

ACF Investigates: Bulldozing the bush

19 JUNE 2025



AUSTRALIAN
CONSERVATION
FOUNDATION

Nature
needs us,
now

**We acknowledge the
Traditional Owners of
Country** and their continuing
connection to land, waters and
community. **We pay respect to
their Elders past and present
and to the pivotal role that
First Nations Peoples continue
to play in caring for Country
across Australia.**

Citizen investigators discover Australia is bulldozing bushland at an alarming scale, putting native wildlife at significant risk of extinction

Australia is in the grip of an extinction crisis. There are now more than 2,200 Australian ecosystems, plants and animals recognised as being threatened with extinction, driven in a large part by the relentless bulldozing of bushland.

To our national shame, Australia ranks among the world's worst deforestation hotspots. Up to half a million hectares of precious habitat is razed annually, and devastatingly, for every 100 hectares cleared, an estimated 2,000 birds, 15,000 reptiles and 500 mammals are killed.

New findings from the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) now reveals 90,000 hectares of native habitat—equivalent in size to about 320 Sydney CBDs—were cleared across 176 properties between 2020 and 2025. By far, the biggest driver of habitat destruction on these properties was agriculture (85% of cases), most often for beef.

The clearing was detected by hundreds of dedicated, nature-loving Australians—on their smartphones while commuting to work and on computers at home— who signed up to ACF Investigates, ACF's crowd-sourced investigation into habitat destruction. Participants used a tool to compare satellite imagery from 2023 and 2024 which was then sent to the ACF investigation team for further analysis.

All identified clearing occurred in areas mapped as habitat for nationally listed threatened species. Sadly, this is merely a snapshot of the habitat destruction driven by land clearing that is occurring all across Australia.

This is happening despite Australia signing the Glasgow Leaders Declaration to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation at the global climate summit COP26 in 2021. It is also occurring as major brands such as Aldi, Woolworths, and McDonald's — alongside more than 200 global food and beverage companies—commit to phase-out deforestation from their supply chains, and Westpac bank from its agricultural lending, by the end of 2025. This means many operators identified as bulldozing the bush in this analysis risk being locked out of major markets.

Damningly, but not surprisingly, not a single case of this habitat destruction was ever referred for approval under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act). Again, this is consistent with the double standard applied to habitat destruction under federal law over recent decades, with only 2.5% of referrals linked to agriculture over the 25-year life of the Act despite agriculture being associated with the majority of habitat removal.

This crowd-sourced investigation proves that hundreds of everyday Australians care deeply about protecting nature from deforestation, and are compelled to take action.

With this year's COP30 climate summit fast approaching, and reform of national environment laws overdue, it is urgent that the Albanese Government acts to end deforestation in Australia, through the delivery of strong new nature laws and an independent Environmental Protection Authority. Major beef buyers such as Hungry Jack's, McDonald's, and Patties, as well as Australia's major banks must also set and implement science-based 'no deforestation' commitments by the end of 2025.

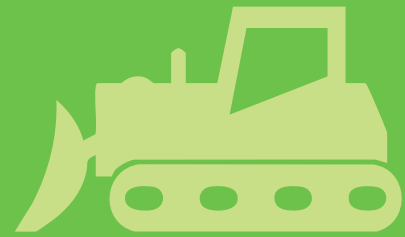
By the numbers



675

individuals
contributed to the
identification of
habitat destruction.

176



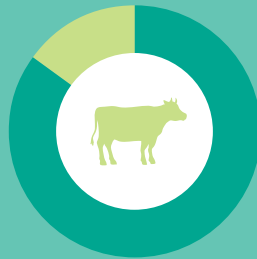
cases of habitat destruction totalling
90,000 hectares was confirmed, with 500
hectares removed per property on average
and the largest removing 7,000 hectares.



104

cases were discovered
in Queensland, 62 in
NSW, 7 in WA and 3 in
the NT.

150 or 85%



of cases occurred on
agricultural properties,
143 of which are livestock
farms, including 69 beef
properties (almost certainly an
underestimation with a further
60 properties identified as
unknown livestock, many of
which are likely to be beef).



ACF Investigates

The main drivers of habitat destruction

Thanks to the efforts of 675 of citizen investigators, ACF has uncovered 176 cases of ongoing and recent habitat destruction across Australia without approval under national environment laws, totalling



90,000
hectares of
land clearing.

To put that into perspective,
that is an area that is equivalent to
approximately



320
Sydney CBDs



or the total area of the
**Australian
Capital
Territory**
excluding National Parks

The average area of bush cleared per property was a little over 500 hectares and the largest area cleared on a single property was 7000 hectares.

The vast majority of cases discovered were on agricultural properties (150 out of the 176) and the biggest driver of deforestation is livestock farming (at least 143 of 176 cases). A total of 69 cases—representing more than half the total area cleared—were identified as beef farms.¹

Just 26 locations appeared to have been cleared for non-agricultural uses, including [industrial developments](#), residential development, and transport.

The deforestation occurred across the country, with 104 cases discovered in Queensland, 62 in New South Wales, seven in Western Australia and three in the Northern Territory. Over half the cases were concentrated in the Brigalow Belt bioregion.

What's the impact on threatened species?

All of the vegetation analysed is more than 15 years old, the [average age after which regrowing forest and woodlands provide valuable habitat for many threatened species](#). A significant proportion of the clearing is of remnant vegetation, which is more likely to provide habitat for a higher number of species including those, like greater gliders, that require tree hollows for nesting.

The koala is the threatened species likely to be most impacted by this unchecked clearing, as it is likely to live at more than one third of the locations where bush has been cleared.

Other species impacted in dozens of the cases include the pink cockatoo, greater glider, grey falcon, diamond firetail, blue-winged parrot, malleefowl and corben's long-eared bat, as well as endangered ecological communities such as brigalow and poplar box bushlands.

Some of these examples of bulldozing could even have knocked down habitat for critically endangered species like the swift parrot, regent honeyeater, and bullock jewel butterfly, as well as several critically endangered ecological communities.

¹ This figure includes properties where cattle used for beef were one of several types of livestock.

A case of regulatory failure?

As well as revealing dozens of individual cases of serious deforestation that would otherwise have gone unnoticed, the fact that so many cases can be found in just one year by an NGO **shows that our national nature law, the EPBC Act, is not working to protect our rarest animals and most precious habitats, and that state and federal laws are failing to halt and reverse forest loss and degradation.**

This collection of cases adds to a growing body of evidence that there is a [double standard](#) when it comes to referring habitat destruction to the national regulator for approval: deforestation on agricultural land is rarely referred or the subject of enforcement action, and therefore the agriculture sector enjoys a de-facto exemption from national nature laws.

To elaborate:

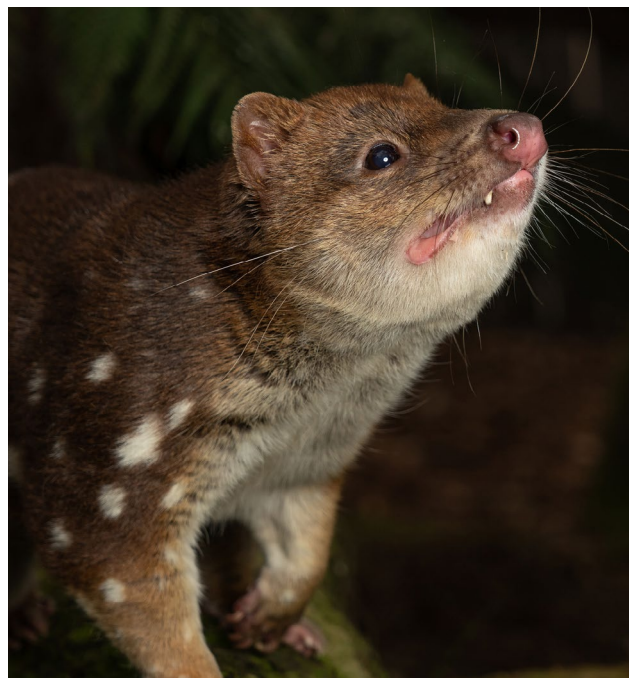
- Over the 25-year history of Australia's national nature law, only 125 out of 5000 referrals were for agriculture—that's just 2.5% of all referrals, despite the fact that the Statewide Landcover and Trees Study data routinely shows that agriculture is responsible for the majority of canopy loss across Queensland and New South Wales.
- Late last year, an agricultural project in the Mallee that proposed the destruction of 113.2 hectares of native vegetation was referred under the EPBC Act and deemed to be a controlled action requiring federal approval.² In contrast, this investigation uncovered nine clearing events in the Mallee³ with over 100 hectares of clearing—four of which had over 1000 hectares of clearing—yet none of which were referred under the EPBC Act.

Is it illegal?

In total, ACF identified 105 cases of clearing that potentially breached state and/or federal law.⁴ These 105 cases have been or will be reported to government authorities (see below 'How has ACF acted on this information?').

ACF will report 76 cases covering 31,866 hectares of land clearing to the federal government for potential breaches of national nature law, the EPBC Act.

ACF knows from conversations with landowners and comments in the media that many people incorrectly assume that a state approval (for example, a certificate from the NSW Local Land Services) eliminates the need for a federal approval. This isn't accurate, and ACF believes that regulators could do more to help inform landholders of their federal obligation under the EPBC Act to refer clearing that could significantly impact Matters of National Environmental Significance, even if that clearing is permitted by other levels of government.



² Bellevue Estate Irrigation Expansion Project, 2024/09990

³ Murray Darling Depression and Riverina cases

⁴ Of these 110 cases:

- 57 cases involved clearing that potentially breached both federal and state law
- 25 cases involved clearing that potentially breached only federal law
- 28 cases involved clearing that potentially breached only state law.

How is ACF acting on this information?

ACF has reported or is in the process of reporting a number of the cases to relevant authorities. We have been told that enquiries are being made into several cases. For those cases where we discovered active clearing that may have been in breach of state/federal law, we reported immediately and, in most cases, contacted the landholder to seek information and inform them of their obligations. Clearing was halted for at least one of these cases (in Singleton NSW).

ACF will also provide this data to the supermarkets and fast-food chains who are the major buyers of beef and agricultural products, and to banks who have an obligation to adjust their lending so that it doesn't support the destruction of nature, especially where it may be illegal.

How much of the clearing is deforestation?

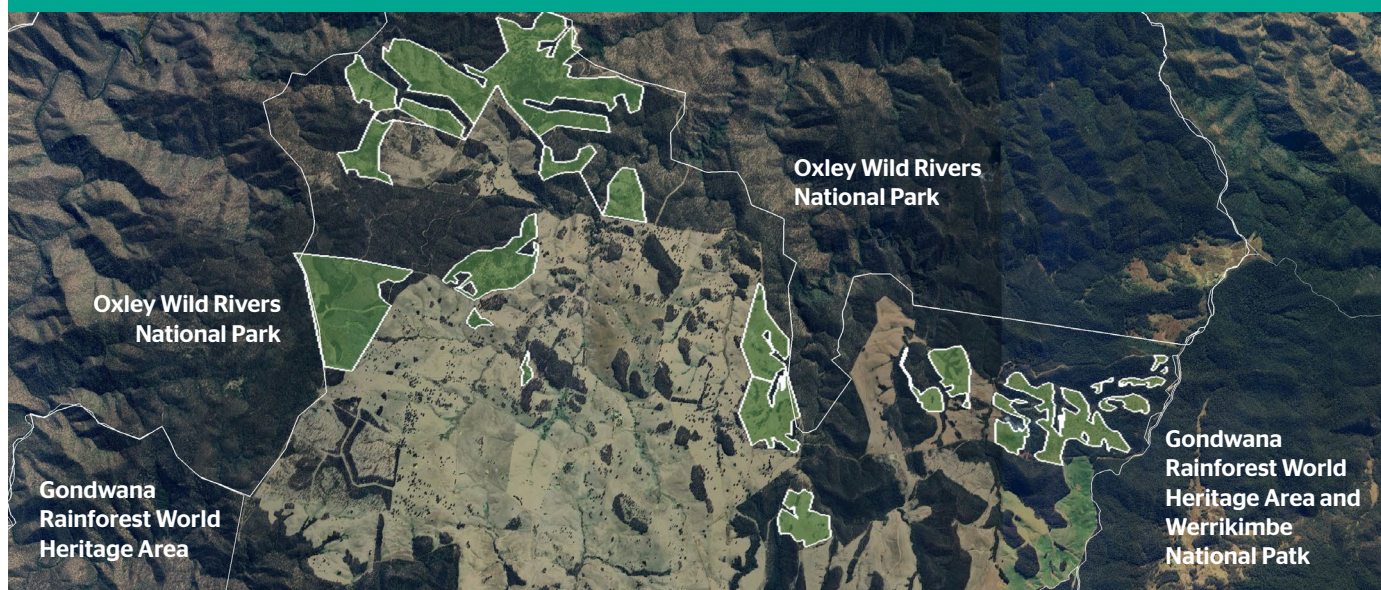
Most of the clearing was of vegetation that meets the quantitative threshold to be called a forest based on the UN-FAO definition (an area of land with trees over 5m and 10% canopy cover), and all of the forest was older than 15 years at the time of clearing meaning it is likely to be regarded as 'natural forest' according to the Accountability Framework Initiative (AFi). 161 out of 176 cases involved a significant amount of deforestation, with 137 cases being at least 50% deforestation.

How did we discover these cases of land clearing?

In November 2024, ACF launched an online crowdsourced investigation that allowed everyday people to investigate potential deforestation by comparing and classifying satellite images. 675 people took part, scanning over 4 million hectares of Australia where threatened species are most likely to live, and where AI had predicted deforestation might have occurred between winter 2023 and winter 2024. This phase resulted in 500+ leads generated by volunteer investigators. The ACF investigations team then thoroughly investigated each of the leads, ruling out any cases that were caused by bushfire, caused by forestry exempt under the EPBC Act, were too small (generally <5ha unless they were clearly significant), were clearing of <15 year old regrowth, or had federal approval under the EPBC Act to clear, and ultimately identified 176 cases as genuine, significant, clearing of native vegetation mapped as threatened species' habitat.



Case study: Habitat destruction hotspot in the NSW Northern Tablelands near the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area.



Map of habitat destruction hotspot in the NSW Northern Tablelands showing areas cleared between national parks and near the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area'

ACF uncovered a hotspot for habitat destruction in the Northern Tablelands of NSW where hundreds of hectares of threatened species' habitat was cleared in recent years for cattle grazing across several neighbouring properties.

The properties are sandwiched between two national parks and near the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area, a place recognised for its '[outstanding universal value](#)' thanks in part to its exceptional biological diversity, that is 'one of only a few places on earth containing so many plants and animals which remain relatively unchanged from their ancestors in the fossil record.'

Two of the properties in the Northern Tablelands habitat destruction hotspot are part of the Maria River Cattle Co's lucrative portfolio of properties, coined the '[McPhee Beef Farms](#)', which is expected to sell for \$120 million.

None of the clearing in the Northern Tablelands hotspot had federal approval under the EPBC Act. However, NSW Local Land Services issued at least two permits for the clearing, despite the potential impacts of the clearing on the Brush-tailed rock-wallaby—a species listed as threatened under both state and federal law.

There are more than 270 records of the brush-tailed rock-wallaby in the area. The [national conservation advice](#) lists the population of brush-tailed rock-wallabies in this area, known as 'Green Gully', as an 'important population' for the survival of the species. Impacts from clearing on such 'important populations' can require federal approval under the [EPBC Act](#).

The [2024 draft national recovery plan](#) also notes that Green Gully is a priority site for the brush-tailed rock wallaby under the NSW Saving Our Species Program, making NSW Local Land Services' approval of the clearing completely at odds with the NSW government's own conservation priorities.

Vegetation mapping also indicates that the cleared vegetation was suitable habitat for the brush-tailed rock wallaby.

Threatened species distribution maps and recorded sightings further indicate that the cleared vegetation was likely habitat for other nationally listed threatened species, including the glossy black cockatoo, spotted-tailed quoll, greater glider, koala, yellow-bellied glider, and stuttering frog.

Clearing events on neighbouring properties in the NSW Northern Tablelands

Clearing by local graziers

Approximately 130 hectares of dense bushland (likely remnant) was cleared on a parcel of land between late 2020 and early 2025. The local graziers who own the parcel also own the adjoining land that was cleared of regulated native vegetation between 2017 and 2020, resulting in compliance action for contravention of NSW law.

Clearing by Maria River Cattle Co

Approximately 411 hectares of bushland (some likely to have been remnant) was cleared between late 2021 and April 2024 on one of the Maria River Cattle Co's cattle stations, owned by a prominent family in the cattle and transport businesses.

The cattle station is part of the portfolio of properties, coined the McPhee Beef Farms, that was advertised for sale in 2025 and is estimated to sell for \$120 million.

In the portfolio is another adjoining parcel that the Maria River Cattle Co acquired in 2025. On it, several hundred hectares of regrowth vegetation was removed between October 2024 and May 2025. A real estate listing indicates it will be sown in 2026 for pasture.



Case study: destruction of hundreds of hectares of likely koala habitat inland from the Gold Coast without Commonwealth approval



In 2024, approximately 341 hectares of bushland mapped as koala habitat was bulldozed in less than 2 months on a property likely used to graze cattle. Two national parks and the Scenic Rim Key Biodiversity Area, a rainforest area that is globally important for a number of bird species, are a few kilometres away.

While the cleared vegetation is mapped as exempt from regulation at a state level, the potential impact of the clearing on the nationally protected koala indicates that it ought to have been referred under the EPBC Act. An EPBC referral is required if there is a real chance or possibility that clearing will have a significant impact on a nationally threatened species, such as the endangered koala. Clearing that reduces the koala's area of occupancy or fragments populations of koalas, for example, [can constitute a 'significant impact'](#) and therefore potentially breach the EPBC Act.

In this case:

- There are over 70 records of koalas within a 10 km radius, including a record of a koala spotted in the area that was bulldozed less than six months later.

- Several areas mapped as core koala habitat are contiguous with the cleared areas or are in the property's vicinity.

- **The cleared vegetation is mapped as having contained sections of woodland dominated by Narrow-leaved Ironbark woodland (*Eucalyptus crebra*), an [important tree species for koalas in southeast Queensland](#).** There are also records of other important and ancillary koala habitat trees nearby.

- Most of the vegetation that was cleared appears to have been regrowth over 20 years old. [Studies have shown](#) that koalas 'regularly use trees ranging in size from young regrowth that barely supports a koala's weight to the largest, old growth trees in a forest.' [Regrowth vegetation is known to provide high quality koala habitat](#) as, unlike other mammals, the koala is not dependent on hollows found in remnant trees.

ACF could not find any record of an EPBC referral.

Cases of habitat destruction detected through ACF Investigates



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now** 