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Draft National Urban Policy Committee Department of Infrastructure,

Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts Australian Government, Canberra

DRAFT NATIONAL URBAN POLICY SUBMISSION: Enhanced measures to address urban canopy.

To the Draft National Urban Policy Committee,

We are writing to advocate for the inclusion of improved measures to address the alarming decline in urban canopy across our cities. While the current draft of the National Urban Policy makes commendable strides in recognising the importance of green infrastructure, it does not go far enough to address the critical need for more decisive actions to protect and expand our urban tree canopies.

Who is Arboriculture Australia

Arboriculture Australia is the peak body representing professionals and practitioners in arboriculture and urban forestry across the country. As the leading organisation in this field, Arboriculture Australia plays a key role in advancing the knowledge, standards, and practices related to tree care and urban forestry. As part of this, we are proud of our members critical contributions in helping to meet city and state wide climate adaptation, sustainability, net zero and liveability goals. This is because urban greening, in particular tree canopy, is one of the most efficient and cost-effective measures for reducing urban heat, adapting our cities to climate change and improving overall liveability in our urban neighbourhoods. Our expertise and commitment contribute significantly to the preservation and promotion of trees as vital components of urban environments nationwide.

The Issue at Hand

Urban tree canopy cover in every one of our capital cities is diminishing due to factors such as urban development, changing risk profiles of landholders, ineffective planning policy and insufficient resources to care for and protect it. A nationwide study, <u>"Where Will All the Trees</u> <u>Go?"</u>, reveals that every four years, Australian cities cumulatively lose 2.1% of their green cover. That's 4,041km² or 161,860 Melbourne Cricket Grounds worth of urban greening every four years. This decline means our cities are getting hotter, we are losing biodiversity and we are undermining liveability and community health and wellbeing in our cities.

Why does this matter?

Trees and urban greening are the lifeblood of our basic ecosystem services: shade and cooling, oxygen production, air and water filtration, stormwater reduction, carbon sequestration and food and habitat for biodiversity. Furthermore, urban greening plays a highly dominant role in improving mental and physical health by reducing stress levels, lowering incidences of mental health issues, and improved overall well-being (Astell-Burt T, Feng X. (2019). If we do not recognise the basic biological and social needs of our cities by the inclusion of urban tree canopy and urban greening actions at the National Urban Policy scale, we will continue to compromise the health and wellbeing our cities' social, environmental and economic systems.

Proposed Measures for inclusion

We propose that the following measures be considered for inclusion in the National Urban Policy;

The following are suggested wording amendments to the Draft document:

 Include urban greening and tree canopy cover statistics showcasing the loss of basic biological assets within our cities to be included in the State of the Cities – snapshot. Commentary should reference the significant research that demonstrates the impact of this loss – reduced community mental and physical wellbeing, increased urban heat impacts and heat related morbidity, biodiversity loss and a reduced capacity to adapt to climate change.

2. P17 Liveable Goal

Access to green and open space should be qualified by the inclusion of descriptors that are critical to achieving liveability such as "high quality" green and open space, provision of adequate shade and cooling and be equitable across demographics.

3. P18 Equitable Goal

Factors that determine a city's equity should include accessibility to open green, cool spaces during heat related events.

4. P18 Sustainable Goal

This should reference urban green spaces, tree cover and biodiversity

5. P19 Resilient Goal

This should list high quality natural green and blue systems with diverse ecosystems within the urban environment that are protected and enhanced by appropriate land use policies

6. P31 "Our urban areas are sustainable"

Issues: Green and blue spaces should reference that a lack of these also compromises community health and wellbeing as well as biodiversity and climate resilience. "Cities can lead the climate solution" by safeguarding and promoting high quality urban green space and tree canopy cover.

"Green spaces" paragraph: This section should more appropriately and accurately reflect the real opportunities evidenced by research. E.g. urban agriculture is a very low priority compared to managing and protecting the levels of urban green cover.

7. P35 "Our urban environments and communities promote health and wellbeing – possible actions:

This sentence should be altered to: "supporting measures that support urban heat resilience such as more urban greening and tree canopy cover and the use of cool paints"

The following are broader measures that should be considered for implementation as part of the Policy delivery:

8. Creation of a National Urban Greening Strategy:

Develop a comprehensive national strategy dedicated to urban greening with mandated canopy and green space requirements for regions and cities. This strategy should be formulated in consultation with local governments, state government, environmental organisations, urban forest and urban planning experts.

9. Establishment of a Federal 'Green Cities' Body:

To ensure a coordinated approach to urban greening and urban canopy in our cities, the establishment of a federal urban greening body is essential. This could be based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, which has a dedicated Urban and Community Forestry Program, a national body can oversee urban forest management, provide technical assistance, and distribute federal funding to state and local governments. This body would be responsible for developing policies (such as a National Urban Greening Strategy), conducting research (including national level canopy mapping), and supporting urban greening initiatives nationwide (<u>USDA</u>).

10. Mandated Canopy Targets:

Establish minimum canopy cover targets for urban areas. Consider adopting the global metrics of <u>3,30,300 from renowned expert Cecil Konijnendijk from the Nature Based</u> <u>Solutions Institute</u>: 3 trees seen from every home, 30% tree canopy cover in every neighbourhood and 300m from the nearest park or green space. In Australia, these targets should be ambitious yet achievable and may need to be tailored to the specific ecological and climatic conditions of different regions. Targets could be mandated at a Federal Level AND by state level planning and building sustainability programs such as the NSW BASIX system, Green Star or NABERS (National Australian Built Environment Rating System).

11. Recognition of Trees as an Asset Class:

Formally recognise urban trees and green open space as individual asset classes in urban planning and asset management frameworks. This would ensure that trees and urban green spaces are treated equally alongside hard infrastructure such as buildings, roads, footpaths, draining and utilities. Influencing State Asset Management Frameworks to include these assets would be game changing for how we protect and manage our urban green assets at a more local scale.

12. Strengthening Urban Tree Protection Laws:

Advocate with state governments to implement stronger planning regulations to protect existing trees. Federal government should require each state and territory within Australia to have tree protection laws in place. Currently tree protection in urban areas is at the discretion of each state to set their own legislation on tree protections which has seen large disparity between the states. <u>South Australia has just undertaken to do this</u> and NSW State Environmental Planning Policy (Biodiversity and Conservation) 2021, requires each Local Government area within NSW to declare protections for trees in urban areas. Yet other states lag behind. Changes should also allow for stricter financial penalties for unauthorised removal and more rigorous requirements for compensatory planting.

13. Funding and Resources for Urban Forestry:

Increase federal and state funding for urban forestry and greening programs to give a much needed boost for planting, maintaining, and protecting urban trees. The Federal U.S. Urban and Community Forestry Programme provides grants to support urban forestry projects, demonstrating the positive impact of dedicated funding. This has recently been dramatically increased by the 'Biden's Billion' tree program which has seen \$1billion invested in projects to expand access to trees and green space nationwide.

Conclusion

Addressing the decline in urban canopy is not only an environmental necessity but also a societal imperative. By implementing these measures, we can ensure that our cities remain resilient, liveable, and healthy for future generations. The implementation of a national urban greening body with mandated canopy targets and recognition of trees as a critical asset will pave the way for a greener and more sustainable urban future for Australia.

Thank you for considering these recommendations. We look forward to seeing a stronger commitment to urban canopy preservation and enhancement in the final National Urban Policy.

Yours sincerely,

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• 'Biden's Billion' https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2023/09/14/biden-harris-administration-invests-1-billion-nearly-400-projects