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The Committee Secretary, Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communication

**Submission on the EPBC Reform Bills 2025**

FROM: Bendigo & District Environment Council Inc. (BDEC incorporated 1988) is a non-profit community volunteer organisation with a long history of advocating for conservation of the natural environment, for greater accountability and transparency in environmental decision making by all levels of government, and Australia's progress towards the achievement of ecological sustainability.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Environment Protection Reform Bill 2025.

BDEC made a submission in the last round of consultation (23/03/2024) re the proposed reforms to the EPBC Act 1999.

Our rationale submitted then is relevant to this latest bill:

- Once destroyed, we simply do not know how to rebuild the natural systems upon which we all depend, and which are entitled in their own right to exist;
- Reform bills can only work properly when the public sector can take part at all stages of the process.

LOCAL RELEVANCE: The Reform Bill in its current form is of little use to BDEC for addressing threats to Protected Matters of National Environmental Significance (MNES) from residential developments in Bendigo.

Bendigo is a rapidly growing urban centre where we are experiencing many incursions of the built environment into rural and forested environments. For example, two protected MNES threatened species populations, the Pink Tailed Worm Lizard and the Eltham Copper Butterfly, are under threat by City of Greater Bendigo Council and the Victorian State government approved residential developments. This year BDEC has experienced lack of response to our communications directed to the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) regarding threats to protected MNES in the Greater Bendigo LGA. The Federal government must lift its game.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Immediate action:**

It is with great concern that we note that many provisions in the Environment Protection Reform Bill 2025 do not meet accountability and transparency standards

that our community expects. Before the Reform Bills are debated in the Senate the Albanese government must allow more time for a measured and transparent consultative process with the people of Australia.

The highest priority for this consultative process is for the Albanese government to develop the National Environmental Standards with significant input from the public sector.

The Environment Protection Reform Bill 2025 must:

1. Include scientifically based, objective, clear and specific national standards designed to PROTECT and RESTORE nature as a first priority, and in this process threats from climate change must be acknowledged;  
It is imperative to have objective National Environment Standards which can not be varied at the whim of the Minister for the Environment & Water, or the CEO of the National EPA.
2. Revise “Streamlined Assessment” to mean genuine consultation at a local level for any project. The current Reform Bill that by-passes community works from ignorance, not knowledge, of local biodiversity and essential ecological services. It will cut out First Nations’ knowledge, culture and opinion.
3. Ensure the Federal Minister must exercise his final say within carefully proscribed boundaries that relate closely to the National Environmental Standards.
4. Stop shuffling responsibilities back to the States on matters of national environmental significance is irresponsible and MUST NOT BE ALLOWED. The whole point of a Federal referral is that it is objective, scientifically accurate and independent of state lobbyists.
5. Close loopholes that allow deforestation and habitat destruction to continue outside the purview of the Environment Protection Reform Bill 2025, and the EPBC Act of 1999.
6. Require projects that are deemed necessary to proceed to do more than ‘Pay to Destroy’. As noted previously, exact habitats are too complex to be found elsewhere or recreated. Such a scheme tried in NSW did not succeed in funnelling money into habitat restoration.

BDEC endorses the establishment of a Federal, independent EPA, and an independent regulator to enforce the rules without political interference.

Yours faithfully,

Aldo Penbrook

Convenor, Bendigo and District Environment Council