Federal Budget 2026–27

Submission by the Invasive Species Council

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Document details

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About the Invasive Species Council

The Invasive Species Council was formed in 2002 to advocate for stronger laws, policies and programs to keep Australian biodiversity safe from weeds, feral animals, exotic pathogens and other invaders. It is a not-for-profit charitable organisation, funded predominantly by donations from supporters and philanthropic organisations.

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Introduction

an obligation to future generations to deliver a better standard of living
productivity matters, … budget sustainability matters, … resilience … matters
Reform which is progressive and patriotic … and practical and pragmatic
methodical reform, which is considered and collaborative and ambitious

Treasurer Jim Chalmers, National Press Club, June 2025

Australia is overrun by invasive species that hunt, trample, disease and outcompete native wildlife. They **degrade** ecosystems, **erode** Indigenous culture, **cost** farmers many billions of dollars a year, **sabotage** climate goals by fueling intense fires, **endanger** public health, and **damage** the environmental values underpinning our nature tourism industry. The annual measurable cost of invasive species already exceeds **$24.5 billion** (a CSIRO compilation of published costs).

The funding proposals in this submission – to eliminate and suppress invasive species – would deliver benefits that meet all the priorities articulated by the Treasurer in his National Press Club address.

They will drive **methodical**, **collaborative**, **ambitious** reforms for nature – that are also of enormous benefit for people. They will ensure a **better standard of living** for current and future generations.

Living with fire ants would mean painful, sometimes deadly, encounters with stinging swarms; dead pets; billions in annual costs. Eradicating them should therefore be a **standard-of-living, sustainability** and **productivity** imperative for multiple government agencies. The same is true for rabbits, which will ravage landscapes and farm incomes unless we re-invest in biocontrol efficacy.

Nothing could be more **progressive and patriotic** than saving Australian wildlife from extinction and protecting precious places such as national parks and islands from exotic invaders. To improve our capacity to do all this, we need to invest in Australians' talent for solving difficult problems by supporting **collaborative and ambitious** innovation from lab to landscape.

Some proposals build on existing programs of proven effectiveness – a new round of the flagship Saving Native Species program is essential to meet government targets. Others propose new programs, recognising that environmental spending, including on invasive species, has been far too low for far too long.

This submission is guided by 5 principles for effective environmental investments, focused on ensuring that public money is invested wisely to achieve the most beneficial long-term outcomes.

Principles for effective environmental investments

1. **Prioritise prevention and eradication**: Biosecurity prevention should be treated as a productivity investment with a high benefit-cost ratio. Eradications, such as that of red fire ants, must be treated as national emergencies that do not require funding offsets.
2. **Avoid funding cliffs**: Early, decisive decisions on major programs – such as Saving Native Species, NESP, and fire ant eradication – are essential to prevent costly program disruption and loss of skilled personnel.
3. **Invest in identified strategic priorities**: Environmental expenditure should be concentrated on strategic, planned priorities rather than fragmented competitive grants.
4. **Invest in workforce capacity**: Workforce planning is required to ensure a skilled capacity for conservation management, especially for invasive species and fire management in protected areas and on public land.
5. **Build responsive capacity into programs**: Recognising the biological nature of invasions, programs must have inbuilt agility and funds to seize opportunities (e.g. droughts) and react swiftly to emerging threats.

Funding proposals for the Australian budget 2026–2027

Proposal section	Investment item	Term (years)	Total cost ($m)	2026–27 budget ($m)	Forward estimates ($m)	Beyond forward estimates ($m)
CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL PRIORITIES						
Fire ants (page 3)	National Fire Ant Eradication Program (suppression boost)	2	24.0	12.0	12.0	–
	National Fire Ant Eradication Program	6	378.6	–	189.3	189.3
Science (page 7)	National environmental solutions accelerator fund	4	80.0	20.0	60.0	–
Subtotal		**–**	**482.6**	**32.0**	**261.3**	**189.3**
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY (DAFF)						
Project fund (page 3)	Environmental Biosecurity Project Fund	4	10.0	2.5	7.5	
Rabbits (page 4)	Rabbit Biocontrol Pipeline Strategy	5	15.0	3.0	9.0	3.0
Mega-threats (page 5)	National invasive species action coordinators (7 FTE)	4	11.2	2.8	8.4	–
APVMA (page 4)	Biosecurity permit coordinator	3	1.5	0.5	1.0	–
	Biosecurity permit processes and treatments	3	0.9	0.3	0.6	–
DAFF subtotal		**–**	**38.6**	**9.1**	**26.5**	**3.0**
DEPARTMENT OF CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY, THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER (DCCEEW)						
Nature fund (page 3)	Saving Native Species fund	4	300.0	75.0	225.0	–
Mega-threats (page 5)	Nature resilience and threat abatement fund	4	48.0	12.0	36.0	–
	H5 bird flu species resilience program	2	16.0	8.0	8.0	–
Precious places (page 6)	Protected areas invasives action fund	4	160.0	40.0	120.0	–
	National islands eradication and recovery fund	10	200.0	20.0	60.0	120.0
Voice of Country (page 5)	Commissioner for Country	4	8.0	2.0	6.0	–
Science (page 6)	National Environmental Science Program	6	300.0	50.0	150.0	100.0
DCCEEW subtotal		**–**	**1,032.0**	**207.0**	**605.0**	**220.0**
TOTAL INVESTMENT		**–**	**$1,553.2**	**$248.1**	**$892.8**	**$412.3**

1. Eradicate fire ants

Eradicating fire ants now, while it is still technically feasible, is one of the most socially, environmentally and financially responsible decisions the government can make. Failure to act decisively will burden Australia with costs estimated to exceed $22 billion by the 2040s, impoverish ecosystems, and leave large parts of the continent dangerous for humans and domestic animals.

Because a nationwide infestation will be an economy-wide impost – with costs to health, agriculture, infrastructure, tourism, sport, local government, education and the environment – this funding should not be subject to a requirement for offsetting against other funding in the DAFF budget. Eradication funding should be treated as a whole-of-government priority and be additional to other departmental expenditures.

While recent eradication efforts are reversing the spread, current funding levels are insufficient to achieve total eradication. To secure the success of the National Fire Ant Eradication Program, the government must ensure continuity of funding and an immediate suppression boost in high-density areas.

$24 million over 2 years for fire ant suppression work to be undertaken by the National Fire Ant Eradication Program managing high-density fire ant infestation sites in the fire ant suppression zone.

$378.56 million over 6 years (from 2027–28 to 2032–33) to secure the eradication trajectory. This number is subject to verification by the eradication gate review due in mid-2026.

2. Rescue the Saving Native Species fund

No new extinctions, the Australian Government pledged in 2022. Meeting this pledge will require reversing a dire trajectory: Australia has already suffered the extinction of 7 unique animal species this century, and more than 100 plants and animals have been assessed by the National Environmental Science Program as more likely than not to be extinct by 2040.

Yet funding for the main national program focused on staving off extinctions is set to expire in mid-2026. It seems unthinkable that the Australian Government would allow the expiry of the Saving Native Species program – a primary source of funding, strategy and energy for reversing the nature crisis. EPBC reforms will count for little unless they are backed by efforts to save highly threatened species and tackle critical extinction drivers, including invasive species. At a minimum, the program should be maintained with a modest funding indexation from $224.5 million over 3.5 years to $300 million over 4 years.

Examples of projects at immediate risk:

- Yellow crazy ant eradications to protect the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area
- Gamba grass eradications to prevent catastrophic invasion of Kakadu National Park and west Arnhem Land
- Kangaroo Island feral cat eradication to create Australia's largest island haven
- Tasmanian feral deer and cat control on Bruny Island and the Midlands biodiversity hotspots.

$300 million over 4 years to maintain and expand the Saving Native Species program – to protect some of our most vulnerable species and precious places, and tackle critical extinction drivers.

3. Boost the Environmental Biosecurity Project Fund

Despite escalating threats and the acknowledged need to strengthen environmental biosecurity, the budget for Australia's only dedicated environmental biosecurity fund has been frozen since its 2018 inception, preventing many worthy high-impact projects from even being considered.

Environmental biosecurity presents big challenges that differ fundamentally from those of agricultural biosecurity and warrant an increase to dedicated funding focus to:

- investigate environment-specific invasion risks and pathways
- improve surveillance for invaders with primarily ecological impacts
- support the development of promising innovations for managing environmental invaders
- better engaging communities as the eyes and ears of our biosecurity system.

The proposed modest annual increase, for $0.8 million to $2.5 million would enable more ambitious multi-year projects and back in the elevated status of the Chief Environmental Biosecurity Officer to allow them to build government, community and industry capacity to prepare for, respond to and reduce environmental risks.

$10 million over 4 years for the Environmental Biosecurity Project Fund to enable support for high-impact, multi-year environmental biosecurity projects.

4. Prevent a looming rabbit plague

Denuded landscapes, eroded soils, ravaged crops and vanishing wildlife – rabbits are Australia's most costly vertebrate invader ($200 million/year cost to farmers) and a threat to more than 300 nationally listed species.

Australia has had great success suppressing rabbit populations with biocontrols, but the research pipeline has dried up since the last biocontrol release in 2017. Rabbits build immunity to biocontrol, and a new release is needed every decade or so to prevent population explosions and escalating damage to nature, agriculture and the economy. **The Rabbit Biocontrol Pipeline Strategy is endorsed by national experts and all governments, but currently lacks federal investment.**

$15 million over 5 years to fund the nationally endorsed Rabbit Biocontrol Pipeline Strategy. This investment is critical to fast-track the next rabbit biocontrol virus before existing controls fail.

5. Unblock biosecurity response tools

Effective responses to biosecurity incursions often rely on the timely availability of chemical controls. **Currently, the regulatory process for minor or emergency use permits can be a bottleneck, undermining the potential for success or increasing the costs.** Dedicated resources within the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) are required to streamline this process. The solution to this bottleneck will involve a combination of direct support with applications and a project to ensure that jurisdictions leading biosecurity responses are able to collect and submit relevant data to deploy the correct treatments in their applications.

$1.5 million over 3 years to fund a biosecurity permit coordinator within the APVMA with the following functions:

- Engage with state/territory jurisdictions and biosecurity management groups to ensure timely processing of minor or emergency use permits.
- Promote engagement with end users to ensure correct and effective use of chemicals under permits.
- Support jurisdictions leading biosecurity responses with explanatory language for use in the communication of permits and their functions where high public interest exists.

$900,000 over 3 years for work to align biosecurity needs, permit processes and available treatments and create improved predictability on permit application data package requirements.

6. Establish a Commissioner for Country

Caring for Country is deeply embedded in First Nations peoples' culture. Despite increasing acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge, Australia sorely lacks First Nations voices in environmental decision-making. **A statutory Commissioner for Country would elevate Indigenous leadership and ensure culturally appropriate governance in environmental law.** The Commissioner would work to:

- support First Nations people to care for Country
- advocate for biodiversity and culturally significant species
- provide advice to government on decisions under the EPBC Act that impact Indigenous people
- progress Indigenous-led solutions to environmental problems and inform policy design.

$4 million over 2 years to establish a Commonwealth Commissioner for Country in DCCEEW

7. Systematically mitigate mega-threats

7A. Reverse decline through threat abatement

With more than 2,000 native species and ecological communities listed as nationally threatened, it is not feasible to save them all – species-by-species, community-by-community – while their major threats remain potent. **To stop new extinctions, reverse declines and restore ecosystems, Australia must systematically mitigate the mega-threats driving declines.**

For more than 30 years, Australia has had a system for listing and abating key threatening processes – essential for addressing threats like feral cats unconstrained by regulations or protected area boundaries. The proposed Nature Resilience and Threat Abatement Fund would provide guaranteed baseline funding ($2 million a year) for coordinating abatement of 12 big threats to nature.

The Australian Government recognised the value of threat mitigation in its 2024 H5 bird flu response, acknowledging that reducing existing pressures is the most effective way to help wildlife survive an unavoidable outbreak of bird flu. We recommend maintaining the resilience funding at a similar level to achieve the dual benefits of boosting the resilience of native wildlife and achieving enduring threat mitigation. Unspent funds from any part of the current bird flu package should be rolled over.

$48 million over 4 years to establish a Nature Resilience and Threat Abatement Fund to support national collaboration on priority threats.

$16 million over 2 years to maintain the program boosting the resilience of species susceptible to H5 bird flu. Ensure that unspent funds are rolled over to strengthen long-term preparedness.

7B. Expand DAFF's successful national action coordinators network

National action coordinators for feral deer, pigs and cats have galvanised collaboration and co-investment, reducing the environmental and agricultural threat of some of Australia's most harmful invasive species.

We propose the expansion of the national network of action coordinators by 7 new roles ($400,000/year per coordinator). Priorities for coordination include (1) invasive grasses in northern Australia, (2) community surveillance, (3) invasive insects, (4) freshwater invasive species, (5) invasive cacti, (6) escaped garden plants and (7) myrtle rust and other exotic plant diseases.

$11.2 million over 4 years for 7 new national invasive species action coordinators.

8. Secure a feral-free future for precious places

8A. Create island wildlife havens

Australia's islands have been epicentres of extinction and continue to harbour a disproportionate number of threatened species. But they also offer unrivalled opportunities to recover threatened species because invasive species can be totally eliminated – a feat rarely achievable on the mainland for well-established invaders.

Australia should scale up one of its most demonstrably effective conservation interventions: island eradications to create wildlife havens. Recent outstanding successes on World Heritage islands – Macquarie, Dirk Hartog, Lord Howe – show how rapidly threatened species rebound when invasive predators are removed.

A National Islands Eradication and Recovery Fund would yield enormous benefits for endemic island wildlife, island-breeding seabirds, and at-risk mainland species. Examples of eradications that could be supported include feral cats on Kangaroo Island, weeds on Lord Howe Island, deer on Bruny Island, Argentine ants on Norfolk Island, gamba grass on Tiwi Islands and Groote Eylandt and yellow crazy ants on Hamilton Island.

$200 million over 10 years to establish a National Islands Eradication and Recovery Fund to provide the long-term funding needed to complete the full cycle of planning, eradication, verification and prevention of re-invasion.

8B. Stave off ecosystem collapses and extinctions in protected areas

While protected areas mostly stop land clearing and mining, they are not a barrier to biological invasions. Many of Australia's premier national parks are suffering devastating declines or are at grave risk:

- Six animal extinctions since 2000 have been of species with most of their habitat in national parks.
- In some premier national parks around the nation – world-heritage-listed Kakadu (NT) and Purnululu (WA), as well as Booderee (NSW) and Great Otway (Vic) – populations of several mammal species have collapsed.
- Invasions of highly flammable grasses are threatening the future of several parks – buffel grass in Uluru-Kata Tjuta and Tjoritja/West MacDonnell Ranges and gamba grass in Litchfield and Kakadu .

The precipitous decline of some of Australia's most valuable protected areas warrants federal investment to avert permanent loss. A Protected Areas Invasives Action Fund would enable state and territory governments to manage catastrophic threats that exceed routine management capacities.

$160 million over 4 years to establish a Protected Areas Invasives Action Fund to manage invasive threats in public and private protected areas at risk of ecosystem collapse or major biodiversity loss.

9. Innovate for a wildlife revival

9A. Accelerate research into practical invasive species solutions

Australia has a history of overcoming immense environmental challenges through research and innovation – epitomised by the Cactoblastis moth that beat back prickly pear and the viruses that keep rabbits from eating the land bare. Investment in research is essential for developing the cost-effective, landscape-scale solutions required to tackle invasive species.

The National Environmental Science Program delivers applied science to strengthen nature conservation. It has been instrumental in advancing our understanding of biodiversity trends, improving threatened species recovery and threat management, and supporting Indigenous land management. **But the scale of the invasive species**

crisis requires a more dedicated focus. With funding for the current program expiring in mid-2027, now is the time to commit to a renewed program with a priority focus on strengthening Australians' capacity to more effectively avert and suppress extinction-driving invasions.

$300 million over 6 years for the National Environmental Science Program, including for a dedicated invasive species hub to drive research for practical, scalable solutions for mitigating invasive threats.

9B. Support mission-driven innovation from lab to landscape

Australia's failure to overcome invasive threats is not due to a lack of scientific talent. Rather, promising solutions often fail to transition from the lab to the field because of the 'valley of death' – the gap between proof-of-concept and on-ground deployment. Australia currently lacks the innovation ecosystem needed to incentivise and scale these breakthroughs.

We've seen the power of focused collaborative efforts in ambitious global projects, such as the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines and New Zealand's Predator-Free 2050 program. **By unifying effort around high-impact challenges, Australia can transition from a reactive, piecemeal approach to a 'can-do' culture of conservation problem-solving.** New and emerging technologies – e.g. drones, AI, smart traps, eDNA monitors, thermal imaging cameras – combined with a deeper understanding of invader attributes are opening the door to addressing previously intractable problems.

One inspiring challenge would be to create the conditions – effective suppression of fox populations – to enable eastern quolls to once again thrive on the mainland (outside fenced reserves). Another worthy challenge would be to halt the inexorable western expansion of feral deer by enabling large-scale ungulate control.

$80 million over 4 years to establish a National Environmental Solutions Accelerator Fund dedicated to motivating, driving and supporting the development of innovative solutions to Australia's most harmful invasions.