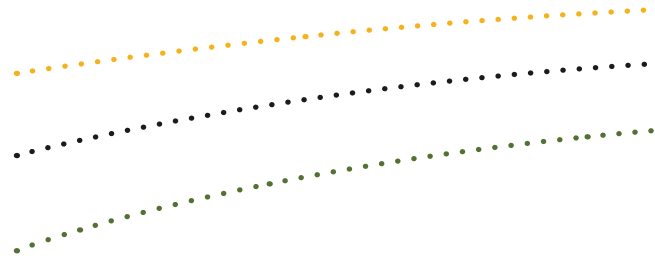




Australian Government

**Department of Sustainability, Environment,
Water, Population and Communities**



STRATEGIC ASSESSMENTS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Any activity that is likely to have a significant impact on nationally protected matters must be assessed under national environment law. Nationally protected matters are:

- world heritage properties
- national heritage places
- wetlands of international importance (often called 'Ramsar' wetlands after the international treaty under which such wetlands are listed)
- nationally threatened species and ecological communities
- migratory species
- Commonwealth marine areas
- the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park
- nuclear actions (including uranium mining)
- a water resource, in relation to coal seam gas development and large coal mining development.

Generally, activities are individually submitted to the federal environment department for assessment, but strategic assessments take a bigger-picture approach. Rather than looking at how a single activity will affect nationally protected matters, a strategic assessment looks at how a group of activities (under a policy, plan or program) will affect these matters on a regional scale.


As well as helping to protect Australia's unique biodiversity, this type of assessment also benefits the community, developers, industry and government by cutting red tape and providing long-term certainty.

What can be assessed?

Strategic assessments are useful for complex, large-scale or ongoing activities; for projects involving multiple stakeholders; or for high-growth areas where many projects would otherwise need separate federal approvals. These could be:

- urban development programs
- fire management policies
- water use policies
- major industry development plans.





For example, a strategic assessment could consider the effects of implementing a state government's 20-year urban expansion program on nationally protected matters. This single process could cover dozens, or even hundreds, of individual assessments, and combine offsets to get good environmental results.

Or a strategic assessment of a regional fire management policy could provide federal government approval for fire hazard reduction activities that minimise environmental impacts.

What are the benefits of strategic assessments for the community?

Strategic assessments reduce red tape by considering federal and state environmental concerns in a single assessment process, and by cutting out the need for individual assessments.

Once a strategic assessment is complete and approvals have been given, individual proponents will not have to seek federal approval, as long as they undertake their projects in accordance with the endorsed policy, plan or program.

By looking at cumulative impacts on the environment over the whole landscape before projects begin, strategic assessments help to shape policies, plans or programs from the earliest stage, rather than requiring them to be modified later on.

And by outlining what can and cannot be done in the future, they provide greater upfront certainty to developers, landholders, planners, industry, government and the community.

How are the assessments done?

A report about the potential environmental impacts of the policy, plan or program must be prepared, so the federal environment minister can determine whether the impacts on matters protected under national environment law are acceptable.

Once satisfied this is the case, the federal environment minister may endorse the policy, plan or program, and then approve the types of activities that can take place in accordance with it. This means individual activities that are done according to that policy, plan or program will not need to get federal approval under national environment law.

Strategic assessments provide ample opportunities for the public to have a say. They use the best available information, and consult extensively with stakeholders including local communities, environmental experts, non-government organisations, traditional owners and industry.

Examples

- A state government proposes a program for a city's urban expansion. Among other requirements, the program outlines the survey methods for threatened species for areas within the program. Where threatened species are found on site, the program specifies how they should be managed through habitat protection and/or offsets. Where offsets are required, the program provides a process to consolidate them and protect the best habitats available. By streamlining the approvals process, a strategic assessment would ensure good environmental outcomes, consistent management of nationally protected matters and certainty for the community, developers, industry and government.
- A state government is developing a policy for fire management. The policy specifies survey methods and outlines how threatened species should be handled if found in an area earmarked for fire reduction activities such as back-burning, slashing, clearing or chemical use. If a strategic assessment of this policy is done and approval is granted, any land manager across the state could carry out the approved fire management activities in accordance with the policy without the need for further federal assessment.

Who makes the final decision?

After a thorough assessment of potential impacts, the federal environment minister will decide whether to endorse the policy, plan or program. The proponent must also ensure state legislation is followed and that the management measures in the policy, plan or program are feasible.

How can the policy, plan or program be effective for the long term?

A strategic assessment will check that clear and robust measures are in place in the policy, plan or program to ensure future development is sustainable. It ensures mechanisms are built into the program so that it can respond to new information that may become available, and that the policy, plan or program can be independently reviewed during its life.

For more information about strategic assessments, go to www.environment.gov.au/epbc/assessments/strategic.html

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