposed action will need formal assessment and approval under the EPBC Act. For further information on referral, assessment and approval processes, refer to the following website:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/protection/environment-assessments/assessment-and-approval-process>

Social and economic matters may also be taken into account for individual projects that may have a significant impact on the ecological community, through the EPBC Act approvals process. Strict timeframes apply to assessments to ensure decisions are made as quickly as possible.

The key diagnostics and condition thresholds outlined above for the ecological community exclude many patches on properties or along roadside verges that are considered too degraded for protection. In addition, the EPBC Act provides exemptions for continuing (routine) use or where legal permission has previously been given; see previous section on 'Business as usual for most routine activities'.

The major activity that is likely to have a significant impact on the ecological community is permanently clearing large or otherwise important areas of intact or high-quality native vegetation. Examples include:

- major mining, residential, commercial or other industrial development
- building new roads or widening existing roads
- converting large areas into new pastures or cropping fields.

To help reduce the significance of actions, the EPBC Act promotes the avoidance and mitigation of impacts from the early planning stage, wherever that is possible.

## Do state or local environment laws also apply?

Yes. However, such state and local laws complement, rather than replace or override national environment law. Information about state-listed ecological communities and vegetation management laws are available from the following New South Wales agencies:

- ACT – Environment and Planning Directorate  
[http://www.environment.act.gov.au/cpr/review\\_of\\_the\\_nature\\_conservation\\_act](http://www.environment.act.gov.au/cpr/review_of_the_nature_conservation_act)
- NSW – Office of Environment and Heritage  
[www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspecies/](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/threatenedspecies/)  
[www.environment.nsw.gov.au/vegetation/](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/vegetation/)
- NSW – Riverina Local Land Services  
<http://riverina.lls.nsw.gov.au/>
- NSW – South East Local Land Services:  
<http://southeast.lls.nsw.gov.au/>



## Where can I get further information?

- Information on threatened ecological communities:  
[www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities](http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities)
- Information on the proposed listing of the ecological communities:  
[www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/nominations/comment](http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/nominations/comment)
- The listing process:  
[www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/index.html)
- The EPBC referral and approval process:  
[www.environment.gov.au/epbc/](http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/)
- Australian Government natural resource management initiatives: [www.nrm.gov.au/](http://www.nrm.gov.au/)
- The department's Community Information Unit: by phone on 1800 803 772 (freecall), or email at [ciu@environment.gov.au](mailto:ciu@environment.gov.au)

