

# **Lower Cotter Catchment Recreation Strategy (Draft)**

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## 1. Goal

Contribute to the Lower Cotter Catchment (LCC) draft *Strategic Management Plan* (SMP) vision of 'Clean Water, Healthy landscapes' through providing for sustainable and appropriate public use of the LCC while protecting water quality.

## 2. Purpose

This draft Recreation Strategy is intended to establish interim policies and practices to manage recreation in the LCC over the next 1-3 years. This represents the first step in a process identified in the LCC draft *Strategic Management Plan* (2006), namely:

*"In consultation with the community, prepare a recreation plan that takes into account a risk management framework aimed at protecting water quality."* (Strategy 3, Key action (f) 0-6 year timeframe)

The provisions of the Recreation Strategy will be considered, and where appropriate, incorporated into a statutory Management Plan to be prepared under the *Planning and Development Act 2007*.

In recognition of the close links between the LCC and the Cotter Recreational Precinct, and the impacts of the Enlarged Cotter Dam (ECD) construction project on both areas, this Strategy includes consideration of the Cotter Precinct. For similar reason, it also considers Uriarra Village which is located just outside the LCC on its northern boundary.

### 3. Planning Context

The Recreation Strategy has been prepared in the context of the *Planning and Development Act 2007* and the *Territory Plan*. Under the *Territory Plan*, the LCC is included within the Non-Urban Zone, NUZ5 Mountains and Bushland. The Territory Plan map defines the Lower Cotter Catchment (outside Namadgi National Park) as public land reserved for the protection of water supply (denoted as Pg), for which the management objectives are:

1. to protect existing and future domestic water supply;
2. to conserve the natural environment;
3. to provide for public use of the area for education, research and low-impact recreation.

Part 10.4 of the Act requires plans of management for public land to be developed in accordance with these objectives. This draft Recreation Strategy is not intended to serve as a plan of management, rather it is an interim policy to guide management while a formal plan is developed.

The Codes in the *Planning and Development Act* that apply to the LCC include the *Non-Urban Zones Development Code* and the *Water Use and Catchment General Code*. The latter Code defines the Cotter water supply catchment, which extends from the Cotter River headwaters to the Cotter Reservoir. This allows for domestic water supply as the predominant water use, and requires that water and catchment land uses are consistent with maintaining a safe and reliable water supply. This Code specifically excludes camping and residential use in the catchment, and requires that recreational activities be controlled to minimise the potential pollution of waters.

In summary, the intent of the LCC draft SMP is consistent with the *Planning and Development Act* and the *Territory Plan* in that the SMP defines water supply as the primary land use, and other uses are permitted only if they are compatible with water supply objectives.

There is a range of other legislation relevant to this Recreation Strategy, among them the *Environment Protection Act*, *Water Resources Act*, *Fisheries Act*, *Emergencies Act*, *Nature Conservation Act*, *Heritage Act* and *Public Health Act*.

### 4. Background

Responsibility for management of the LCC rests with Parks, Conservation and Lands (PCL), within the ACT Department of Territory and Municipal Services (TAMS). However, in light of the importance of the area for domestic water supply, ACTEW Corporation have in the recent past provided significant funding and expertise to assist the restoration of the LCC to a stable and resilient landscape that delivers high quality water to the Cotter Reservoir. ACTEW's involvement will continue for the foreseeable future through its Source Water Protection program and through funding for land restoration as part of the ECD *Biodiversity Offsets Implementation Plan*.

The construction of the Enlarged Cotter Dam (ECD) is a major component of the ACT Water Security project. The ECD project is being managed by the Bulk Water Alliance, made up of five organisations including ACTEW Corporation and ACTEWAGL. Land management responsibility for the ECD construction site is held by the BWA, while responsibility for the surrounding land remains with PCL. BWA has a particular interest in the Cotter Recreation Precinct due to its proximity to the dam and the potential for complementary Precinct enhancement works to be undertaken as part of the overall ECD project.

## **5. Community consultation**

The previous version of this Strategy was available for community consultation in the second half of 2008 primarily via the TAMS website. Responses to the previous draft were received from the ACT Equestrian Association and from motor sport users. In addition, ACT Health have provided some advice pertaining to horse riding. The current draft has been updated in light of these responses. Further formal consultation will be undertaken in the future as part of the development of a statutory plan of management for the LCC. A separate community consultation process is being undertaken by the BWA in relation to the Cotter Precinct and the Enlarged Cotter Dam project.

## **6. Proposed Zoning**

Use of a zoning approach is a well-established methodology for managing public land for multiple uses, and this draft Recreation Strategy proposes to zone areas within the LCC according to management objectives and define compatible recreational activities. The zoning approach shares some of the policies established in the Namadgi National Park (NNP) Plan of Management, but includes modifications to suit unique circumstances of the LCC. For example, an additional zone will be required in the LCC to cater for areas of planted and natural regeneration.

The proposed zoning is shown in Map 1. Zoning is based on connectivity to watercourses and the Cotter Reservoir, location of regenerating or revegetated areas, biodiversity values, presence of (or potential for) suitable recreational infrastructure and sensitive areas vulnerable to disturbance. Table 1 summarises the recreational activities that will be permitted in each of the Zones.

### **6.1 Zone 1 Roaded Recreation Zone**

#### **6.1.1 Rationale**

This Zone is equivalent to NNP Zone 3. Small areas of this Zone including Blue Range Hut, parts of Mt McDonald and Uriarra Village fall slightly outside the LCC catchment boundaries, but have strong connections to the LCC and so have been incorporated into the Strategy. In addition, the Cotter Precinct is also considered as part of this Zone.

The following factors support the establishment of a Zone that provides for appropriate, low impact recreational access.

- the natural and cultural attractions of the area including excellent examples of post-fire landscape recovery;
- established physical (road) connections with existing recreational areas at Cotter Precinct, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and the northern part of Namadgi National Park;
- the need to allow community access to view rehabilitation progress and the results of community volunteer works;
- the need to provide on-site education and information about catchment management and water supply;
- historic use patterns and community expectations about access to public land;
- availability of an established gravel road network of good quality;
- anticipated community interest in the Enlarged Cotter Dam.

### **6.1.2 Management Policies**

6.1.2 (a) Identified high quality roads are promoted and managed as touring routes for vehicles and bicycles. Where these roads cross streams or are strongly connected to streams (in a sediment movement sense), engineering treatments to minimise sediment movement and/or maintenance will be considered. This may include surface hardening.

6.1.2 (b) Major visitor nodes provide focal points for interpretation, day-use facilities and organised events. Potential sites and facilities include:

- Condor Hut (orientation and interps signage, basic picnic area)
- Blue Range Hut (existing facilities including toilets, picnic shelter, BBQ, plus interps sign)
- Cotter Recreational Precinct (see 6.1.2(e)) including viewing area for ECD construction (site and details to be determined)
- Uriarra Village (subject to liaison with developer and future body corporate)

6.1.2 (c) Minor visitor nodes provide basic facilities (eg. signage, interpretation, picnic table). Potential sites include:

- Blundells Flat
- Mt McDonald Overlook on walking track
- Padovans Crossing
- Sinclair Circuit
- Junction of Bullock Paddock & Brindabella Roads

6.1.2(d) Points of interest along road corridors are included in self-guided interpretation. Potential sites include:

- Vanities Crossing
- Warks Road at Condor Creek
- Thompsons Corner
- Shannons turnoff lookout

6.1.2 (e) The Cotter Recreation Precinct, below the Cotter Dam wall, is a “gateway’ to the LCC and the natural areas beyond (Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, Namadgi National Park and “the Brindabellas”). It is a prime venue for visitor education and interpretation. Future recreation development and management in the Cotter Precinct should reflect and complement the intent of this Strategy, particularly in relation to interpretation and ensuring compatible uses.

6.1.2 (f) A small area of Zone 3 will allow for a horse riding route on existing roads or on purpose-built trails. This route will connect Uriarra Settlement with the Sherwood pine plantation area outside the catchment and is intended to provide an alternative horse riding area outside the LCC. The area proposed includes Priors Road between Uriarra Settlement and Brindabella Road, and a connecting route from Brindabella Road through East-West Block to Sherwood.

## **6.2 Zone 2 Water Quality Protection Zone**

### **6.2.1 Rationale**

This Zone is equivalent to NNP Zone 1B. Water quality protection zones are proposed for areas where access by recreational vehicles is likely to impact on sediment movement and therefore water quality. This includes roads that are located adjacent to streams, the foreshores of the enlarged Cotter Dam and steep roads where recreational use substantially increases maintenance costs.

### **6.2.2 Management Policies**

6.2.2 (a) Roads in Zone 2 will be subject to one or more of the following treatments:

- Closure, decommissioning and rehabilitation where not required for management purposes;
- Locked gates installed on management roads to prevent unauthorised access;
- The timing of road closures and gate installations will be determined by operational and resource factors.

6.2.2 (b) Roads to be closed and decommissioned have been previously agreed by the LCC Management Group. Additional closures or other changes may be identified in future as management requirements and recreational use patterns evolve.

6.2.2 (c) Locked gates are proposed to prevent all non-management vehicle access to the following areas:

- Wombat Special Purpose Reserve (SPR)
- Pago SPR
- Warks Road between Lees Creek Nursery and Blundell's Creek Road
- Cotter Dam Foreshores (Priors and Crusher Roads, Kiosk area, Bracks Hole Road, eastern and eastern/southern sections of Sinclair Circuit)

Roads closed by gates will be available for use by walkers and cyclists.

6.2.2 (d) Access for organised events behind locked areas in 6.2.2 (c) will be considered through the PCL Events Bookings system.

### **6.3 Zone 3 Regeneration Zone**

#### **6.3.1 Rationale**

There is no equivalent zone in NNP. This Zone consists of the remainder of the Catchment outside Zones 1 and 2 and includes former pine plantation areas being returned to native vegetation and pine plantation areas. It includes a significant network of roads that are available for recreational use.

#### **6.3.2 Management Policies**

6.3.2 (a) In general, recreational use in Zone 3 will be discouraged in favour of use in Zone 1. However, activities identified in Table 1 are permitted.

6.3.2 (b) Provision is made for construction of dedicated dual use cycle and/or walking trails where they can be managed without impacting on water quality, predominantly in pine plantation, on stable soils, on low to moderate slopes and/or where trails/routes already exist.

6.3.2 (c) The appropriateness of any dedicated dual use trails that are proposed will be judged by a more detailed set of criteria, to be developed. These criteria should include consideration of the recreational situation in the rest of the ACT and similar opportunities available elsewhere as well as bio-physical and water quality aspects.

**Table 1 Summary of Zoning Provisions**

Activity	Zone 1 Roaded Recreation Zone	Zone 2 Water Quality Protectio n Zone	Zone 3 Regeneration Zone	Notes
<b>Individual, non-organised activities</b>				
Recreational car driving or motorcycle riding-on road	✓	X	✓	Use of selected roads for sightseeing will allow public access and appreciation without unacceptable impacts on water quality.
Picnicking/sightseeing etc.	✓	✓	✓	Low impact passive activities. Close links to on road driving.
Non-motorised access (running, walking, orienteering)	✓	✓	✓	Low impact activity. Provision for future multi-use track in suitable areas of Zone 3.
Cycling- on road	✓	✓	✓	Low impact activity when restricted to formed roads.
Cycling- single track	X	X	✓	Provision for future dual-use tracks in suitable areas of Zone 3.
Hunting	X	X	X	Incompatible with other uses.
Camping	X	X	X	Not permitted under the <i>Territory Plan</i> .
Overnight accommodation	X	X	X	Not permitted under the <i>Territory Plan</i> . Outside catchment only.
Fires	X	X	X	Unacceptable risk of bushfire; availability of alternative sites nearby.
Horse riding	X	X	Defined area only	Not permitted in the LCC except the defined route connecting Uriarra Village to Sherwood via Priors Road and East West block.
Dogs	✓ on lead, no dogs at Vanitys Crossing	X	✓ on lead	Risk to water quality from pathogens in faeces; close monitoring required adjacent to streams. Dogs not permitted at Vanitys Crossing.
Offroad vehicle driving or riding	X	X	X	Unacceptable risk to water quality from vegetation disturbance and soil erosion .
Fishing downstream of Bendora Dam	✓	NA	NA	As per <i>Fisheries Act</i> and regulations that allow fishing in Cotter River below Bendora Dam to the junction with Pierces Creek.
Swimming downstream of Vanities Crossing	X	X	X	Unacceptable contamination from human body.
Firewood collection	X	X	X	<i>Nature Conservation Act</i> provisions
<b>Organised Events</b>				
Competitive car or motorbike rallies	X	X	X	Unacceptable risk of erosion and sediment movement from roads; maintenance issues.
Organised equestrian events	Defined area only	X	Defined area only	Defined area is within Zones 1 and 3 west of Brindabella Rd. Events subject to case-by-case consideration and conditions including veto.
Organised event versions of other activities otherwise allowed in Zone	✓	✓	✓	Permitted in principle but subject to case-by-case consideration and specific conditions including veto.

## **7. Interpretation**

### **7.1 Rationale**

The purpose of providing interpretation is to inform visitors and local residents of the land use, explain the key aspects of land management and encourage acceptable recreational behaviour.

The audience for interpretation in the LCC can be divided into 3 main groups. The characteristics of these groups reflect the relatively remote location of the area, the lack of visitor facilities and the limited range of recreational opportunities available.

“Old school” visitors have established use patterns, mainly related to vehicle use, for example dirt bike riding, four wheel driving. This group includes a small element of illegal users such as pig hunters. The amount of inappropriate use, such as off-road driving, has declined in the past couple of years due to the extensive road closure program which has reduced the attraction of the LCC for these activities. These users value the area primarily as a venue for their chosen activity.

“New school’ visitors are interested in experiencing the landscape recovery after the 2003 fires, as well as “soft adventure’ recreational activities such as 4 wheel driving. New school visitors are more likely to seek out additional information such as web-based interpretation.

“Locals’ are residents of the local area including Uriarra Village. This group is likely to become very significant for recreational management, and there is a good opportunity over the next 1-2 years to promote and establish acceptable recreational behaviour through education and interpretation before unacceptable behaviour and use patterns become entrenched. This is discussed in more detail in Section 10 ‘Links to Uriarra Village’.

### **7.2 Management Policies**

7.2 (a) The focus for interpretation and education within the LCC will be in Zone 1, noting the need to ensure that interpretation provided in the Cotter Precinct is complementary.

7.2 (b) Interpretation should be provided in a dynamic manner that allows for rapid changes in the landscape to be interpreted. It should be resistant to vandalism and not impact on the natural character of the landscape.

7.2 (c) Highly visible signage with key messages governing behaviour and permitted activities will be provided at all major road entry points to the LCC.

7.2 (d) Closed roads and other sensitive areas will be signposted to prevent inadvertent use.

7.2 (e) Where possible, alternative venues will be promoted for motorised activities that are not appropriate in the LCC. Possible alternative venues are being examined by PCL’s Community and Volunteers section in consultation with user groups.

7.2 (f) Identified recreational opportunities that are compatible with water quality objectives will be promoted (for example, a self-guided touring route).

7.2 (g) On-site and web-based interpretive information will be provided to increase awareness and understanding of land and water management objectives and the role of visitors in contributing to these.

7.2 (h) Community involvement in related land management activities such as community planting, Friends group etc. will be promoted.

7.2 (i) Local residents will be provided with information that targets specific, locally relevant behaviours such as horse riding and off-road vehicle use.

7.2 (j) A signage plan will be developed to ensure consistency and adequacy of all information, orientation, regulatory and interpretive signage.

## **8. Links to Cotter Recreation Precinct**

### **8.1 Rationale**

The Cotter Recreation Precinct is not in the LCC, but is closely linked to it in a biophysical, recreational and land management context. In the short to medium term, the most significant impacts of the Enlarged Cotter Dam (ECD) project, in a recreational sense, will be on the Cotter Precinct. The ECD project also provides opportunities to leave a positive legacy after completion.

The Cotter Precinct is a well-known and well-used recreation area and is therefore an ideal location to introduce and interpret broader catchment management issues. For example, an interpretive walking trail to the Lower Cotter Catchment Lookout on the slopes of Mt MacDonald was established in 2007. This trail is linked to the Cotter Precinct, and is also accessible via Brindabella Road.

Cotter Precinct's near-city location, natural and cultural values and quality of visitor facilities are attractive to a broader range and much higher number of visitors than that of the LCC. Visitors to the Cotter Precinct can be divided into three broad groups. Traditional users (family, ethnic, aged, community and other groups) who visit the area for picnics, playground, walking and camping; Passers-by include cyclists, motorists and motorcycle riders who use the Cotter Precinct as a meeting point or staging area, or who pass through on Tourist Route 5. Dam tourists are a potentially large new group who are interested in progress of dam construction. Management of these groups and broader community involvement is being considered by the Bulk Water Alliance as a key component of the ECD project.

The significant natural, cultural and recreational values of the Cotter Precinct dictate that the ECD project should be planned and implemented to minimise impacts on these values, particularly long term impacts. While this may require temporary restrictions on public access for some years, PCL considers that maintaining the values in the long term is more important than providing continuous access.

The impact of dam construction on recreational access is not yet clear, but the Management Policies in section 8.2 assume significant disruption.

Beyond the construction period, the ECD project provides many opportunities to enhance the Cotter Precinct so it can be "handed back" to the community in an improved state. Community views canvassed after the 2003 bushfires, as part of the *Shaping Our Territory* report, suggested strongly that the community values the Cotter Precinct for its naturalness and low level of development. As a result, the post-bushfire restoration works in Cotter Precinct, completed in 2006, focused on improving landscape amenity, upgrading picnic facilities, expanding and improving walking tracks and providing high quality interpretation. Several years on, the Bulk Water Alliance is consulting community and other stakeholders about appropriate ways to mitigate the impacts of the ECD construction on recreational opportunities in ways that will leave a positive legacy.

## **8.2 Management Policies - construction period**

8.2. (a) Provide detailed input to BWA planning to provide alternative, comparable recreational facilities to mitigate potential loss of access to Cotter Avenue during construction phase of the ECD. As of January 2010, Casuarina Sands has been upgraded as a key measure in this respect.

8.2.(b) Work closely with BWA to manage passers-by to minimise conflict between construction activities and visitation. This is an important part of pre-construction planning that is being undertaken by the Bulk Water Alliance.

8.2.(c) Avoid permanent impacts on the key values and recreational assets of the Cotter Precinct (especially established trees), through selection of appropriate sites for construction purposes, and careful management of construction activities.

8.2.(d) Provide purpose built, well managed and safe facilities to allow public viewing of the Dam construction. Catchment interpretation should be provided at these sites to complement information about the dam project. As of January 2010, plans are being developed for a walking access a viewing platform near Cotter Avenue as a key measure in this respect.

8.2.(e) Include catchment management and water supply themes as a part of interpretation established for the ECD project in general.

## **8.3 Management Policies – post-construction period**

8.3 (a) Work in cooperation with the BWA and the community to provide for post-construction enhancement of the Cotter Precinct and thus provide a positive legacy for the community, while maintaining the essential character of the area. Examples of possible enhancements include:

- Upgrade/replace existing toilet facilities and provide additional facilities
- Upgrade walking tracks, barbeques and picnic tables
- Provide additional picnic shelters
- Improve landscape amenity (for example tree planting; establish shrub beds; underground power lines)
- Provide a cycling and walking link between Stromlo Forest Park and the Cotter Precinct
- Install irrigation for grassed areas, using non-potable water
- Upgrade Cotter campground and allow for powered sites
- Provide purpose-built dam viewing areas
- Provide enhanced interpretation of local features and allow the area to serve as a “gateway” to natural areas beyond.

## **9. Links to Uriarra Village**

### **9.1 Rationale**

Uriarra Village is under construction and will consist of around 100 houses under a Community Title lease. The generally large residential blocks, some with horse agistment facilities, and the surrounding rural setting suggest that management of recreation by Uriarra Village residents will be a significant management challenge. The main recreation activities of concern will be use of motorbikes and off road vehicles, horse riding, and the ease of access to the future Cotter Reservoir. The main means of managing these activities will be to inform and educate residents of the restrictions and, where practicable, to provide and promote alternative venues.

### **9.2 Management Policies**

9.2 (a) Ensure recreational restrictions are clearly made known to residents as early as possible in the development process. The first steps towards this have been made with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Village developers, to ensure that planned restrictions on recreational use in the LCC are known to potential buyers of residential blocks.

9.2 (b) Define, develop and promote to residents those PCL-managed areas that are suitable for recreation, as an alternative to the areas where restrictions are in place.

9.2 (c) Ensure that restrictions are made clear on the ground via use of access barriers, signage or other means.

9.2 (d) Build a constructive relationship with the future Village body corporate or equivalent organisation to ensure a cooperative relationship is maintained with residents.

## **10. Monitoring**

### **10.1 Rationale**

Monitoring of recreational uses and impacts is essential to assess the success of management strategies and identify issues that require further intervention. Monitoring of recreational use and impacts will be undertaken as part of the overall monitoring program for the LCC. This program currently includes a range of qualitative and quantitative measures of vegetation cover, vegetation composition and condition, landscape function and water quality.

### **10.2 Management Policies**

10.2 (a) Monitoring of recreational use and impacts will be integrated into the *LCC Monitoring and Research Implementation Plan*.

10.2 (b) Monitoring will seek to record and measure a range of biophysical factors including damage to roads, tracks and infrastructure, presence of litter and domestic animal droppings, physical impacts on specific sites and spread of weeds as a result of recreational activities.

10.2 (c) Monitoring will track changes in recreation use patterns or uses, changes in demand for recreational activities, illegal or inappropriate uses and feedback from users.

10.2 (d) Monitoring of individual, non-organised horse use will include recording of opportunistic observations of horse usage or evidence of horse usage (such as droppings, tracks, parked horse floats). Monitoring of organised equestrian events will include a post-event field survey of the event route to identify impacts including soil surface damage, manure load and rubbish.

