



Australian Government response to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy

Cane toads on the march

Inquiry into controlling the spread of cane toads

May 2020

Background

On 28 November 2018, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy resolved to inquire into and report on the Department of the Environment and Energy's annual report 2017-18, with particular reference to:

- 1 The effectiveness of control measures to limit the spread of cane toads in Australia.
- 2 Additional support for cane toad population control measures.

The Committee tabled its report on 26 March 2019.

Summary

The Australian Government acknowledges the significant impact that toxic ingestion of cane toads has on Australian predators and the consequential impacts on natural ecosystems. The listing of the biological effects, including lethal toxic ingestion, caused by cane toads as a key threatening process and associated making of a threat abatement plan, *Threat abatement plan for the biological effects, including lethal toxic ingestion, caused by cane toads* (2011), provide evidence that the threat is taken seriously.

The Australian Government alone cannot abate the threat from cane toads. It requires the combined efforts of local, state, territory and Commonwealth governments, together with the actions of landholders, communities, traditional owners, the private sector and non-government organisations who deliver biodiversity protection and conservation.

The Australian Government remains committed to its part through the revision of the threat abatement plan to guide investment and effort, and through partnering on strategic research and on-ground action to minimise the spread and impacts of cane toads.

The Australian Government agrees, or agrees-in-part, with five recommendations related to providing national strategy, coordination and funding to the problem of cane toads. The Australian Government makes significant investments in environmental research, and notes the recommendation to provide additional funding for research into biological and genetic tools for cane toad control. The Australian Government will consider contributing funding for the modification of artificial water resources (recommendation one) only after the Western Australian Government has assessed this to be a feasible way to prevent the spread of cane toads. The Australian Government has not responded to recommendations five and nine: recommendation five is specifically directed to state and territory governments and the Australian National Audit Office will respond directly to the Australian Parliament on recommendation nine.

Responses to recommendations

Recommendation 1

3.4 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government contribute funding for the modification of artificial water sources to prevent the spread of cane toads along the northern coast of Western Australia between Broome and Port Hedland; in cooperation with the Western Australian Government, land holders, traditional owners and volunteer groups.

NOT AGREED.

The Australian Government is aware that the Western Australian Government, in association with the University of Melbourne, is investigating the feasibility of creating a waterless barrier through the modification of artificial water sources to prevent the spread of cane toads along the northern coast of Western Australia. Should the Western Australian Government determine this is a feasible way to prevent the spread of cane toads the Australian Government will consider the appropriateness of partnering with the Western Australian Government, Traditional Owners, Landholders and volunteer groups in implementation.

Recommendation 2

3.7 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government make funding available to support projects for trapping cane toad tadpoles, including the production of bait, and optimising trap deployment at locations suited to this control method.

AGREED.

The Australian Government makes funding available for on-ground activities to protect, and abate threats to, threatened species via a range of programs. For example, the Government is investing over \$22 million in a new Communities Environment Program to give communities opportunities to protect and care for their local environment. This could include projects that focus on protecting threatened species and addressing weeds and pest animals, such as cane toads. The projects supported under this program will depend on the project applications received and the alignment of those project applications with the objectives, expected outcomes and eligibility requirements of the program.

Recommendation 3

3.9 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government and the State and Territory governments provide support to Indigenous rangers and volunteer groups involved in measures to control cane toads.

AGREED.

There has been a commitment by the Australian Government under the \$100 million Environment Restoration Fund to work with Indigenous rangers and other landholder groups across the Kimberley to identify areas of highest biodiversity ahead of the cane toad invasion front. The objective of this project will be to create pockets of surviving predator populations by inducing toad-aversion behaviours in northern quolls, plains death adders, yellow spotted goannas and other native predators.

Recommendation 4

3.11 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government provide additional funding to relevant organisations such as the CSIRO, universities and other bodies for research into suppressing cane toad populations using biological and genetic controls.

NOTED.

The Australian Government has a long-term commitment to environmental research to support evidence-based decision-making including through the National Environmental Science Program. The Program supports decision-makers to understand, manage and conserve Australia's environment with the best available information and supports a wide range of research including into vertebrate pests.

The Centre for Invasive Species Solutions is developing a priority framework to assess the knowledge gaps that exist, the feasibility and a means to prioritize gene drive in our efforts to control vertebrate pest animals. The CSIRO and Western Australian Governments are the project partners. This is an important step in considering the applicability of the technology in vertebrate animals, including cane toads.

The Australian Government's Australian Research Council has provided funding to cane toad research and may do so in future competitive grant rounds.

Recommendation 5

3.14 The Committee recommends that affected State and Territory governments improve internal biosecurity and quarantine measures to protect coastal islands from cane toads.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation is directed to affected state and territory governments.

Recommendation 6

3.17 The Committee recommends that in cooperation with affected State and Territory governments, the Department of the Environment and Energy develop a process to monitor whether overall progress is being made to control cane toads.

AGREED.

The Department of the Environment and Energy will ask affected state and territory governments to participate in an implementation group to oversee progress on implementing a revised threat abatement plan, once this has been made. Other interested stakeholder groups also will be asked to participate in this group, where appropriate.

Recommendation 7

3.22 The Committee recommends that the Department of the Environment and Energy, the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources and relevant State and Territory departments ensure that they:

- **develop and coordinate plans and strategies to control cane toads;**
- **identify priority actions, including:**
 - **establishing procedures for responding to potential outbreaks of cane toads on islands or at other isolated locations away from the main population;**
 - **preventing cane toads from spreading into unaffected areas;**
- **contribute adequate funding to projects and programs to control cane toads; and**
- **publicly report on the progress achieved against the objectives identified in their plans to control cane toads.**

AGREED-IN-PART.

The *Threat abatement plan for the biological effects, including lethal toxic ingestion, caused by cane toads* (2011) is a national strategy to guide efforts by all levels of government, research organisations and non-government organisations in reducing the impacts of cane toads on native animals and ecosystems. The threat abatement plan aims to identify native species and ecosystems at risk due to cane toads, reduce the impact of cane toads on native species and ecosystems, and communicate information about cane toads and their impacts.

The Australian Government reports on progress to abate the threat of cane toads through five-yearly reviews of the threat abatement plan. Project-level reporting on activities funded by the Australian Government via the Natural Heritage Trust is provided on the Atlas of Living Australia.

When the threat abatement plan was reviewed in 2016, the then Minister for the Environment agreed to vary it to address new priorities and directions for research and provide contemporary guidance on the impacts of cane toads. The varied plan will include an objective on the identification and prioritisation of key species and ecological communities and locations where strategic cane toad management is required. The plan will include the two priority actions identified in this recommendation, and other actions identified by the Department through the process of revising the plan.

The threat abatement plan recognises that the control of cane toads requires the combined efforts of local, state, territory and Commonwealth governments, together with the actions of landholders, communities, traditional owners, the private sector and non-government organisations who deliver biodiversity protection and conservation on the ground.

The Australian Government invests in on-ground activities to protect, and abate threats to, threatened species via a range of programs. Funding for threat abatement plan actions, as well as other projects and programs to control cane toads, will be subject to evaluation against program guidelines, available funds and other competing priorities.

Where the Australian Government has land management responsibilities, such as at Kakadu National Park, cane toad management is considered in relevant documents including *A strategy for the conservation of threatened species and threatened ecological communities in Kakadu National Park | 2014-2024* and the *Kakadu National Park Management Plan 2016 - 2026*. In the absence of genetic control methods, cane toad control at the landscape scale of Kakadu National Park presents significant challenges, as is the case elsewhere across northern Australia. Kakadu National Park has a range of programs that contribute to monitoring the impacts of cane toads on the Park's biodiversity. Additionally, Kakadu National Park has participated in research on aversion training and reintroduction of trained quolls. Field Island was thought to have the potential to be a toad-free refuge, however surveys showed that there are toads present. Although they die off each dry season due to a lack of fresh water, they recolonise during the wet season when eggs and toadlets are washed down the rivers and raft to Field Island. Kakadu National Park is evaluating the potential for the use of physical barriers in suitable areas, and is planning toad exclusion trials by modifying the existing cat exclusion fencing at Kapalga to examine the survivorship of vulnerable native species.

Recommendation 8

3.25 The Committee recommends that the Department of the Environment and Energy expedite its review of the cane toad threat abatement plan and, as part of this process, take into consideration the measures outlined and recommended in this report.

AGREED.

The Australian Government has undertaken a review of the 2011 *Threat abatement plan for the biological effects, including lethal toxic ingestion, caused by cane toads*. In 2016, the then Minister for the Environment agreed to vary the threat abatement plan. The Australian Government commenced a process to vary the plan with a stakeholder workshop in 2016. The Department of the Environment and Energy will take into consideration the measures outlined and recommended in this report in drafting the revised plan.

Recommendation 9

3.27 The Committee recommends that prior to the expiry of the next review period of the cane toad threat abatement plan in around 2024, the Australian National Audit Office conduct a performance audit to ascertain whether the Department of the Environment and Energy has fulfilled the plan's requirements and any related statutory obligations.

The Department of the Environment and Energy notes that the Australian National Audit Office will report directly to the Australian Parliament on this recommendation.