

FARMING AND NATIONALLY PROTECTED LOWLAND NATIVE GRASSLANDS OF TASMANIA

Since European settlement, most of the Lowland Native Grasslands of Tasmania have disappeared. To help protect the mainly small patches that remain, the grasslands are now listed as critically endangered under Australia's national environment law—the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

What does national protection of the grasslands mean for farmers and graziers?

The listing does not stop farmers from continuing to do what they have been doing on their land. In many cases, supportive farming practices have helped to keep the remaining grasslands in good condition. The national environment law is not about stopping farm business; it protects Australia's unique plants and animals.

It does mean that if farmers have the protected grasslands on their property and want to change the way they use their land—for example develop or clear their property—they may need federal approval. Only activities likely to have a significant impact on the best quality areas of the remaining grasslands need to be assessed by the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. In some cases, it could mean looking at alternative ways to carry out the activities to reduce the impact on the grasslands.

Before farmers make any changes to the way they use their land that could result in irreversible loss of the listed native grasslands it is best that they first check with the federal environment department to see whether approval is needed.

Farmers may also be eligible for funding to protect and restore the grasslands through the Australian Government's Caring for our Country initiative if they have the protected grasslands on their property.

Are all areas of native grasslands protected?

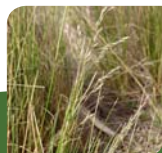
Only native grasslands of more than one hectare and of high quality are protected (see flowchart over page).

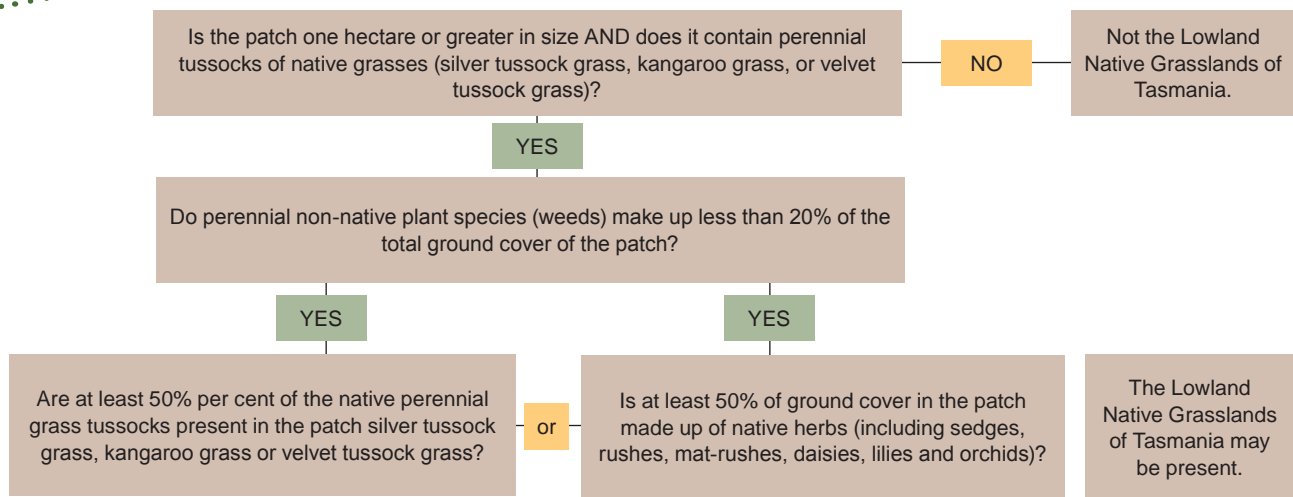
How do I know whether the lowland grasslands are on my property?

The booklet *Lowland Native Grasslands of Tasmania* tells you how to identify whether you have the lowland grasslands on your property (see contact at the end of this pamphlet if you want a copy). In general, the patch of grassland must be more than one hectare, and must comprise more than 50 per cent coverage of the native perennial silver tussock grass, kangaroo grass, or velvet tussock grass (see flowchart). If these conditions are met, the listed grassland may be present and you should read on to see whether you need to seek further advice from the federal environment department that administers the national environment law.

Why are derived grasslands also protected?

Native grasslands that have resulted from historical tree clearance have the same value as areas of natural grasslands. Scientific experts recommended that derived grasslands be included in the listing because of their value, and because, in many cases, it is impossible to distinguish them from natural grasslands.





How does it affect activities taking place before the lowland grasslands were listed?

Activities that began before the listing of the lowland grasslands on 25 June 2009 can continue without approval.

What routine farming activities are not significant?

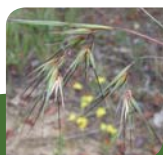
Farming activities that are unlikely to have a significant impact on the lowland grasslands include:

- doing minor firebreaks and routine burn-offs at appropriate times of year (for example, avoid peak flowering season)
- maintaining existing fence lines, roads or firebreaks
- maintaining farm gardens and orchards
- removing individual trees for safety reasons
- installing new fences not more than permitted widths
- replacing and maintaining sheds, yards and other farm buildings
- maintaining internal access tracks
- protecting and maintaining natural or lawfully established pastures (if established before the listing of the lowland grasslands on 25 June 2009)
- running low intensity (sustainable) grazing, including rotation or strip grazing
- controlling weeds (hand and minor ground machinery)
- moving farm vehicles and machinery (with minimised impact on native vegetation).

What farming activities might need consideration?

Activities that are likely to have a significant impact and may need federal approval are those that will forever clear or replace lowland grasslands, or forever change the grasslands' values. They include:

- permanently clearing areas of lowland grasslands
- permanently converting lowland grasslands to cropping
- fertilising, irrigating, or sowing exotic grass on lowland grasslands pastures in a way that significantly reduces coverage of the native species (that is, it will no longer be the listed ecological community)
- intensifying grazing pressure in a way that permanently degrades the lowland grasslands



- changing the type of livestock (for example, from sheep to goat) if it is likely to lead to long-term and permanent degradation of the lowland grasslands
- large-scale aerial spraying that could degrade lowland grasslands
- expanding farming activities into previously undisturbed lowland grasslands (for example, intensified grazing) that may cause irreversible harm.

Some specific examples

Erecting a new house/shed or other farm infrastructure

In most cases, activities of this type are unlikely to have a significant impact on lowland grasslands, especially when existing sites are used, and do not need assessment and approval under national environment law.

Installing a firebreak around the perimeter of a rural property

Firebreak construction and maintenance for rural asset protection purposes are unlikely to have a significant impact. An exception might be when establishing new firebreaks through lowland grasslands known to have high conservation values (for example, high number of native species, or important patches that connect to other native vegetation).

Cultivating existing firebreaks (previously mown or grazed)

If the lowland grasslands are no longer present, and the firebreak was in place before the grasslands were listed on 25 June 2009, assessment and approval under national environment law is not needed.

Emergency grading, slashing or clearing during a bushfire emergency

While emergency works with a significant impact on the lowland grasslands (or other nationally protected matters) may be subject to national environment law, the department will not seek to enforce the law if the impacts are a consequence of a genuine emergency. But the department would expect reasonable efforts to rehabilitate the grasslands as far as practicable.

Grazing in roadside reserves or stock reserves

While roadside and stock reserves may support lowland grasslands, grazing under permit (if required) is not likely to have a significant impact, assuming it is done at a sustainable frequency and rate.

Weed control

Weed control is unlikely to be significant if done as part of the normal farming business, and using farm machinery without permanent damage or degradation of the native grasslands.

Road maintenance works next to my property

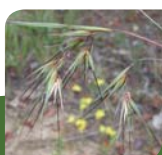
These works, normally done by local government, may need assessment and approval under national environment law, but councils are responsible for considering whether that is the case. Works planned in a way not likely to have a significant impact on the lowland grasslands will not need consideration under national environmental law.

Construction and maintenance of stormwater drains, including when flooding threatens access to or within a property

National environment law will not apply to routine and ongoing maintenance of existing drains. Construction of new drains will not need consideration under the law if the works will not impact on nationally protected matters, such as the lowland grasslands. Construction of large scale drainage networks (with a view to draining lands and improving productivity) may need approval if the drainage works will result in significant damage or loss of listed native grasslands.

What is an ecological community?

An ecological community is a group of plants, animals and other organisms that interact in a unique habitat. Types of ecological communities include woodlands, grasslands, shrublands, forests and wetlands.



How does an ecological community become listed?

When an ecological community becomes threatened and its survival uncertain, it may be listed under national environment law for protection. The decision to protect an ecological community under the law is based on science.

Ecological communities, like species, undergo a thorough assessment by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee, an independent panel of experts. This assessment is done in consultation with other experts, land managers, state governments, key stakeholder groups and the public.

The scientific committee looks at whether the ecological community meets the criteria to be listed under national environment law, then provides advice and a recommendation to the minister about whether it should be listed. The minister considers the recommendation, public comments and supporting documentation before making the final decision.

Why are the Lowland Native Grasslands of Tasmania listed as a protected ecological community?

More than 80 per cent of these grasslands have disappeared since European settlement as a result of land clearing, changing land use and weed invasion. Mostly small patches are left, and they are at risk from these ongoing threats.

The Lowland Native Grasslands of Tasmania provide habitat to more than 20 nationally listed threatened species and 60 state listed species. These include eastern-barred bandicoots, spotted-tail quolls and the Tasmanian devil. Many threatened plant species can also be found in the grasslands.

Who was consulted over this listing of the lowland grasslands?

Experts, state agencies, local councils, the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association and the general public were consulted over the proposal to list these grasslands.

The Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment provided vital information to help complete the assessment, and provided detailed submissions on the proposed listing, as did the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association.

Where can I get more information?

The department has developed a detailed booklet to help farmers identify whether the protected grasslands are present on their property. It is available at www.environment.gov.au/epbc where more information about the national environment law is also available.

If, after reading this question and answer sheet, you think the protected lowland grasslands is present, and you want to undertake an activity with significant impacts (for example, that will result in loss or permanent degradation of more than one hectare grassland), you should contact the department for advice and assistance as to whether the national environmental law applies and you need to get permission.

The department's environmental liaison officer, located with the National Farmer's Federation, can be contacted by phone on 1800 704 520 (freecall, including mobiles) or by email at environment@nff.org.au

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eastern-barred bandicoot (D. Watts)