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# AUSTRALIA'S GREEN TAPE ARMY

AN ANALYSIS OF THE GROWTH OF THE  
ENVIRONMENTAL BUREAUCRACY AND  
AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

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Public Affairs**



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# Introduction

Agriculture embodies the values of hard work, risk-taking and entrepreneurship: the values which are central to the Australian way of life. Farmers, graziers, cattlemen, shearers and stockmen are an inextricable part of the Australian identity.

The products of Australia's \$83 billion agricultural industry feed and clothe the world, and lift people out of poverty and starvation. As a nation, Australia produces enough food to feed 75 million people each and every year - enough to feed its entire population three times over.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the significant and enduring contribution of Australia's agricultural sector, the burden of red and green tape is immense and continues to grow.

There are a number of different ways to measure the weight of regulatory burdens. A landmark research report by the Institute of Public Affairs, *The Growth of Federal Environmental Law: 2019 Update*, quantified the growth of environmental regulatory burden at the federal level since the establishment of the first Commonwealth environmental department (in 1971) by studying the number of pages of Commonwealth environmental regulation since 1971. It identified that there had been an 80-fold increase in environmental red tape by 2019.

Another way of quantifying the growth of environmental red tape – or green tape – is to measure the expansion of the environmental bureaucracy in terms of its spending and workforce. This is the purpose of the present study. Environmental bureaucracy, in this report, is defined as the relevant environment department, plus all of its related entities such as the Environment Protection Agency. A list of the relevant agencies is provided in the Appendix.

This report estimates the size and growth of the federal and Western Australian state environment bureaucracies since the year 2000, when the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) came into effect. To do this, we analysed total spending by and staffing of respective environment departments and agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Tehan (2021) Joint media release: Backing Australian farmers to expand horizons in 2021, *Australian Government*, available from <https://www.trademinister.gov.au/minister/dan-tehan/media-release/joint-media-release-backing-australian-farmers-expand-horizons-2021>; Australian Food and Grocery Council (2020) No need to panic, Australia produces enough food for 75 million, *Australian Food and Grocery Council: News and Media*, available from <https://www.afgc.org.au/news-and-media/2020/06/no-need-to-panic-australia-produces-enough-food-for-75-million>

At the national level, our study finds that, since the year 2000:

- Spending on the Commonwealth's environmental bureaucracy has increased by 470%, while the size of the agricultural industry nationwide has increased by only 175%.
- The Commonwealth's environmental bureaucracy has grown at nearly three times the rate as the agricultural sector.
- Staffing at the federal environmental bureaucracy has increased by 256%, while employment in agriculture throughout the country has declined by 27%.
- For every job created in the environmental bureaucracy, 14 jobs have been destroyed in Australia's agricultural sector.

At the state level in Western Australia our study finds that, since the year 2000:

- Western Australia's environmental bureaucracy spending has increased by 635%, while the size of the state's agricultural sector has only increased by 115%.
- The growth of the Western Australian environmental bureaucracy is 5.5 times the growth of the agricultural industry over this period.
- Staffing at Western Australia's environmental bureaucracy has increased by 326%, while employment in agriculture throughout the state has declined by 35%.
- For every job created in Western Australia's environmental bureaucracy, 21 jobs have been destroyed in the Western Australian agricultural sector.

To illustrate the sheer size of Australia's environmental bureaucracy, this report also estimates the number of Australians employed by environmental bureaucracies across all states and territories and at the federal level.

The total number of staff employed by environmental departments nationwide is estimated to amount to 34,604 people. By contrast, the size of Australia's regular army by headcount is 29,399. This means that the size of the nation's taxpayer-funded green tape army is almost 20% larger than the size of the regular army.

Moreover, the green tape army of environmental bureaucrats has doubled in size since 2000 whereas the increase in the size of the regular army was only 22%.

Only root and branch reform, involving the elimination of unnecessary red and green tape, and the bureaucrats who impose it on farmers and other primary producers, will help restore prosperity and opportunity to the Australian economy.

Our recommendations are as follows:

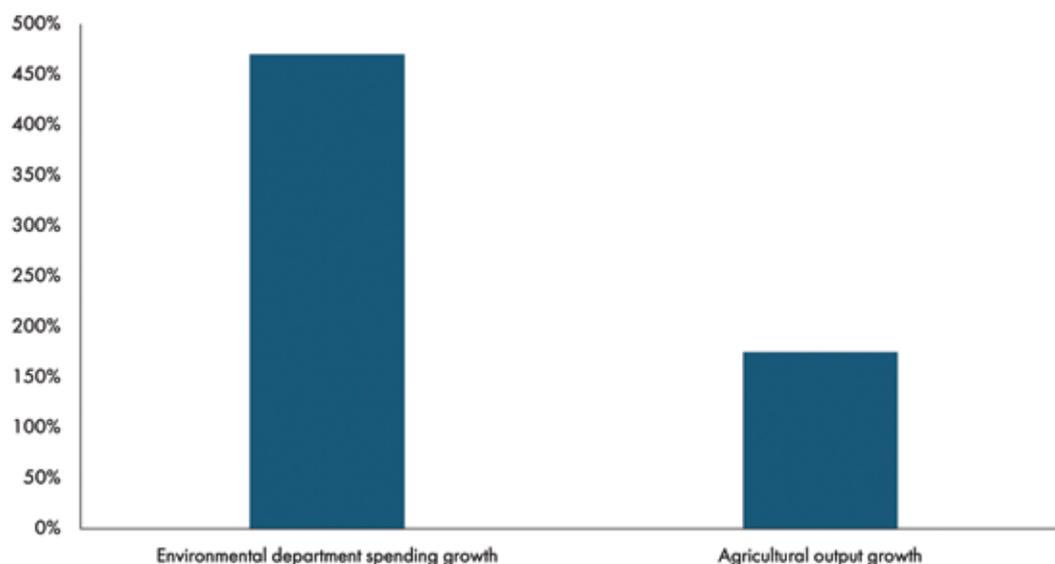
- Australian governments of all levels should announce a moratorium on all new regulation being imposed on the agricultural sector for the next five years.
- Subsequently, federal and state governments must introduce a one-in-two-out approach, where two pieces of regulation are repealed for every new piece of regulation introduced.
- The federal government should cease the regulation of any agricultural activity which is already regulated at the state level, to remove unnecessary duplication.
- Repeal the requirement for farmers and landowners to obtain a government permit to clear native vegetation, which is of low environmental value, on privately held land.
- Repeal section 487 of the EPBC Act which allows environmental groups to engage in litigation against major resources projects.

# The expansion of the Commonwealth's environmental bureaucracy

In the year 2000, the federal Department of the Environment and Heritage had a total operating expense of \$405.30 million.<sup>2</sup> By the year 2022, spending on the federal Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment had jumped to an estimated \$2.31 billion.<sup>3</sup> This is an increase of approximately 470%.

Meanwhile, the gross value of Australia's agricultural production has increased by 175%, from \$30.22 billion in the year 2000 to \$83.10 billion today.<sup>4</sup>

**Chart 1: Growth of federal environmental bureaucracy spending compared with the growth in the value of Australia's agricultural production**



2 Department of the Environment and Heritage (2000) *Annual Report, Part 5: Financial Statements*, DEH: Canberra, available from <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20190416111001/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/161758/20190415-1313/www.environment.gov.au/archive/about/publications/annual-report/99-00/index.html>

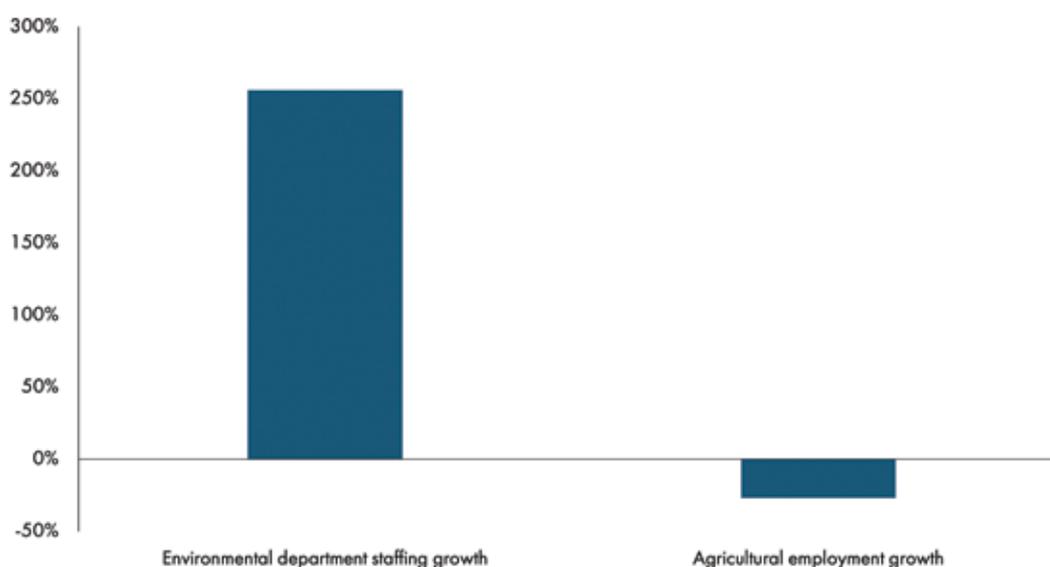
3 Commonwealth Government (2022) *Budget 2022-23: Agency Resourcing: Budget Paper No 4*, The Treasury: Canberra, available from [https://budget.gov.au/2022-23/content/bp4/download/bp4\\_2022-23.pdf](https://budget.gov.au/2022-23/content/bp4/download/bp4_2022-23.pdf)

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) 7113.0 – *Agriculture, Australia, 1999-2000*, ABS: Canberra, available from [https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/7113.0#~:text=CHAPTER%201%3A%20AGRICULTURE%20AND%20THE%20AUSTRALIAN%20ECONOMY&text=In%201999%2D2000%20the%20gross,agricultural%20production%20was%20%2430.2%20billion.](https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/7113.0#~:text=CHAPTER%201%3A%20AGRICULTURE%20AND%20THE%20AUSTRALIAN%20ECONOMY&text=In%201999%2D2000%20the%20gross,agricultural%20production%20was%20%2430.2%20billion.;); Andrew Cameron (2022) *Agricultural overview: June Quarter 2022*, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry: Canberra, available from [https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/agricultural-outlook/agriculture-overview#:~:text=The%20gross%20value%20of%20agricultural,%E2%80%93%209322%20\(Figure%201.1\).](https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/agricultural-outlook/agriculture-overview#:~:text=The%20gross%20value%20of%20agricultural,%E2%80%93%209322%20(Figure%201.1).)

In the year 2000, the Department of the Environment and Heritage had 2,634 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff in its payroll.<sup>5</sup> In 2022, the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment employs 9,365 FTE staff.<sup>6</sup> This represents an increase of 256%.

Conversely, the number of people employed in agriculture has declined by 27% since 2000, from 364,000 people to 265,000.<sup>7</sup>

**Chart 2: Growth of employment in federal environmental bureaucracy compared with change in Australia's agricultural workforce**



5 Environment Australia (2000) *Environment Australia Annual Report*, EA: Canberra, available from <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20110608022756/http://www.environment.gov.au/archive/about/publications/annual-report/99-00/manage.html>

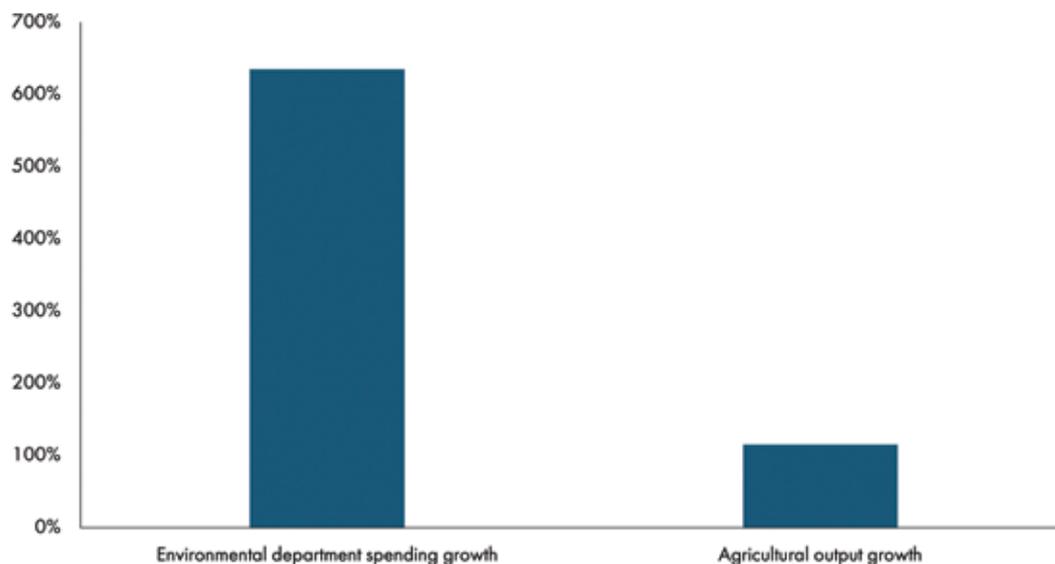
6 Commonwealth Government (2022) *2022-23 Budget paper no. 4*, CA: Canberra, available from [https://budget.gov.au/2022-23/content/bp4/download/bp4\\_2022-23.pdf](https://budget.gov.au/2022-23/content/bp4/download/bp4_2022-23.pdf)

7 Commonwealth Government (2021) *Agricultural commodities and trade data*, DAFF: Canberra, available from <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/agricultural-outlook/data#2021>; Australian Industry and Skills Committee (2021) *Agriculture*, AISC: Canberra <https://nationalindustryinsights.aisc.net.au/industries/agriculture>

# The expansion of Western Australia's environmental bureaucracy

In 2000, the Western Australian Department of Environmental Protection had a total operating expense of \$31.10 million.<sup>8</sup> By 2022 this had increased by 635%, with the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation's total operating expenses increasing to \$228.52 million.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the gross value of Western Australia's agricultural production has increased by 115%, from \$4.74 billion to \$10.20 billion today.<sup>10</sup>

**Chart 3: Growth of Western Australia's environmental bureaucracy spending compared with growth in the value of the Western Australia's agricultural production**



8 Government of Western Australia (1999) *1999-2000 State Budget*, WA Treasury: Perth, available from <https://www.ourstatebudget.wa.gov.au/1999-2000/index.html>

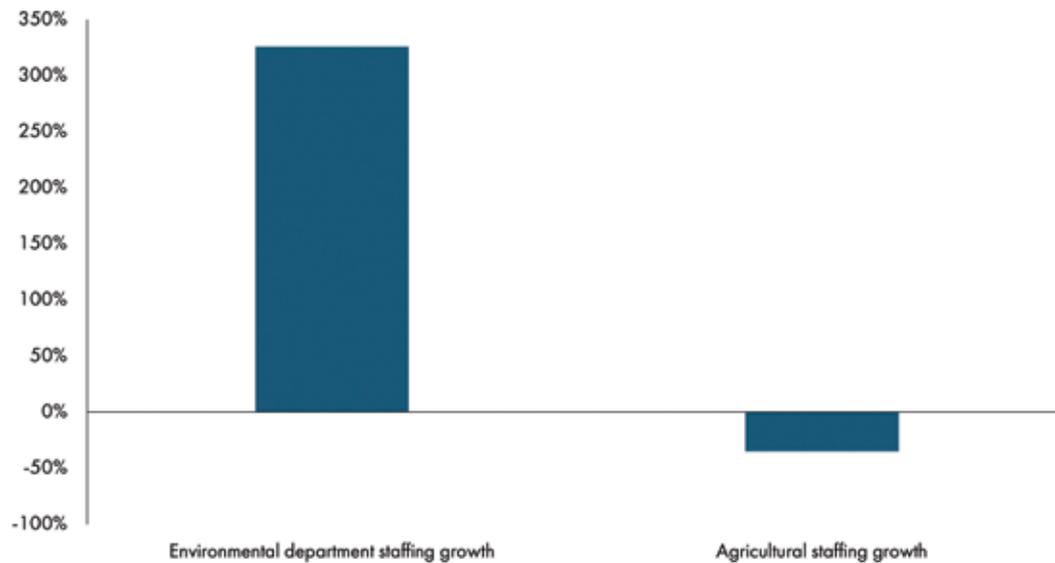
9 Government of Western Australia (2022) *2022-2023 State Budget*, WA Treasury: Perth, available from <https://www.ourstatebudget.wa.gov.au/2022-23/budget-papers/bp2/2022-23-wa-state-budget-bp2-vol2.pdf>

10 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *Value of Agricultural Commodities Produced, Australia*, ABS: Canberra <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/agriculture/value-agricultural-commodities-produced-australia/latest-release>; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) *7113.0 Agriculture, Australia (1999-2000)*, ABS: Canberra, available from [https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/4CC3169264EA5935CA256ADA00813232/\\$File/71130\\_1999-2000.pdf](https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/4CC3169264EA5935CA256ADA00813232/$File/71130_1999-2000.pdf)

In the year 2000, Western Australia’s Department of Environmental Protection had 197 FTE staff in its payroll.<sup>11</sup> By 2021, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation had employed 840 FTE staff.<sup>12</sup> This represents an increase of 326%.

The number of people employed in Agriculture in Western Australia has declined by 35% since 2000, from 39,194 to approximately 25,657 in 2022.<sup>13</sup>

**Chart 4: Growth of employment in Western Australia’s environmental bureaucracy compared with change in Western Australia’s agricultural workforce**



11 Government of Western Australia (1999) *1999-2000 State Budget*, WA Treasury: Perth, available from <https://www.ourstatebudget.wa.gov.au/1999-2000/index.html>

12 Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (2021) *Annual Report 2020-21*, DWER: Perth, <https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2021-10/DWER-annual-report-2020-21.pdf>; Government of Western Australia (2021), *Western Australian public sector quarterly workforce report – June 2021*, WA Public Sector Commissioner: Perth, available from [https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2022-06/quarterly\\_workforce\\_report\\_-\\_june\\_2021.DOCX](https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2022-06/quarterly_workforce_report_-_june_2021.DOCX)

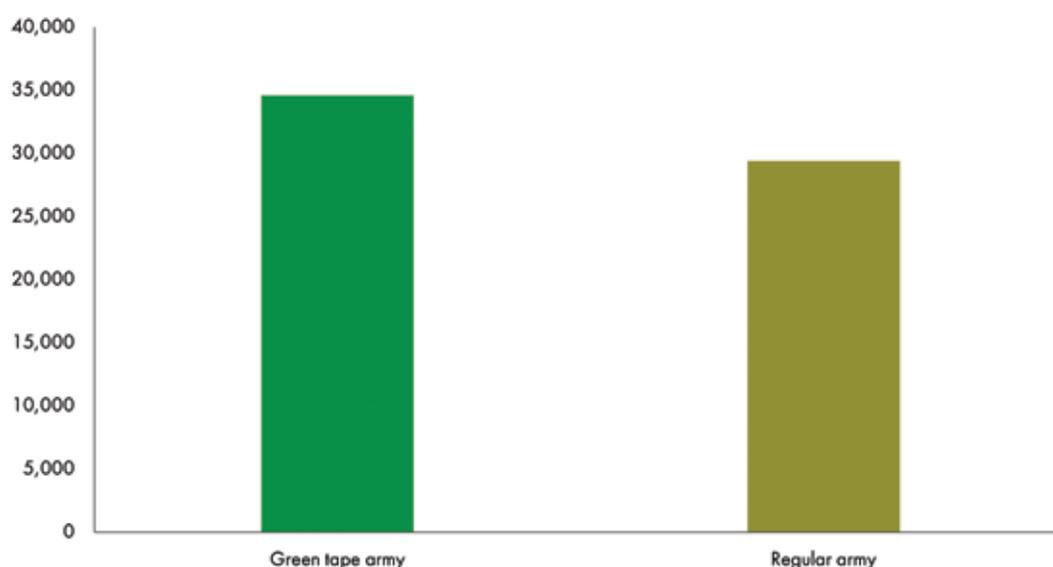
13 According to ABS data, close to 42,000 people were employed in WA’s agriculture, fishing and forestry sectors in 2000. Furthermore, just over 29,000 people are employed in the sectors today. Nationwide throughout the 90s and 2000s, around 90% of employment in AFF is based in agriculture. The stated employment numbers for 2000 and 2022 are estimates of WA’s agricultural employment based on the said figures. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed*, ABS: Canberra, available from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australiadetailed/latest-release#industry-occupation-and-sector>; Commonwealth Government (2021) *Agricultural commodities and trade data*, DAFF: Canberra, available from <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/research-topics/agricultural-outlook/data#2021>

# The size of Australia's green tape army

The total number of staff employed by environmental departments nationwide, based on the latest data, is estimated to amount to 34,604 people.<sup>14</sup>

The size of Australia's regular army is 29,399 based on the Australian Defence Force's latest annual report.<sup>15</sup> This means that the size of the nation's taxpayer-funded green tape army is almost 20% bigger than the size of the regular army.

**Chart 5: Size of green tape army compared with regular army**



The green tape army today, by headcount, is more than double the size that it was twenty years ago, when it was approximately 16,261 individuals strong.<sup>16</sup> The headcount of the regular army, on the other hand, has only increased by 22% since 2000, from 24,164 to 29,399 individuals.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This number is based on the latest available data from state, territory and federal departmental annual reports (e.g., Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (2021) *Annual Report 2020-21*, DPIE: Sydney, [https://media.opengov.nsw.gov.au/pairtree\\_root/04/5d/19/8f/0d/73/4b/58/b9/3f/9b/94/f1/62/c5/57/obj/DPIE\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2020\\_21\\_Final\\_291021\\_.pdf](https://media.opengov.nsw.gov.au/pairtree_root/04/5d/19/8f/0d/73/4b/58/b9/3f/9b/94/f1/62/c5/57/obj/DPIE_Annual_Report_2020_21_Final_291021_.pdf); Commonwealth Government (2022) *Budget 2022-23: Agency Resourcing: Budget Paper No 4*, The Treasury: Canberra, [https://budget.gov.au/2022-23/content/bp4/download/bp4\\_2022-23.pdf](https://budget.gov.au/2022-23/content/bp4/download/bp4_2022-23.pdf); Department of Environment and Science (2021) *Annual Report 2020-2021*, DES: Brisbane, [https://www.des.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0032/249836/annual-report-2020-21.pdf](https://www.des.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/249836/annual-report-2020-21.pdf)). Data from state public sector workforce reports suggest that the ratio between FTE and total headcount is approximately 1: 1.2; therefore, where only FTE figures are available, we estimate the total headcount to be 20% higher than the noted FTE numbers.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Defence (2021) *Annual Report 2022-21*, DoF: Canberra, available from <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/information-disclosures/annual-reports>

<sup>16</sup> This number is based on data from state, territory and federal departmental annual reports for the year 2000 with the exception for NSW, where the earliest digitised report we could find was from 2004, and the NT, where an estimate had to be made based on other financial data. As noted previously, data from state public sector workforce reports suggest that the ratio between FTE and total headcount is approximately 1: 1.2; therefore, where only FTE figures are available, we estimate the total headcount to be 20% higher than the noted FTE numbers.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Defence (2000) *Defence Annual Report 1999-2000*, DoF: Canberra, available from <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/information-disclosures/annual-reports>

# Conclusion

This report estimates the size and growth of the federal and Western Australian state environment bureaucracies since the year 2000, when the EPBC Act came into effect. To do this, we analysed total spending by and staffing of respective environment departments and agencies.

At the national level, our study finds that, since the year 2000:

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# Appendix

Agencies supported by the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment:

- Australian Fisheries Management Authority
- Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority
- Bureau of Meteorology
- Cotton Research and Development Corporation
- Director of National Parks
- Fisheries Research and Development Corporation
- Grains Research and Development Corporation
- Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
- Murray-Darling Basin Authority
- Regional Investment Corporation
- Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation
- Sydney Harbour Federation Trust
- Wine Australia

Agencies supported by the Western Australian Department of Water and Environmental Regulation:

- Environmental Protection Authority
- Cockburn Sound Management Council
- Waste Authority
- Keep Australia Beautiful Council WA



# AUSTRALIA'S GREEN TAPE ARMY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE GROWTH OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL BUREAUCRACY AND AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

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## About the authors

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