



In Australia a new government program pours millions into private land protection and creates a model for collaborative conservation

*Cecilia Riebl — ILCN Regional Rep. for Australia and Lily Robinson — ILCN Program Coordinator
March 15, 2023*

In the Australian state of Victoria, gears are turning in a large-scale initiative to drive nature-based climate solutions. The Victorian Government's \$77-million (AUD) [BushBank](#) program is addressing climate change and supporting wildlife as it restores more than 20,000 hectares (ha) of land across Victoria. Part of this plan creates a framework to deliver financial incentives to private landowners who commit to restoring, conserving, and sustainably managing their property in perpetuity.

"This project is a unique public-private partnership where the government is both investing in its own outcomes, but also helping private business to meet their aspirations," said Paul Dettmann, Founder and Director of Cassinia Environmental, the delivery partner selected to roll out the private land component of BushBank. As a sixth-generation farmer, a conservationist, and an environmental markets expert, Dettmann is well-attuned to the issues the program targets and he said the government initiative concurrently addresses funding gaps and drives environmental and social outcomes.

BushBank diverts funds in three directions through public, private, and Indigenous project components. \$30.9 million will flow into private land restoration and protection and Cassinia Environmental will work to secure co-funding with private investors to restore 20,000 ha of private land. Some of this funding will be dispersed to landowners as incentives for participating in the program and will reflect the foregone monetary value of the land they conserve. Further funds will be directed to grants for Traditional Owners and



Paul Dettmann, Founder and Director of Cassinia Environmental; Credit: Trust for Nature.

First Peoples to lead and participate in habitat restoration and carbon markets and for revegetation and restoration programs on public land.

BushBank's private land component adopts a cooperative model with a four-party delivery system. The Department of Environment, Energy, and Climate Action (DEECA) plays a leadership role by setting the rules, establishing funding agreements with Cassinia Environmental and Trust for Nature (TFN)—Victoria's dedicated private land conservation organization—and facilitating a memorandum of understanding between these parties. It also oversees deliverables and milestone payments under these agreements.

For its part, TFN will help assess sites and provide advice on which are most suitable for covenanting. It will prepare and enter into permanent conservation covenants to secure the restoration sites and assist landowners with ongoing stewardship.

As the government's delivery partner, the Victoria-based land management company Cassinia Environmental will work alongside landowners to restore properties and will monitor and report progress to DEECA. In the early stages of the program, it will help recruit landowners, organize site assessments, and secure carbon and other co-funding.

As the fourth party in the collaborative, landowners participate in planning activities and help inform the restoration plan for their property. The landowner must sign a restoration agreement with Cassinia Environmental and a conservation covenant with TFN. If the project includes carbon co-funding, the landowner may also choose to enter into a carbon agreement to access payments for, and ownership of, carbon credits. Once these documents are finalized, the landowner is responsible for sustainably restoring and managing their land in perpetuity.

Dettmann said the team at Cassinia Environmental intends to engage Traditional Owners and other First Nations People in developing and delivering the program, though the details of their role are not yet defined. He also hopes the covenants will be written to include protection and access for cultural values and practices.

To maximize the impact of public investments, BushBank is prioritizing land with high biodiversity and carbon value. It is using a Target Landscape Map—developed as part of this project—to identify these parcels. The map ranks locations across Victoria based on the potential for revegetation to simultaneously produce biodiversity and carbon benefits.

The program will prioritize parcels of private land that are degraded, especially those with a high density of, or potential for, native woody species. Areas that also include grassland and non-woody wetland vegetation are potentially included. Land that is already legally required to be preserved or restored is excluded from BushBank and the minimum area for restoration is 10 ha.

DEECA has established a 15-year agreement with Cassinia Environmental, which will be responsible for identifying all participating landowners across the four years of the project. On-the-ground restoration activities should begin this year and initial planting should be completed on all sites by the seventh year. This allows time for plantings to be well-established by the end of the first decade.

BushBank is anticipated to increase carbon sequestration by between 20,000 and 100,000 tons per year. It will also facilitate habitat connectivity; attract co-funding; support and create jobs within the conservation sector; provide an array of financial incentives to recognize private landowners' commitment to land protection and restoration; and uplift First Peoples and local community groups.

The BushBank framework is still somewhat nascent. The team behind the program is working to parse out details on Indigenous involvement, payment amounts for landowners, and plans to continue supporting landowner commitment to protect their land in perpetuity after the 16-year budget plan runs out. Still, Dettmann assures that this is just the beginning “Victoria has a 200,000-ha goal for restoration by 2037, so there is a lot of work to be done”.