

21<sup>st</sup> April 2024

Coastal Floodplain Drainage Project

NSW Department Climate Change Energy Environment and Water

Via online submission form

To whom it may concern,

### **Submission: Coastal Floodplain Drainage Program**

The Nature Conservation Council of New South Wales (NCC) is the state's peak environment organisation. We represent over 190 environment groups across NSW. Together we are dedicated to protecting and conserving the wildlife, landscapes and natural resources of NSW.

NCC is pleased to be able to provide comment on the NSW Government's Coastal Floodplain Drainage Program, which is seeking to:

- streamline the regulatory process for modifying drainage infrastructure
- reduce the instances of blackwater and acid sulphite water pollution.

### **The most effective way to minimise occurrences of blackwater and acid sulphite water pollution is to restore wetlands.**

Of the options listed, NCC supports:

- a strengthened version of *Option 4: Implement a risk-based approach for approvals for coastal floodplain drainage works*. This approach should be strengthened so that approvals found to have high and extreme risk of polluting are automatically disallowed.
- *Option 5 (ii) Drainage work approvals under the Water Management Act 2000 - a drainage work approval could apply to existing and new drainage works across the entire drainage network*. This option allows for the identification of non-functioning works which would allow for a pathway for their decommissioning. Public authorities should be required to hold a drainage works approval.
- *Option 1 One-stop shop webpage* and *Option 2 Drainage applications coordinator* are sensible improvements to an overly complicated system.

### Impact of draining wetlands

Most coastal wetlands in NSW have been drained and developed, predominantly for agriculture. This has been a significant loss of critical habitat and feeding grounds for wildlife including many threatened and endangered species and migratory birds.

Among the impacts of draining wetlands is the exposure of acid sulphite soils and increased black water events which are serious environmental issues.

Sea level rise due to human induced climate change poses a significant threat to coastal environments around the world. The best defence against rising seas is restoring drained wetlands back into their natural state. Wetlands are big sponges, they soak up large volumes of water, and water dependent vegetation slows water moving across the landscape. This has the added benefit of drawing down significant amounts of carbon from the atmosphere and storing it, thereby slowing down the impacts of climate change.

**The sooner we begin restoring low lying wetlands in anticipation for rising sea levels the better.**

### Regulation

While the coastal drainage program is focused on simplifying the regulatory requirements for maintaining a drained wetland landscape, the process for landholders, councils and agencies to restore wetlands for all the obvious benefits must also be overhauled.

**It is critical that the responsibility for mapping coastal vulnerability areas for the SEPP (Resilience and Hazards) be given back to the government from the Councils, and that all efforts be made to accelerate wetland restoration in these areas.** Currently there is only one registered coastal vulnerability zone in the state.

Exemptions under local environmental plans for cane growers to avoid the approvals process should be removed, and changes that allow industry to self-assessment and self-regulation of drainage works modification should not be made.

Activities that are determined will increase instances of blackwater pollution and acid sulphite run off should not be approved.

Works that have no approval and are causing environmental harm should be remediated.

The risk-based approach for approvals for drainage works would identify works that would sustain or increase instances of blackwater and acid run off. **To obtain the objectives of this program, that is to decrease blackwater and acid sulphite run off, any works approvals with High or Extreme risk should not be granted.**

### Traditional Owners

Traditional Owner groups should be given free, prior and informed consent to give input into the restoration of important wetlands, as described in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. The cultural significance of land and the emotional wellbeing of



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The voice for nature in NSW

Traditional Owners must be valued and considered in the process of accelerating the restoration of wetlands.

### Restore Wetlands

The vast extent of coastal wetland drainage and over development has caused such severe environmental degradation in some low-lying areas of drainage networks they will be no longer functioning in ten to fifteen years, and these impacts will be exacerbated by climate change<sup>1</sup>.

**The govt should establish clear policy about sea level rise and tidal inundation due to climate change.**

There is a trend that drained wetlands are being used less and less for agriculture, therefore there are fewer private drainage boards and the responsibility for maintaining drainage infrastructure is falling more to councils. Costs for councils is increasing, and they are increasingly financially unable to maintain drains on public land, leading to neglect and unchecked environmental damage.

Resorting wetlands is the most effective way to reverse the occurrences of blackwater and acid sulphide water pollution.

**Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this consultation.**

Your key contact point for further questions and correspondence is Melissa Gray, Water Campaigner, available via [mgray@nature.org.au](mailto:mgray@nature.org.au) and (02) 9516 1488. We welcome further conversation on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

**Jacqui Mumford**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Nature Conservation Council of NSW**

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<sup>1</sup> What we heard report