

A decade of destruction: Bulldozed threatened species habitat for beef across Queensland and Great Barrier Reef Catchments

Key findings

- A whopping **3.7 million hectares**¹ of forest and bushland have been bulldozed across the last decade of government data in Queensland,² with **90% of the razing to make way for pastures**³ - the majority for beef.⁴ The total amount of forest and bushland destroyed is larger than the size of **Belgium**.⁵
- Across the last decade of government data in QLD, almost 1.5 million hectares⁶ of forest and bushland has been destroyed in Great Barrier Reef Catchments.
 - Of forest and bushland destroyed in **Great Barrier Reef catchments** across the ten year period, **86% is for beef** (that's a whopping **1.3 million hectares**)⁷. This is equivalent in size to the area of Greater Sydney including the Blue Mountains and Central Coast region.⁸
- Almost 2.5 million hectares of the total forest and bushland destroyed in Queensland from 2013-2023 was for beef pastures.⁹ This is larger in size than the country of Wales.¹⁰
- Of the forest and bushland destroyed for **beef pastures in Queensland** during the 10 year time period:
 - **Half (52%) is in Great Barrier Reef** catchment areas.
 - **Half (50%) is mapped known or likely koala habitat** - now an endangered species in Queensland, New South Wales, and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) as of February 2022.
 - Up to 32 **critically endangered species** had mapped likely or known habitat impacted by deforestation for beef each year.
 - Up to 100 **endangered species** had mapped likely or known habitat impacted by deforestation for beef each year such as the iconic **koala, greater glider and red**

¹ Exact figure: 3,687,397 hectares.

² Figures in report are based on analysis of 2013-2023 Queensland Government (2025), 'Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) reports' Available at: <https://www.qld.gov.au/environment/land/management/mapping/statewide-monitoring/slats/slats-reports> (Accessed 4 May 2026).

³ Figure excludes SLATS clearing on lots with no land use.

⁴ At least 66% for beef across QLD. Figure is based on the latest 10 years of available QLD government data Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) reports.

⁵ Belgium is 30,688 km² compared to the 36,874km² of destroyed forest and bushland over 10 years.

⁶ Exact figure: 1,470,860 hectares.

⁷ Exact figure: 1,267,899 hectares.

⁸ Bureau of Meteorology, Greater Sydney Climate Guide (2019). Available at: <https://www.bom.gov.au/climate/climate-guides/guides/024-Greater-Sydney-NSW-Climate-Guide.pdf> Accessed 7 May 2026.

⁹ Exact figure: 2,438,459 hectares.

¹⁰ Wales is 21,218km² compared to the 24,385km² of destroyed forest and bushland over 10 years for beef pastures.

goshawk.

- New footage captured in [January](#), [April](#) and [May](#) 2026 shows evidence of continued destruction of mapped threatened species habitat without appearing to be reported to the federal government, in potential violation of the reformed national nature law.
- Large beef buyers including Coles and Woolworths are exposed to this ongoing forest and bushland destruction, with recent nature law reform increasing the risk of illegal deforestation in supply chains. This highlights the critical importance of the supermarkets implementing their commitments to go deforestation-free by requiring their suppliers to comply, and looking to address conversion of natural ecosystems.
- Previous Wilderness Society analysis shows that over **one million hectares of Queensland forest and bushland has been destroyed for beef since the Albanese Government took office in 2022.**¹¹

View recent footage of bulldozed threatened species habitat happening across Queensland, including in Great Barrier Reef caught on camera by the Wilderness Society [here](#).



Image: Deforestation near Carnarvon National Park for beef (Great Barrier Reef catchment) (370 hectares), May 2026

¹¹See Wilderness Society's report: Albanese's QLD Deforestation Report Card (2025) <https://wilderness.org.au/news-events/shocking-investigation-reveals-one-million-hectares-of-queensland-forest-bulldozed-under-the-albanese-government> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

Introduction

Australia is a deforestation hotspot¹² on par with the Amazon, the Congo and Borneo, according to the World Wildlife Fund for Nature.¹³

In Queensland, forests and bushland are bulldozed at an alarming scale, the majority of which is to expand pastures for grazing cattle. **From 2013 to 2023, a staggering 3.7 million hectares¹⁴ of forest and bushland have been bulldozed, with 90% of the razing to make way for pastures¹⁵** - the majority for beef.¹⁶ In the latest available year of government data (2022-2023), 70% of deforestation in QLD for beef occurred in mature forests and bushland over 15 years old. The majority of destroyed regrowing forest and bushland in Queensland is over 15 years old, providing valuable habitat for threatened species. Some species are even likely to benefit from trees as young as three years old.¹⁷

Deforestation destroys habitat for Australia's threatened species, accelerates climate change, smothers the Great Barrier Reef with sediment and pollutant run-off, and threatens First Nations cultural heritage. The science is unambiguous: stopping deforestation is one of the fastest and cheapest ways to reduce emissions and protect biodiversity.

In 2024, the World Heritage advisory body, UNESCO, singled out deforestation as a major threat to the Great Barrier Reef.¹⁸ UNESCO has recommended the Federal and State Governments strengthen deforestation regulations to protect mature and high-quality forest and bushland in Reef Catchments and other high priority areas, including vegetation along water courses.¹⁹

The Federal and Queensland Governments report to UNESCO on the status of the Reef in February 2026 relied **heavily on Australia's nature law reforms as evidence of the governments' commitment to Reef protection.**

In July 2026, the UNESCO World Heritage committee will determine whether or not to declare the Great Barrier Reef as 'In Danger.' **UNESCO verdict on the Great Barrier Reef hinges on whether Governments are taking real action to protect the Reef, including halting the dangerous pollution of this national treasure driven by deforestation.**

¹² World Wildlife Fund for Nature (2018) 'Deforestation and Forest Degradation' Available at: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/deforestation-and-forest-degradation> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

¹³ WWF (2021) 'Deforestation fronts: Drivers and responses in a changing world' - Factsheet. Available at: https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/deforestation_fronts_factsheet____all.pdf (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

¹⁴ Exact figure: 3,687,397 hectares and is derived from an analysis of the SLATS GIS data so may vary to the QLD Govt SLATS reports as per the Drivers of Deforestation report methods.

¹⁵ Figure excludes SLATS clearing on lots with no land use.

¹⁶ Figure is based on the latest 10 years of available QLD government data (SLATS)

¹⁷ Thomas, H. Simmonds, JS., Ward., Eyre, T.J. and Maron, M (2025). 'The value of regrowth forests and woodlands for threatened fauna species', Biological Conservation, 307, 111131. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320725001685> (Accessed 30 April 2026).

¹⁸ Australian Marine Conservation Society (2024), 'Great Barrier Reef still threatened by tree clearing in Reef catchments.' Available at: <https://www.marineconservation.org.au/great-barrier-reef-still-threatened-by-stubbornly-high-tree-clearing-rates-in-reef-catchments/> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

¹⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre (2024) 'State of conservation of properties' WHC/24/46.COM/7B.Add. 46th session of the World Heritage Committee, New Delhi, India, 21-31 July 2024. Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2024/whc24-46com-7B.Add-en.pdf> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

Deforestation threatens the Great Barrier Reef

The Great Barrier Reef faces a magnitude of threats, including rising ocean temperatures driven by global heating (exacerbated by deforestation), coastal development, direct human use and notably, poor water quality from land-based run-off.²⁰

Over the last decade, over half (52%) of all deforestation for beef has occurred in Great Barrier Reef catchments whereby run-off of sediment and pollutants from land clearing drains into the Great Barrier Reef.

In a Wilderness Society study from 2019 to 2023, **88% of the top 50 land parcels with the highest level of deforestation in Great Barrier Reef catchments (all but four) forest and bushland were destroyed for beef pasture.** The highest amount of deforestation for beef in one land parcel was over 11,000 hectares. **That's 11,000 rugby fields destroyed for one beef pasture.**

Specific incidents of deforestation events documented by Wilderness Society that took place in Great Barrier Reef catchments impacted likely mapped habitat for several threatened species including the koala, greater glider, red goshawk and the southern black-throated finch.

Deforestation in Great Barrier Reef catchments drives erosion and sediment runoff that smothers the Reef.²³ High concentrations of sediment disrupt filter feeders like clams and barnacles, reduce light available for photosynthesis²⁴, and kill the seagrass



Image: Great Barrier Reef catchments represented in coloured zones. Source: Queensland Government (n.d), Queensland Globe

Thirty-five catchments across World Heritage listed tropical rainforests, large rivers, tropical savannahs and wetlands, drain into the Reef. The largest land use of these catchments is for agricultural grazing (77%) - the main driver of deforestation in Queensland.^{21 22}

²⁰ Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) (n.d.) 'Pollution & Water Quality in the Great Barrier Reef.' Available at: <https://www.marineconservation.org.au/pollution-great-barrier-reef/> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

²¹ Australian Government (2023), 'Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan', Available at: <https://www.dcccew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/reef-2050-long-term-sustainability-plan-2021-2025.pdf> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

²² The Wilderness Society (2025), 'Drivers of Deforestation and Land Clearing in Queensland Report 2025.'

²³ Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) (n.d.) 'Pollution & Water Quality in the Great Barrier Reef.' Available at: <https://www.marineconservation.org.au/pollution-great-barrier-reef/> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

²⁴ Queensland Government (2019), 'How does sediment affect the Great Barrier Reef?' Available at: <https://www.reefplan.qld.gov.au/resources/explainers/how-does-sediment-affect-the-gbr#:~:text=Scientists%20now%20know%20that%20high,%E2%80%93%E2%80%93%20and%20even%20smother%20corals.> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

beds that endangered dugongs depend on.^{25 26} With the Reef having suffered its fifth mass coral bleaching event in five years²⁷, pollution from deforestation is preventing recovery at the worst possible time.

Images: Deforestation near Townsville for beef (Great Barrier Reef catchment) (380 hectares), October 2025



²⁵ Coral Reef Alliance (2024) 'Corals Decoded: Animals or Plants? Common Myths Debunked'. Available at: <https://coral.org/en/blog/corals-decoded-animals-or-plants-common-myths-debunked/> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

²⁶ Australian Marine Conservation Society (2024), 'Great Barrier Reef still threatened by tree clearing in Reef catchments'. Available at: <https://www.marineconservation.org.au/great-barrier-reef-still-threatened-by-stubbornly-high-tree-clearing-rates-in-reef-catchments/> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

²⁷ Australian Marine Conservation Society (2024), 'Great Barrier Reef still threatened by tree clearing in Reef catchments.' Available at: <https://www.marineconservation.org.au/great-barrier-reef-still-threatened-by-stubbornly-high-tree-clearing-rates-in-reef-catchments/> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

Australia's nature law: what's changed?

In late 2025, Wilderness Society welcomed long-overdue changes to federal nature laws. Crucially, the reforms removed and are phasing out long-standing exemptions that had kept the biggest drivers of forest and bushland destruction outside national scrutiny: the Regional Forest Agreement exemption that shielded native forest logging from assessment (set to end from 1 July 2027) and **the "continuous use" exemption that allowed high-risk, agriculture-driven land clearing to proceed unchecked.**

Specifically, deforestation of forest and bushland that has not been cleared for 15 years, or is within 50 metres of waterways in catchments that flow to the Great Barrier Reef, must be submitted for assessment if it has, will have, or likely have a significant impact on a Matter of National Environmental Significance (MNES). MNES include threatened species or ecological communities, for example.

However, since the national nature law reforms (Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act) were passed on 1 December 2025, Wilderness Society has detected deforestation events of forest and bushland of mapped known and likely threatened species habitat over 15 years old which have not been referred to the Federal Government despite likely meeting the criteria for referral under the national nature law. Since 1 December 2025, Wilderness Society has detected broadscale deforestation in Chinchilla (Traditional lands of the Barunggam people), West of Warwick (Traditional lands of the Githabul people) and near Carnarvon National Park (Traditional lands of the The Bidjara, Karingbal, and Kara Kara peoples) in Central Queensland. Together these total over 700 hectares of mapped threatened species habitat, adding to growing concern about dozens of deforestation events reported in the media across Queensland since these EPBC reforms, which appear not to have been referred to the federal government for approval. Wilderness Society has referred these events to the federal government.

Further, the Albanese Government's Draft Standards released in May 2026 do not go far enough to stop deforestation, protect endangered species, or give the public a real say. The Draft Standards still put corporate interests ahead of nature and community outcomes. The Wilderness Society is calling for iron-clad protections in the regulations and outcomes-focused National Environmental Standards that sit beneath the new laws, alongside increased federal funding for nature protection and recovery and a step change in compliance and enforcement by the new Environmental Protection Agency.

A further concern is the prospect of decision-making being devolved to the states. The reforms open the door to accrediting state assessment and approval frameworks through bilateral agreements. However, in states where those frameworks do not contain rules strong enough to stop deforestation and protect threatened species habitat, devolution risks locking in business as usual rather than lifting protection. National scrutiny is only meaningful if the standards that states are held to are robust and enforceable.

The funding picture underlines the gap between ambition and delivery. The federal government has committed to ending new extinctions, yet according to Biodiversity Council analysis only around 0.06% of the federal budget, roughly \$1 in every \$1,667, goes to on-ground protection and recovery of nature.²⁸ A commitment to halt extinctions cannot be met while the money pledged to deliver it remains so far out of step with the scale of the task.

The Albanese government still has critical work to do to ensure the legislation it passed actually translates into outcomes for nature.

²⁸Biodiversity Council (2026), *What's in the 2026-27 federal budget for nature?* Available at: <https://biodiversitycouncil.org.au/news/whats-in-the-2026-27-federal-budget-for-nature> (Accessed 2 July 2026).

Images: Deforestation of mapped threatened species habitat (240 hectares), West of Warwick, Southern Downs, QLD, April 2026



Nature and people can't afford 'business as usual'

Wilderness Society's satellite platform known as 'Watch on Nature' empowers the environmental organisation to track detected deforestation in real time. Since the Albanese Government took office in 2022, the Wilderness Society has alerted the federal government to more than 4,500 hectares of detected deforestation - largely to make way for beef pastures.²⁹

Not one of the deforestation events for beef detected by the Wilderness Society was referred to the Federal Government for assessment - but this is consistent with a long-established pattern of non-compliance. Under the EPBC Act, a person or organisation must 'refer' an action to the Federal Government (i.e. provide information to determine whether an action requires approval) if it is likely to have a 'significant impact' on a Matter of National Environmental Significance (MNES) such as a threatened species or ecological community. However, University of Queensland research found that 93% of threatened species habitat destroyed after the EPBC Act was introduced, was bulldozed without federal referral.³⁰ The same research found that 78% of all land clearing across Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia between 2000 and 2017 was relevant to the EPBC Act. The agricultural sector responsible for the majority of that clearing, submitted a disproportionately low share of referrals across that period. In other words, the agricultural sector represented merely 1.3% of all referrals to the Federal Government.

Without strong, outcome-based Standards underpinned by enforcement mechanisms with teeth, the bulldozing will continue unabated.



Image: Deforestation of mapped threatened species habitat (160 hectares), near Chinchilla, December 2025, just days after new federal environment laws passed parliament.

²⁹ See Wilderness Society's report: Albanese's QLD Deforestation Report Card (2025) <https://wilderness.org.au/news-events/shocking-investigation-reveals-one-million-hectares-of-queensland-forest-bulldozed-under-the-albanese-government> (Accessed 21 April 2026).

³⁰ Ward et al (2019), Lots of loss with little scrutiny: The attrition of habitat critical for threatened species in Australia. Available at: <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/csp2.117> (Accessed 21 April 2026).

Images: Deforestation of mapped threatened species habitat (160 hectares), near Chinchilla, December 2025, just days after new federal environment laws passed parliament.



The Matters of National Significance (MNES) standard will fail nature

The Wilderness Society highlighted the following **significant failings of the draft MNES Standard in its submission:**

- Approvals will be based on process, not protection. A developer or logging agency can satisfy the Standard simply by following a set of principles and a mitigation or compensation process, rather than by actually avoiding harm or delivering real outcomes for nature. This is a major lowering of the bar.
- When read alongside the draft Offsets Standard, the MNES Standard will drive offsets rather than the upfront protection of nature, establishing a dangerous "pay to destroy" precedent where proponents can buy their way past habitat destruction instead of avoiding it.
- Protections for threatened species habitat have been weakened. The objectives for threatened species, threatened ecological communities and migratory species have all been narrowed, leaving their habitat with weaker protection than before.
- The Standard fails to set robust and clear rules or thresholds for how decisions will be made on proposals that would impact matters of national environmental significance.
- Vague and discretionary language throughout the Standard undermines its ability to deliver better outcomes for nature, and weakens certainty and accountability in decision-making under the EPBC Act.
- Cumulative impacts are not an explicit requirement. The Standard limits consideration of context to bioregional plans and strategic assessments, rather than requiring it across all decisions.
- Climate change is not mentioned at all. The Standard fails to require that impacts on nature be considered in the context of different climate change scenarios, despite climate being a systemic threat to the species and places it is meant to protect.
- Monitoring, reporting and enforcement are left underdone with insufficient detail on what will be required to track whether the Standard is actually working.
- Indigenous Rights are not upheld. The Standard lacks rules for effective and genuine engagement with Indigenous people and for the contribution of Indigenous knowledge.
- The Standard is not clear on what counts as effective public consultation, leaving little guarantee of a meaningful role for the community in decisions.

Wilderness Society's policy recommendations

Federal Government - National Environmental Standards

The Wilderness Society calls on the Albanese Government to implement the following measures to ensure Federal Environmental Standards provide genuine protection for nature:

- The legal test for consistency should require that an action actually achieves the Standard's outcomes and objectives, not merely that a process has been followed.
- The objectives for threatened species, ecological communities and migratory species should be amended to protect all habitat, not only habitat defined in narrow and restrictive terms.
- The Standard should require explicit consideration of cumulative impacts, climate change scenarios and key threatening processes in all decisions, none of which the proposed Standard currently addresses.
- The Standard should be extended to apply to plans, policies and programs made under the Act, not just specified decisions, and should include requirements for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of whether the outcomes and objectives are being achieved.

Federal Government - Urgent action required beyond National Environmental Standards

- Substantially increase federal funding for nature protection and recovery, which currently sits at around 0.06% of the federal budget, far short of what the government's own commitment to end extinctions requires.
- Support a national deforestation monitoring program (vegetation mapping) and early-detection system, and fund a traceability system for agricultural products so they can be tracked from "farm-to-fork," demonstrating sustainability credentials and ensuring ongoing market access.
- Set a target for a national deforestation roadmap.
- Educate all stakeholders about their updated responsibilities under the national nature protection law, including landholders and the state and territory departments that often deal directly with them.
- Compel proponents to refer to proposed deforestation of threatened species habitat, and require the decision-maker to assess it.
- Urgently improve federal environmental compliance and enforcement by the new EPA through boosted funding, strengthened policies and a clear prioritisation of cracking down on illegal deforestation.
- Require large companies and financial institutions to publicly disclose nature-related impacts, risks and opportunities.
- Enshrine a fair say for the community in environmental decision-making, as well as the cultural and self-determination rights of First Nations, including the right to give or withhold free, prior and informed consent.

Policy recommendations for corporate actors:

To mitigate exposure to nature risk and deforestation, including potentially illegal deforestation of threatened species habitat, the largest domestic buyers of Australian beef, including Coles and Woolworths, must take genuine steps to adhere to strict “deforestation (and conversion)-free” policies in all Australian states and territories they purchase beef from. This includes:

- Publishing a time-bound plan to require all beef suppliers to meet deforestation-free targets.
- Detailing the actions that will be taken to support suppliers and ensure compliance with expectations, as well as remediation steps for breaches.
- Disclosing actions taken to trace beef supply chains and the outcomes achieved.
- Providing time-bound plans to achieve lifetime farm-to-fork traceability and geolocation of all farms supplying beef.
- Outline obstacles met and actions taken to address them, to achieve traceability and geolocation of all farms supplying beef.
- Providing a timeline for sourcing Australian hardwood pallets exclusively from plantation timber, with no timber sourced from native forests, and outline the rationale for this transition.

Policy recommendations for the Queensland Government:

To protect safeguard Queensland’s unique forests and bushland and protect the Great Barrier Reef, Wilderness Society recommends the Crisafulli Queensland Government:

- **Release an up to date Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) on an annual basis:**
 - The Queensland Government’s 2023 independent review chaired by Professor Hugh Possingham, the *Native Vegetation Scientific Expert Panel report*, recommended that SLATS be released annually. The report recommended the releases include ‘state-wide data and data breakdowns by Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IBRA) regions and show the full balance sheet of native vegetation, with clearing, re-clearing and recovering vegetation explicitly defined and accounted (for).’³¹
- **Strengthen and ensure the robust enforcement of Queensland’s Vegetation Management Act (VMA) 1999:**
 - Close loopholes in the VMA to increase protection of remnant vegetation, high value regrowth, vegetation on watercourses and land subject to degradation, threatened species habitat and tightly restrict fodder harvesting.
 - Tree clearing, particularly of waterways (riparian areas), remains among the largest drivers of water pollution.³² It is highly alarming that the targets for riparian vegetation in the 2050 Catchment Water Quality Strategy have been updated to be even less ambitious. The Strategy now only targets ‘no

³¹ Queensland Government (2023), ‘Native Vegetation Scientific Expert Panel report’. Available at: https://environment.desi.qld.gov.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0025/324574/expert-panel-report.pdf pp. 8 (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

³² Australian Marine Conservation Society (2025) ‘After two years of delays, the government’s strategy to reduce water pollution in the Great Barrier Reef says little and promises even less’ Available at: <https://www.marineconservation.org.au/governments-strategy-to-reduce-water-pollution-says-little-and-promises-even-less/> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

net loss' instead of aiming for an increase in riparian vegetation. This will lead to sediment pollution posing a risk to coral and seagrass ecosystems.³³

- Address loopholes in and compliance with vegetation clearing codes. Wilderness Society observations using our satellite technology platform, *Watch on Nature*, has revealed the misuse of the weed management code as well as logging on private property of Category B (remnant vegetation) undertaken without Government oversight using the self-assessable vegetation clearing code, NFP.³⁴ The Wilderness Society is concerned about clearing codes being exploited to expand agricultural land clearing.
- Boost investment in compliance and enforcement to monitor the efficiency of Queensland's *Vegetation Management Act (VMA) 1999* to protect high conservation value (HCV) forest and bushland and prevent unexplained land clearing and deforestation.
- Incentivise and support sustainable land management and stewardship:
 - Enhance private stewardship programs (including the Land Restoration Fund) by increasing funding opportunities, deepening landholder engagement and take up and focusing on both regulated and unregulated lands (e.g. Category B, Category R, Category C and Category X lands).
 - Provide financial incentives, technical assistance, and extension programs for landholders adopting sustainable land management practices, including:
 - Improved management of existing cleared land for enhanced productivity.
 - Restoration of degraded lands and reforestation initiatives.

View recent footage of bulldozed threatened species habitat happening across Queensland, including in Great Barrier Reef caught on camera by the Wilderness Society [here](#).

³³ Australian Marine Conservation Society (2025) 'After two years of delays, the government's strategy to reduce water pollution in the Great Barrier Reef says little and promises even less' Available at: <https://www.marineconservation.org.au/governments-strategy-to-reduce-water-pollution-says-little-and-promises-even-less/> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).

³⁴ Queensland Government (2023), 'Clearing Codes' Available from: <https://www.qld.gov.au/environment/land/management/vegetation/clearing-approvals/codes/choose> (Accessed: 30 April 2026).