

Queensland's opportunity to exempt conservation covenants from land tax

Policy Note

SUMMARY

Queensland is the only remaining Australian state that levies land tax on landholders with conservation covenants. The Queensland Government has an opportunity to significantly expand the public environmental, social and economic benefits that are provided by covenants to all Queenslanders by exempting them from land tax, aligning its policy settings with the other states of Australia.

The Australian Land Conservation Alliance — Australia's peak body for private land conservation — strongly recommends the Queensland Government introduce a land tax exemption for land protected under Nature Refuges¹, *Land Title Act* voluntary conservation covenants², and Special Wildlife Reserves³ (SWRs) to:

- support its protected area targets and lift its contribution to Australia's '30 by 30' goal (protecting 30% of Australia's lands by 2030);
- avoid disincentivising landholders from engaging in conservation and stewardship;
- support landscape-scale environmental, social and economic benefits; and
- align Queensland policy with all other Australian states.



WHAT ARE CONSERVATION COVENANTS?

A conservation covenant (known widely as ‘nature refuges’ in Queensland; but also, separately, voluntary covenants under the *Land Title Act*) is a legal mechanism placed voluntarily by landholders on a property title to permanently protect some or all of their land for biodiversity.

Special Wildlife Reserves (SWRs) are a distinct type of conservation covenant currently only found in Queensland. SWRs are used to protect land that can demonstrate exceptional ecological or cultural value.

Nature refuges and SWRs contribute to:

- Australia’s National Reserve System⁴;
- The ‘30 by 30’ protection target from the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity’s Global Biodiversity Framework⁵;
- The Queensland Government’s *Protected Area Strategy 2020-2030* (17% land target⁶);
- Carbon sequestration, climate change mitigation, and resilient agricultural landscapes.

WHY ARE CONSERVATION COVENANTS IMPORTANT?

Conservation covenants protect high value conservation areas and ecosystems. They help to reconnect fragmented landscapes and allow for the movement of wildlife, helping to deliver landscape-scale protection of biodiversity. With approximately half of Australia’s threatened species relying on private land for habitat, and with private land tenure dominating in ecosystems that are underrepresented in Australia’s National Reserve System, conservation and stewardship efforts on privately managed land are essential.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO GOVERNMENT?

➤ Protecting high-value biodiversity on private land

Conservation covenants help safeguard diverse habitats and threatened species and are a key tool in delivering a comprehensive protected area network. A well-planned, and well-managed network of protected areas is also the most prospective and important strategy for reducing the negative impacts of climate change on biodiversity⁷.

➤ Contributing to Queensland’s protected areas target

In 2015, the Queensland Government adopted a long-term target of increasing its protected areas on land to 17% of the state⁸. As at 30 June 2024, Queensland had secured only 8.6% of the state in

protected areas⁹. Conservation on private land will be essential to meet this target, especially in underrepresented landscapes dominated by private land.

⊗ Delivering cost-effective conservation outcomes

Supporting existing landholders to manage and protect nature on private land is a cost-effective strategy, especially in areas where land acquisition may be challenging or where there are particularly high land values.

⊗ Safeguarding Queensland's nature-dependent economy

Approximately half of Australia's GDP has a moderate to very high dependence on nature¹⁰. The World Economic Forum has similarly found that *"over half the world's total GDP – is moderately or highly dependent on nature and its services"*¹¹. Long-term protection of our remnant biodiversity is the best way to safeguard the nature-reliant sectors of our economy.

⊗ Aligning with collective national and international commitments

Covenants contribute to the shared commitment of State, Territory and Commonwealth governments to *"work collectively to achieve a national target to protect and conserve 30% of Australia's landmass and 30% of Australia's marine areas by 2030"*¹², and to develop a comprehensive, adequate, and representative ('CAR') terrestrial protected areas within the National Reserve System¹³.

They also contribute to Australia's international commitment to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework Agreement under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity¹⁴.

WHAT IS THE LAND TAX EXEMPTION OPPORTUNITY?

Queensland is the only state jurisdiction still to levy land tax on land under a voluntary conservation covenant – i.e. privately managed land permanently protected for nature. Whilst a landholder with a covenant does derive some private benefits, voluntary conservation on private land overwhelmingly delivers a **public** benefit.

Despite this public benefit, many private landholders are not eligible for land tax exemptions¹⁵ (unlike ALCA member organisations that can access the 'Charitable institutions exemption'¹⁶). As a result, these landholders receive no financial incentive to transition land into formal conservation under a covenant.

Further, landholders who qualify for an existing exemption can be actively penalised, as often they will lose that exemption if they place a conservation covenant upon their land. This acts as a major disincentive for private landholders to contribute to the Queensland Government's policy goals and commitments.

In Victoria, the most recent state government that introduced a land tax exemption for covenants, landholder interest in covenants increased by 135% (i.e. over double) in the year following the commencement of the exemption¹⁷.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ALCA strongly recommends that:

- ⊗ The Queensland Government progresses a land tax exemption for land under conservation covenant (nature refuge, *Land Title Act* voluntary conservation covenant, and Special Wildlife Reserve).

ALCA and its member organisations can:

- ⊗ Provide case studies of affected Queensland landholders; and
- ⊗ Provide further detail on the efficacy of the land tax exemption in incentivising voluntary private land conservation in other jurisdictions.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

More information on nature refuges:

[Nature Refuges Program](#) | Email naturerefuge@des.qld.gov.au

More information on Special Wildlife Reserves (SWRs):

[Special Wildlife Reserves](#) | Email swr@des.qld.gov.au

Contact ALCA: ALCA's Policy Lead, Michael Cornish, who stands ready to provide further information and assistance. Email michael@alca.org.au

Australian Land Conservation Alliance, July 2025

1 <https://www.qld.gov.au/environment/parks/protected-areas/private/program>
2 Voluntary covenants under s97A of the *Land Title Act* 1994; <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-1994-011>
3 <https://www.qld.gov.au/environment/parks/protected-areas/private/special-wildlife-reserves>
4 <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/land/nrs>
5 Target 3, <https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222>
6 https://parks.des.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/212524/qld-protected-area-strategy-2020-30.pdf
7 *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009–2030*, May 2009; <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/nrsstrat.pdf>
8 https://parks.des.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/212524/qld-protected-area-strategy-2020-30.pdf
9 https://parks.desi.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/342160/qld-protected-area-strategy-2023-report-card.pdf
10 Australian Conservation Foundation, *The nature-based economy: How Australia's prosperity depends on nature*, September 2022; <https://www.acf.org.au/how-australias-prosperity-depends-on-nature>
11 World Economic Forum, *Nature Risk Rising: Why the Crisis Engulfing Nature Matters for Business and the Economy*, January 2020; <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2020>
12 Agreed Communique, Environment Ministers Meeting, 21 October 2022; <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/emm-communique-21-oct-2022.pdf>
13 As reaffirmed in: *Directions for the National Reserve System – A partnership approach*, Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council, 2005; <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/env/pages/35ded9a1-0a17-47fa-a518-05f7bfe045ce/files/directions.pdf>
14 <https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222>
15 <https://qro.qld.gov.au/land-tax/relief/exemptions/>
16 <https://www.publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/form-osr-lt15-exemption-charitable-institution>
17 Exemption commenced 1 January 2024; there was a 135% increase in Number of EOI forms received for conservation covenants in 2024 compared to 2023; source: Victorian Government statutory entity, Trust For Nature Victoria