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Submission on Draft ACT Urban Forest Strategy

Preamble

The Institute of Foresters of Australia (IFA) is the national professional body representing over 1000 members who are forest scientists, professionals and managers operating in all aspects of forest and natural resource management throughout Australia. Many members of the ACT Division of the Institute have professional experience or conduct research relevant to the management of Canberra's urban trees.

The IFA welcomes the ACT Government's development of an *Urban Forest Strategy*, as we did the development of the ACT *Living Infrastructure Plan*; and we appreciate the opportunity to offer comment on the *Strategy*. We also note that our submission (13 December 2019) to the *Review of the Tree Protection ACT 2005* is relevant to aspects of the *Strategy*.

Key contexts and general comments

We welcome recognition in the *Strategy* that Canberra's globally-unique and -leading urban forest is central not just to the character of Canberra itself ('the Bush Capital'), but is fundamental to maintaining the liveability of Canberra and the health of its residents as we enter an era of warmer summer temperatures. We also note that the value of urban living infrastructure and trees has been highlighted globally, and in Australia, by the restrictions imposed on activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the consequent physical and mental health benefits of both access to green space and visibility of trees; and that such pandemics are also expected to become less exceptional.

We support the 6 Objectives nominated in the *Strategy*, noting recognition of the need to balance actions to conserve, sustain and where possible enhance current urban forest assets (Objectives 1 and, in part, 4-5) with those to renew and adapt those assets (Objectives 2-4), and the critical underpinning and value-adding role played by strong community engagement (Objective 6).

Within these Objectives, we particularly welcome:

- recognition of the need for strategies and measures to sustain and enhance the contributions of trees on leased land to the urban forest;
- the ambition to achieve canopy cover targets more uniformly across Canberra's suburbs;
- goals to make better use of wood harvested from trees removed from public land, as well as the use of those trees for biodiversity enhancement;
- actions in support of stronger community partnerships, at a range of scales.

Comments on specific points

Highlights: a goal of “Canberrans appreciating and valuing their urban forest” might be added or integrated with that of volunteers. We note that a lack of such appreciation is manifest not simply in the attitudes of some residents to specific trees, but in the attitudes of some business interests to the ‘bush capital’ concept (eg [Geocon: Breaking Ground](#))

Background and contexts: the distinction and complementarity between the ‘urban forest’ and the nature parks that are part of Canberra’s design and ‘peri-urban’ tree assets are not explained.

Regulated trees. A cross-jurisdictional analysis of tree protection measures reveals that a height and canopy span of 12 m each is one of the highest thresholds for protection in Australia. This is ironic given the relatively harsh site conditions in Canberra compared to those in Australia’s coastal cities.

Incentivising lessees to maintain and enhance contributions of trees on leased land. We strongly support this ambition, and suggest it need specific incentive as well as regulatory measures, for example such as those proposed by Leo Dobes ([CT 4 May 20](#)).

Tree canopy cover. The *Living Infrastructure Plan* goal of 30% canopy cover should be seen as a minimum; we agree that retaining high levels of cover in those suburbs where it already exists, and enhancing cover in areas where it is low, are both priorities. We note that the design of the newer suburbs and some apparent landscaping preferences and practices mitigate against realising the potential contribution and value of urban trees; and that these driving factors need also be to addressed.

A 2045 target is ambitious if it is understood to be the year by which the 30% canopy cover target is realised across all of Canberra’s suburbs, given the low levels of cover currently and the time required for trees to develop. This underlines the need for substantial reinvestment in tree planting and maintenance from the present through to 2045.

Resources for maintaining the urban forest. Realising this level of canopy cover, and maintaining the urban forest in healthy condition (eg for watering in the establishment phase; tree maintenance in older phases), will require greater levels of funding than have been committed in the recent past. In particular, we note a legacy of under-management (due to under-resourcing) of now mature trees. Many of these will require a level of crown management as a consequence of (especially but not only) drought-induced stress to ensure they reach their useful life in good and safe condition.

Raising resources. We suggest measures such a specific urban tree funding component within the rating structure; this could be varied by suburb to reflect each of the cost components of reaching canopy target goals and of maintaining established urban trees. We agree that urban trees should be valued as proposed in Action 2.2.1 (p 39).

Alternative location-specific solutions. The *Strategy* refers (p 19) to the *Living Infrastructure Plan* assertion that other green infrastructure and permeable surfaces, such as grass and ground cover beds, can achieve equivalent benefits in higher density areas. We suggest these benefits are complementary rather than equivalent to those of urban trees.

Species diversity and age class distribution. We agree that each of these issues need attention. On p21, the meaning of the statement “large number of streets that have multiple species of trees over single species avenues” is not immediately clear. Nor, on subsequent pages, are specific strategies to address the preponderance of later age class over the urban tree population. Establishment of a mix of shorter- and longer- lived species can be part of the strategy to ensure we do not simply perpetuate an unbalanced age class distribution.

Loss of habitat. We note that “Loss of mature native trees (including hollow bearing trees) and lack of recruitment” is listed as a Key Threatening Process (KTP) under the Nature Conservation Act 2014. We note that retention of ‘totem trees,’ and growing replacements faster and managing them to become hollow-bearing sooner, can play roles in this context

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On behalf of the Institute of Foresters of Australia, ACT & Region
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