

Design and Early Implementation of the National Soil Strategy

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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Canberra ACT

20 May 2024

Dear President
Dear Mr Speaker

In accordance with the authority contained in the *Auditor-General Act 1997*, I have undertaken an independent performance audit in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. The report is titled *Design and Early Implementation of the National Soil Strategy*. Pursuant to Senate Standing Order 166 relating to the presentation of documents when the Senate is not sitting, I present the report of this audit to the Parliament.

Following its presentation and receipt, the report will be placed on the Australian National Audit Office's website — <http://www.anao.gov.au>.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rona Mellor'.

Rona Mellor PSM
Acting Auditor-General

The Honourable the President of the Senate
The Honourable the Speaker of the House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

AUDITING FOR AUSTRALIA

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Audit snapshot

Auditor-General Report No.27 2023–24

Design and Early Implementation of the National Soil Strategy



Why did we do this audit?

- ▶ The National Soil Strategy (the strategy) was released in May 2021 and sets out a 20-year national vision to recognise, better understand and sustainably manage soil as a key national asset. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department) is the Australian Government entity leading the design and implementation of the strategy.
- ▶ This audit examined the effectiveness of the design and early implementation of the strategy and the supporting National Soil Action Plan (national action plan).



What did we find?

- ▶ The design and early implementation of the strategy and the national action plan was not effective, except for its stakeholder engagement activities.
- ▶ The design processes established to support the achievement of the government's objectives were partly appropriate.
- ▶ Effective arrangements are not in place to support implementation of the strategy and the national action plan.



Key facts

- ▶ The strategy outlines three goals and 12 objectives 'aimed at restoring and protecting soil nationally'.
- ▶ The strategy was accompanied by the Commonwealth Interim Action Plan, which outlined 13 Australian Government initiatives to be implemented in the lead-up to the release of the national action plan.
- ▶ The national action plan was published on 28 November 2023.



What did we recommend?

- ▶ There were six recommendations to the department to: ensure necessary business information is created and retained during policy design; communicate risks to relevant participants and establish appropriate risk management arrangements; develop an implementation plan and a monitoring and evaluation plan; and establish evaluation arrangements.
- ▶ The department agreed to four recommendations and agreed in principle to two recommendations.

\$214.9 m

funding allocated in the 2021–22 Budget for initiatives to implement the strategy.

17

partners who provided statements of support for the national action plan.

17 months

delay in releasing the National Soil Action Plan, from its intended release date of June 2022.

Summary and recommendations

Background

1. In May 2021, the Australian Government released the National Soil Strategy (the strategy) as Australia's first national soil policy.¹ It is a 20-year strategy that 'provides a national vision and shared goals and objectives between the Australian Government and state and territory governments for managing soil across all landscapes'.
2. The strategy has three overarching goals to be achieved by 2041.
 - Goal 1: Prioritise soil health.
 - Goal 2: Empower soil innovation and stewards.
 - Goal 3: Strengthen soil knowledge and capability.
3. Each goal specifies a list of objectives and high-level progress measures. A full list of goals, objectives and progress measures is in Appendix 3.
4. The strategy was released alongside the Commonwealth Interim Action Plan (the interim action plan), which outlined 13 Australian Government initiatives to be implemented in the lead-up to the release of the National Soil Action Plan (the national action plan).
5. The national action plan was launched on 28 November 2023, replacing the interim action plan. The national action plan outlines four priority actions to achieve by 2028. It is intended to cover a period of five years, with a new action plan for the next five-year period to be developed following evaluation of the first action plan.
6. The strategy and the national action plan are the joint responsibility of the Australian Government and state and territory governments. The national action plan is being delivered in partnership with the soil science and research community, not-for-profit organisations, Natural Resource Management organisations, and industry bodies. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department) is the Australian Government entity leading the design and implementation of the strategy and the national action plan.²

Rationale for undertaking the audit

7. The strategy sets out a national vision, goals and objectives to be delivered over 20 years, including to recognise, better understand and sustainably manage soil as a key national asset. The 2021–22 Budget provided \$214.9 million in funding over four years for a package of measures to support the National Soil Strategy (National Soil Package), including \$5.9 million to develop the national action plan and implement the strategy. The May 2023 Budget allocated a further \$56 million to drive outcomes under the national action plan.

1 The strategy was developed by the Australian Government in conjunction with state and territory governments, the National Soils Advocate and the soil community. It is available from Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *National Soil Strategy* [Internet], <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/natural-resources/soils> [accessed 7 March 2024].

2 The department was formerly known as the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE). It was renamed as a result of a machinery of government change that took effect on 1 July 2022. This report refers to the entity as 'the department', unless distinction is required.

8. This audit examined the effectiveness of the department's design and early implementation of the strategy and the national action plan. It provides assurance to the Parliament over the department's design processes; arrangements in place to implement the strategy; and delivery of soil initiatives listed in the interim action plan.

Audit objective and criteria

9. The audit objective was to examine the effectiveness of the design and early implementation of the National Soil Strategy and the supporting National Soil Action Plan.

10. To form a conclusion against the objective, the following high-level criteria were adopted.

- Were appropriate design processes established to support the achievement of the government's objectives?
- Are effective arrangements in place to support implementation?

11. The audit focused on the department's design and implementation of the strategy and the national action plan, including the delivery of the initiatives listed in the interim action plan. The audit did not examine the actions that are being implemented by state and territory governments and non-government and industry organisations; the effectiveness of initiatives listed in the interim and national action plans; or the delivery of other soil-related initiatives that are not part of the strategy or the interim and national action plans.

Conclusion

12. The department's design and early implementation of the strategy and the national action plan was not effective, except for its stakeholder engagement activities.

13. The design processes to support the achievement of the government's objectives were partly appropriate. There was limited evidence used to inform the development of the strategy and the national action plan. The national action plan does not specify which of its priority actions relate to which goals or objectives in the strategy. The links between the national action plan's priority actions and the strategy's overarching goals were published on the department's website in April 2024. The department established largely appropriate consultation arrangements for the development of the strategy and national action plan, and adequately addressed three of the four recurring concerns raised by stakeholders. The department did not consider risks to inform the design and implementation of the strategy or the national action plan.

14. Effective arrangements are not in place to support implementation of the strategy and the national action plan. While progress has been made in implementing the initiatives in the interim action plan, the department had no framework or process in place to assess the impacts of individual initiatives on the overall implementation of the strategy. The department has developed and launched a website to report on initiatives under each priority action. There are no arrangements in place to monitor or report on the progress towards the goals and objectives of the strategy.

Supporting findings

Design processes

15. There was limited evidence used to inform the development of the strategy and the national action plan. The department was unable to demonstrate that the strategy and the national action plan were informed by analysis of prior and existing work, critical gaps in government investment, and future priorities for soil based on efforts to date. In April 2024, the department updated its website to specify the links between the national action plan's priority actions and the strategy's overarching goals. (See paragraphs 2.2 to 2.60)

16. The department established multiple channels for stakeholders to engage with the development processes and provide feedback. There were four recurring themes in feedback provided by stakeholders, three of which were addressed throughout the consultation process. The feedback relating to the goals, objectives and actions was not addressed by the department. (See paragraphs 2.61 to 2.85)

17. There was no consideration of risks to inform the design and implementation of the strategy and the national action plan. Two risk documents were drafted for the development of the strategy and the national action plan, however neither were used. There was no discussion of risks to the design and implementation of the strategy and the national action plan with stakeholders or decision-makers. (See paragraphs 2.86 to 2.94)

Implementation

18. Each initiative under the interim action plan has its own arrangement to oversee delivery. The department had no whole-of-program oversight over all the initiatives in the interim action plan. In February 2024, the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee (NSSISC) agreed for the department to commence developing a suite of documents to support oversight of progress in implementing the national action plan. There are no arrangements to manage risk to implementation at a whole-of-program level. (See paragraphs 3.3 to 3.19)

19. While progress has been made in implementing the initiatives under the interim action plan, not all completed initiatives achieved their planned objectives or expended the allocated funding. The impact of the initiatives not meeting or partially meeting their planned targets to the achievement of the strategy's goals and objectives has not been assessed or managed. The department has commenced implementing the initiatives to progress the priority actions of the national action plan following its launch in November 2023. (See paragraphs 3.20 to 3.38)

20. The department has not finalised or used the draft monitoring and evaluation framework that was developed for the National Soil Package. No arrangements are in place to monitor progress in implementing the strategy. A website has been launched to report on initiatives being implemented under the priority actions of the national action plan. There has been no internal or external reporting on progress against the goals and objectives of the strategy. (See paragraphs 3.39 to 3.73)

Recommendations

Recommendation no. 1
Paragraph 2.22

To reinforce the importance of good record keeping for integrity, transparency and accountability in the management of public resources, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry ensure that, in accordance with Australian Government record keeping requirements and its record management policies:

- (a) necessary business information is created and retained to demonstrate the basis on which key policy design and implementation decisions were taken; and
- (b) its record keeping systems and practices are compliant with the official requirements.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response:
Agreed.

Recommendation no. 2
Paragraph 2.91

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry identify, assess and communicate risks to relevant program participants and decision-makers to support informed decision-making, during policy design and throughout the implementation process.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response:
Agreed.

Recommendation no. 3
Paragraph 3.18

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry establish arrangements to coordinate the management of risk to the implementation of the National Soil Strategy and the National Soil Action Plan at a whole-of-program level, including management of shared risks.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response:
Agreed.

Recommendation no. 4
Paragraph 3.35

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry develop an implementation plan for the National Soil Action Plan, which clearly documents and captures roles and responsibilities, timeframes for delivery, and resources allocated to the relevant actions.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response:
Agreed in principle.

Recommendation no. 5 To support the measurement of progress in implementing the strategy and the national action plan, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry finalise the draft monitoring and evaluation plan to:

Paragraph 3.47

- (a) establish specific targets, baselines, and data sources for relevant Australian Government initiatives;
- (b) propose and coordinate the development of processes to monitor and report on progress against the national action plan with action plan partners; and
- (c) measure and report on the achievement of the strategy's overarching goals and objectives.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response:
Agreed in principle.

Recommendation no. 6 The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry establish arrangements for periodic reviews of the strategy and the national action plan as outlined in the strategy, to ensure changes to government priorities and emerging science are reflected appropriately in both documents.

Paragraph 3.55

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response:
Agreed.

Summary of entity response

21. The proposed audit report was provided to the department. The department's summary response to the audit is provided below and its full response is at Appendix 1.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department) acknowledges the findings and recommendations of the ANAO and appreciates the opportunity to comment on the audit report on the '*Design and early implementation of the National Soil Strategy*'.

The department agrees with recommendations 1 to 3 and 6 and agrees in principle to recommendations 4 and 5 made by the ANAO. The department acknowledges that work is underway to implement all the recommendations.

Following the release of the National Soil Action Plan in November 2023, and agreement from the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee in February 2024 to progress an implementation package to support its implementation, work is progressing to develop implementation arrangements for the action plan.

The department is encouraged the ANAO has confirmed that the department's engagement with stakeholders during the design processes was largely appropriate. The department notes the National Soil Action Plan is a joint, collaborative commitment across partners including all levels of government, the soil science and research community, not-for-profits, Natural Resource Management organisations, industry bodies and the private sector. The department looks forward to continuing to engage with our partners and stakeholders as the action plan is implemented.

Key messages from this audit for all Australian Government entities

22. Below is a summary of key messages, including instances of good practice, which have been identified in this audit and may be relevant for the operations of other Australian Government entities.

Policy/program design

- Meaningful engagement with stakeholders can help ensure the objectives of a program are practical, achievable and reflect the needs of the community. The department established multiple channels of engagement, including public surveys and workshops, which provided effective mechanisms to consult with a wide range of stakeholders. Entities should ensure sufficient time is allowed in the design phase for this consultative process to occur and be aware of stakeholder consultation fatigue and adjust approaches accordingly.
- When developing objectives for a strategy or program, entities should consider and build into the design process how the objectives will be achieved, and how progress will be monitored, reported on, and evaluated. Leaving these to be considered later may compromise the entity's ability to determine whether the program is meeting its intended objectives and public resources are being properly used.

Governance and risk management

- When delivering a package of initiatives intended to contribute to common policy objectives, entities should establish arrangements to provide coordinated governance, risk assessment and reporting across all programs and initiatives. This should include appropriate levels of oversight over how the programs and initiatives are performing against the overall policy objectives.

Record keeping

- Necessary business information should be created and retained to demonstrate the basis on which key policy design and implementation decisions were made. Effective record keeping is especially critical to retain evidence of decision-making processes and ensure continuity in program administration through machinery of government changes and staff turnover that may lead to loss of corporate knowledge.

Audit findings

1. Background

Introduction

1.1 In May 2021, the Australian Government released the National Soil Strategy (the strategy) as Australia's first national soil policy.³ It is a 20-year strategy that 'provides a national vision and shared goals and objectives between the Australian Government and state and territory governments for managing soil across all landscapes'.

1.2 The strategy notes that Australia's soil provides the nation with essential ecosystem and production services, contributing an estimated value of around \$930 billion per year to the economy. The strategy's national vision is for:

Australia's soil to be recognised and valued as a key national asset by all stakeholders. It is better understood and sustainably managed, to benefit and secure our environment, economy, food, infrastructure, health, biodiversity, and communities – now and in the future.

1.3 The strategy has three overarching goals to be achieved by 2041.

- Goal 1: Prioritise soil health.
- Goal 2: Empower soil innovation and stewards.
- Goal 3: Strengthen soil knowledge and capability.

1.4 Each goal specifies a list of objectives and high-level progress measures. A full list of goals, objectives and progress measures is in Appendix 3.

1.5 The strategy was developed as a response to a 2017 recommendation from Australia's first National Soils Advocate⁴, who called for the government to '[a]gree to a national soils policy with the objective of maintaining and restoring the health of the Australian agricultural landscape'. On 18 July 2019, the Prime Minister announced that the government will support the National Soils Advocate's recommendation. At the meeting of the Agriculture Ministers' Forum (AGMIN)⁵ on 25 October 2019, the ministers 'agreed to collaborate on a national soils strategy led by the Commonwealth'.

1.6 The strategy is the joint responsibility of the Australian Government and state and territory governments. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department) is the Australian Government entity leading the design and implementation of the strategy.⁶ The

3 The strategy was developed by the Australian Government in conjunction with state and territory governments, the National Soils Advocate and the soil community. It is available from Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *National Soil Strategy* [Internet], <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/natural-resources/soils> [accessed 7 March 2024].

4 Established in 2012, the National Soils Advocate's mission was 'to provide strong leadership and advocacy on the importance of healthy soil, water and vegetation and the benefits thereof for all Australians'. Major General the Hon. Michael Jeffery AC, AO (Mil), CVO, MC (Retd) served as the National Soils Advocate from October 2012 until August 2020. The Hon. Penelope Wensley AC served as Australia's second National Soils Advocate from August 2020 until the position was discontinued in August 2023.

5 Now called the Agriculture Ministers' Meeting (AMM). AMM consists of Australian and state and territory agriculture ministers who work on national issues relating to the agriculture sector.

6 The department was formerly known as the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE). It was renamed as a result of a machinery of government change that took effect on 1 July 2022. This report refers to the entity as 'the department', unless distinction is required.

2021–22 Budget provided the department with \$5.9 million over four years to implement the strategy, including to develop a National Soil Action Plan (the national action plan) by June 2022.

Commonwealth Interim Action Plan

1.7 The strategy was released alongside the Commonwealth Interim Action Plan (the interim action plan) in May 2021. The interim action plan ‘outlines the Australian Government’s commitment to implementing the National Soil Strategy’. It listed 13 initiatives funded in the 2021–22 Budget to be implemented by the Australian Government to contribute to the objectives of the strategy in the lead up to the release of the national action plan. Two of these initiatives are being delivered by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), and one by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA).

1.8 Nine of the 13 initiatives in the interim action plan were announced under a \$214.9 million package of measures to support the strategy (National Soil Package). The interim action plan also outlined 11 existing initiatives that support the strategy, such as the National Landcare Program⁷ funded under the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT).⁸

National Soil Action Plan

1.9 The strategy states that the national action plan would be developed by June 2022 and ‘detail specific actions (programs and activities) required to achieve the vision, goals and objectives of the Strategy’. The national action plan was launched on 28 November 2023, replacing the interim action plan. The national action plan covers a period of five years, with a new action plan for the next five-year period to be developed following evaluation of the first action plan.

1.10 The national action plan outlines four priority actions to achieve by 2028.

1. Develop an agreed national framework to support the measurement, monitoring, mapping, reporting and sharing of soil state and trend information to inform best practice management, decision-making and future investment in soil.
2. Partners to develop a holistic policy and strategy approach where soil function is recognised, valued, and protected for the environment, economy, food, infrastructure, health, biodiversity, and communities.
3. Accelerate the adoption of land use and management practices that protects soil to improve soil condition trends.
4. Identify and develop soil workforce and capabilities needed to meet current and future challenges for Australia and the region.

1.11 In the May 2023 Budget, \$56 million in funding was announced for soil initiatives under the national action plan, comprising:

- \$36 million through the NHT to: design and deliver a new National Soil Monitoring Program; make improvements to the Australian National Soil Information System (ANSIS);

⁷ The National Landcare Program comprised two phases. Phase 1 (2014–15 to 2017–18) invested \$1 billion to support local, regional and national environmental and sustainable agriculture projects. Phase 2 (2018–19 to 2022–23) invested a further \$1.1 billion to fund a range of measures for natural resource management, biodiversity protection and sustainable agricultural practices.

⁸ The Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) is the Australian Government’s primary investment platform for environmental protection, sustainable agriculture and natural resource management.

and continue to support the Regional Soil Coordinators Program and the National Soil Community of Practice; and

- \$20 million ‘to fund states and territories to deliver initiatives that contribute to priority actions of the National Soil Action Plan’.

Rationale for undertaking the audit

1.12 The strategy sets out a national vision, goals and objectives to be delivered over 20 years, including to recognise, better understand and sustainably manage soil as a key national asset. The 2021–22 Budget provided \$214.9 million in funding over four years for the National Soil Package, including \$5.9 million to develop the national action plan and implement the strategy. The May 2023 Budget allocated a further \$56 million to drive outcomes under the national action plan.

1.13 This audit examined the effectiveness of the department’s design and early implementation of the strategy and the national action plan. It provides assurance to the Parliament over the department’s design processes; arrangements in place to implement the strategy; and delivery of soil initiatives listed in the interim action plan.

Audit approach

Audit objective, criteria and scope

1.14 The audit objective was to examine the effectiveness of the design and early implementation of the National Soil Strategy and the supporting National Soil Action Plan.

1.15 To form a conclusion against the objective, the following high-level criteria were adopted.

- Were appropriate design processes established to support the achievement of the government’s objectives?
- Are effective arrangements in place to support implementation?

1.16 The audit focused on the department’s design and implementation of the strategy and the national action plan, including the delivery of the initiatives listed in the interim action plan. The audit did not examine the actions that are being implemented by state and territory governments and non-government and industry organisations; the effectiveness of initiatives listed in the interim and national action plans; or the delivery of other soil-related initiatives that are not part of the strategy or the interim and national action plans.

Audit methodology

1.17 The audit methodology included:

- examination of the department’s documentation;
- assessment of the implementation of initiatives listed in the interim action plan;
- meetings with DCCEEW and NIAA to discuss the initiatives they are delivering; and
- meetings with relevant departmental staff.

1.18 The ANAO also received three submissions from the public via the citizen contribution facility on the ANAO website.

1.19 The audit was conducted in accordance with ANAO Auditing Standards at a cost to the ANAO of approximately \$271,606.

1.20 The team members for this audit were Se Eun Lee, Jordan Hallam, Jade Ryan and Corinne Horton.

2. Design processes

Areas examined

This chapter examines whether the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department) established appropriate design processes to develop the National Soil Strategy (the strategy), the Commonwealth Interim Action Plan (the interim action plan), and the National Soil Action Plan (the national action plan) to support the government's objectives.

Conclusion

The design processes to support the achievement of the government's objectives were partly appropriate. There was limited evidence used to inform the development of the strategy and the national action plan. The national action plan does not specify which of its priority actions relate to which goals or objectives in the strategy. The links between the national action plan's priority actions and the strategy's overarching goals were published on the department's website in April 2024. The department established largely appropriate consultation arrangements for the development of the strategy and national action plan, and adequately addressed three of the four recurring concerns raised by stakeholders. The department did not consider risks to inform the design and implementation of the strategy or the national action plan.

Areas for improvement

The ANAO made two recommendations aimed at improving the department's record keeping practices to ensure necessary business information is created and retained during policy design; and for risks to be identified, assessed and communicated to relevant program participants and decision-makers, during policy design and throughout the implementation process.

The ANAO also identified one area for improvement, to provide stakeholders with sufficient timeframes for consultation.

2.1 The department⁹ led the development of the strategy and the national action plan in conjunction with state and territory governments and other stakeholders. The Australian Public Service Commission's (APSC) 'Delivering Great Policy' model¹⁰ includes the following key elements that contribute to developing great policy advice:

- ensuring that policy and program design is informed by a robust evidence-base, sound analysis, and clear links to the achievement of policy objectives;
- involving key stakeholders within and outside the APS to ensure that government initiatives are reflective of diverse views and have broad support¹¹; and

9 The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) was the Australian Government entity leading the design and implementation of the strategy. It was renamed the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) in the machinery of government changes that took effect on 1 July 2022. This report refers to the entity as 'the department', unless distinction is required.

10 Australian Public Service Academy, *Delivering great policy* [Internet], available from <https://www.apsacademy.gov.au/aps-craft/strategy-policy-evaluation/delivering-great-policy> [accessed 7 March 2024].

11 See also Australian Public Service Commission, *Getting stakeholder engagement right* [Internet], available from <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/workforce-information/taskforce-toolkit/stakeholder-engagement/getting-stakeholder-engagement-right> [accessed 7 February 2024].

- identifying and considering the key risks to design and implementation at early stages of policy development to support informed decision-making as initiatives are established and implemented.¹²

Was the development of the strategy and the national action plan evidence-based?

There was limited evidence used to inform the development of the strategy and the national action plan. The department was unable to demonstrate that the strategy and the national action plan were informed by analysis of prior and existing work, critical gaps in government investment, and future priorities for soil based on efforts to date. In April 2024, the department updated its website to specify the links between the national action plan's priority actions and the strategy's overarching goals.

Development of the strategy

Recommendation from the National Soils Advocate

2.2 In December 2017, the National Soils Advocate¹³ delivered a report to the Prime Minister titled 'Restore the Soil: Prosper the Nation' (the report).¹⁴ The report drew together the National Soils Advocate's consultations since June 2013 'to make a series of recommendations to improve the health of Australia's soil, water and vegetation for the benefit of all Australians'.

2.3 The report noted that 'Australian soil is a major national asset' that is essential for food production, carbon and water cycles, and biodiversity, but that '[t]here is a very limited appreciation of the connection between these outcomes and sustainable soil management'. It stated that:

There is a need for a better coordinated and more focussed national effort to ensure that the critical issue of sustainable soil management is given sufficient attention. I believe that a national approach to soils is needed, and that this should be driven through the development of a comprehensive National Soils Policy which integrates soil, vegetation and water management to maintain and restore the health of Australia's agricultural lands.

2.4 The report made 10 recommendations, including for the government to:

Agree to a national soils policy with the objective of maintaining and restoring the health of the Australian agricultural landscape through a coordinated and integrated approach involving the portfolios responsible for agriculture, environment, health, education, defence, Australian Aid, Indigenous affairs, regional development and industry.

12 See also Department of Finance, *Commonwealth Risk Management Policy*, Finance, 2022, available from <https://www.finance.gov.au/government/comcover/risk-services/management/commonwealth-risk-management-policy> [accessed 7 February 2024].

13 Established in 2012, the National Soils Advocate's mission was 'to provide strong leadership and advocacy on the importance of healthy soil, water and vegetation and the benefits thereof for all Australians'. Major General the Hon. Michael Jeffery AC, AO (Mil), CVO, MC (Retd) served as the National Soils Advocate from October 2012 until August 2020. The Hon. Penelope Wensley AC served as Australia's second National Soils Advocate from August 2020 until the position was discontinued in August 2023.

14 Major General the Hon. Michael Jeffery, AC, AO (Mil), CVO, MC (Retd), *Restore the Soil: Prosper the Nation*, December 2017, available from <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/sitecollectiondocuments/ag-food/publications/restore-soil-prosper.pdf> [accessed 7 February 2024].

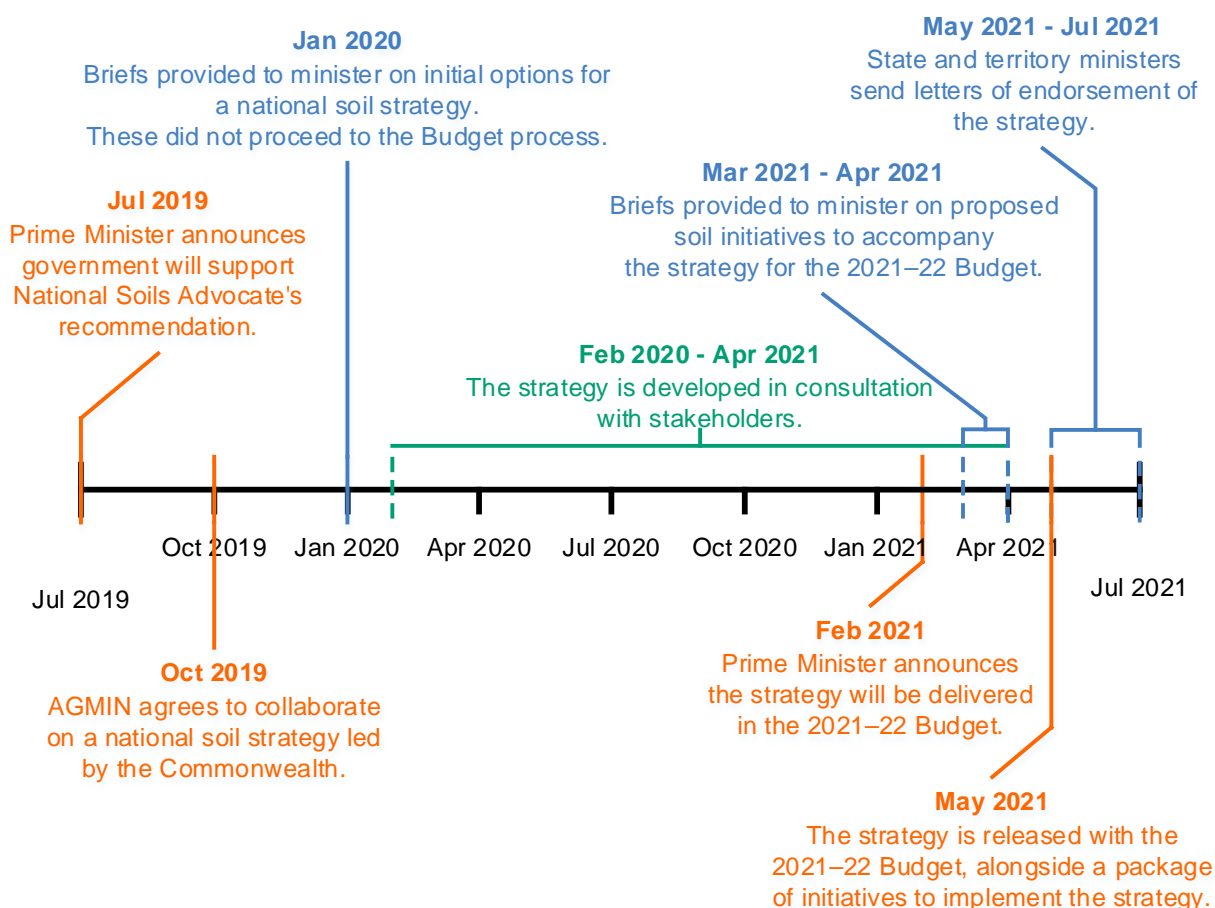
2.5 On 18 July 2019, the Prime Minister announced that the government will support the National Soils Advocate’s recommendation. On 25 October 2019, the Agriculture Ministers’ Forum (AGMIN)¹⁵ ‘agreed to collaborate on a national soils strategy led by the Commonwealth’.

Development and approval of the strategy

2.6 In January 2020, the department provided two briefs to the Minister for Agriculture outlining initial options for a national soil strategy. It contained three recommendations proposing funding in the 2020–21 Budget, including a proposal for \$5.5 million in funding over five years to develop a national soil strategy.

2.7 The recommendations were approved by the minister in February 2020; however, these proposals did not proceed to the 2020–21 Budget process. The department commenced working on developing the strategy without receiving additional funding. The strategy was released with the 2021–22 Budget on 11 May 2021, along with a package of soil initiatives to implement the strategy. The development process is summarised in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Timeline of the strategy development process



Source: ANAO summary of the strategy development process.

15 Now called the Agriculture Ministers’ Meeting (AMM). AMM consists of Australian and state and territory agriculture ministers who work on national issues relating to the agriculture sector.

Evidence and advice underpinning the strategy

2.8 The strategy sets out three goals and 12 objectives ‘aimed at restoring and protecting soil nationally, by driving collaborative and coordinated on-ground action, research, education, monitoring and governance’. Each objective specifies a number of high-level ‘progress measures’. A full list of goals, objectives and progress measures is in Appendix 3.

2.9 The department advised the ANAO in August 2023 that the goals and objectives of the strategy ‘were determined through workshops and a consultation process with states/territories and their stakeholders, Commonwealth agencies, and other expert groups’. The stakeholder consultation process to develop the strategy is examined further at paragraphs 2.61 to 2.68.

2.10 In addition to stakeholder consultation, the department drew upon the following evidence sources to inform its development of the strategy:

- a preliminary stocktake of soils work across the country, conducted by the department in early 2020; and
- the 2014 National Soil Research, Development and Extension (RD&E) Strategy and the independent review of its implementation undertaken in 2019.

2.11 The department developed a draft scope statement on a ‘National Soil Stocktake 2020’ in February 2020. The draft scope statement outlined a three-phase work program to deliver a ‘final analytical report’ that will ‘provide a clear national picture of significant research, development, extension and management activities’ in soil, and identify areas to improve effectiveness and efficiency ‘in order to address a range of important policy issues under a comprehensive national soil strategy’. The three-phase work program comprised:

- Phase 1: Report developed by the department from the feedback provided by states/territories on their soil related work.
- Phase 2: Report developed by the department that builds on the soil stocktake undertaken for the National [Soil RD&E] Strategy. This will involve going back to the soil researchers and managers surveyed to ask them what work has been completed since they were survey[ed] last.
- Phase 3: Report developed by consultant that reviews the existing data portals being used and the soil monitoring data collected.

2.12 Comments in the draft document noted that the first of the three phases of work had been completed. Phase 2 stocktake activities were not undertaken. Phase 3 was delivered as part of the National Soil Data Review program following the launch of the strategy. The final analytical report was not delivered.

2.13 The results of the phase 1 stocktake were summarised in a 2020 discussion paper, ‘Developing a National Soil Strategy’¹⁶, which noted that many jurisdictions had not developed a dedicated soil strategy, and that they identified a wide range of priorities and ideas for a national soil strategy. The discussion paper also identified ‘key investment and diplomatic activities undertaken by the Australian Government’ in relation to soil, such as the National Landcare Program and the Emissions Reduction Fund.

16 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *Developing a National Soil Strategy Discussion Paper*, DAFF, 2020.

2.14 The National Soil RD&E Strategy was published in 2014 under the National Primary Industries Research, Development & Extension Framework.¹⁷ The discussion paper noted that an independent review of the implementation of the National Soil RD&E Strategy was conducted and completed in December 2019, which ‘presents an opportunity for a national soil strategy to build on, and enhance, the work completed under the Soil RDE Strategy’. A brief to the minister in May 2020 also stated that the draft strategy ‘will build off’ the National Soil RD&E Strategy.

2.15 The 2019 review outlined progress in implementing the National Soil RD&E Strategy to date and made three recommendations to improve communication and clarify roles and responsibilities for implementation, including for monitoring and reporting on progress. The findings from the review did not inform the development of the strategy. For example, barriers to implementation or key gaps in soil RD&E identified by the review were not discussed or incorporated into the new soil strategy that was being developed.

2.16 The status and relevance of the National Soil RD&E Strategy to the new soil strategy being developed was first discussed with stakeholders in August 2020, and remained unresolved as at the conclusion of the development of the national action plan in May 2023.

2.17 There was no clear evidence-base for the development of the National Soil Strategy. The goals and objectives of the strategy were not informed by analysis of prior and existing work, critical gaps in government investment, and future priorities for soil — for example, based on the implementation of the National Soil RD&E Strategy to date.

2.18 The department’s advice to the minister on the development of the strategy from January 2020 to April 2021 provided limited evidence to support the need for Australian Government investment, or where this investment should be best targeted, especially in light of existing programs such as the National Landcare Program and the Future Drought Fund. For instance, while a number of ministerial briefs stated that there was a need for greater national coordination and leadership to more effectively deliver soil outcomes across Australia, there was no further evidence to support the assertion that soil outcomes were not being achieved, or that national coordination would help better achieve these outcomes.

2.19 Although reports were commissioned by the department in 2021 to inform the development of some of the initiatives proposed to implement the strategy¹⁸, briefs provided to the minister on the proposed package of initiatives did not present analysis of specific gaps or problems to support the need for these initiatives. The ministerial briefs did not outline the expected contribution of the proposed initiatives towards the goals and objectives of the strategy. There was no information provided to the minister on how outcomes of these initiatives would be measured or evaluated.

2.20 When developing a new policy, entities should be clear on the intent of the policy, including clearly defining the problem they are trying to solve, being able to articulate why government

17 The framework is a joint initiative of the Australian, state and Northern Territory governments; Rural Research and Development Corporations (RDCs); Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO); and universities. It is overseen by the Research & Innovation (R&I) Committee, which is a sub-committee of the Agricultural Senior Officials Committee (AGSOC).

18 The reports were: *Designing a National Soil Monitoring Program* by CSIRO; and *Design of a National Soil Information Framework*, final report and implementation plan by NTT, a global technology and telecommunications company.

intervention is needed, and being clear on the intended outcomes and how they will be measured. Policy development should also be informed by evidence both qualitative and quantitative, and incorporate lessons learned from the past.¹⁹

2.21 Records of these activities should be retained in accordance with government record keeping requirements, including through administrative actions such as machinery of government changes as outlined in the APSC and Department of Finance's *Machinery of Government changes: a guide for entities*.²⁰ A 2022 ANAO audit of the department had noted that its record keeping policy was first published in August 2014 and not reviewed or updated.²¹ The department's revised record keeping policy was approved in October 2023 and made available to staff in December 2023.

Recommendation no. 1

2.22 To reinforce the importance of good record keeping for integrity, transparency and accountability in the management of public resources, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry ensure that, in accordance with Australian Government record keeping requirements and its record management policies:

- (a) necessary business information is created and retained to demonstrate the basis on which key policy design and implementation decisions were taken; and
- (b) its record keeping systems and practices are compliant with the official requirements.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response: Agreed.

2.23 *The department acknowledges the importance of adequate information management and record keeping. The department's updated Information Management Policy Suite (October 2023) outlines staff record keeping obligations and the approved information management systems. The department facilitates:*

- *all staff training in information management (introductory and section specific)*
- *advice on relevant records authorities and best practice and*
- *support to develop business area Records and Information Management Plans.*

2.24 *In addition, the department is investing in new and upgraded technologies (Castlepoint and CM23.4) that will help to manage information in place, with the aim of improving compliance in the capture and retention of business information without increasing end user administrative requirements.*

2.25 *The department has now implemented improved record management processes and staff training, in line with the department's updated Information Management Policy Suite.*

19 Australian Public Service Academy, *Delivering Great Policy: Clear on Intent and Well informed* [Internet], available from <https://www.apsacademy.gov.au/aps-craft/strategy-policy-evaluation/delivering-great-policy> [accessed 7 February 2024].

20 Australian Public Service Commission and the Department of Finance, *Machinery of Government changes: a guide for entities*, November 2021, available from <https://www.finance.gov.au/government/managing-commonwealth-resources/machinery-of-government-changes> [accessed 7 March 2024].

21 Auditor-General Report No. 17 2022–23 *Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's cultural reform*, Appendix 5: Record keeping, available from <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/department-agriculture-fisheries-and-forestrys-cultural-reform> [accessed 10 May 2024].

Development of the Commonwealth Interim Action Plan

2.26 The strategy states that:

Prior to the release of the National Soil Strategy Action Plan in June 2022, the Australian Government will implement soil-related measures which contribute to the objectives of this Strategy under a Commonwealth Interim Action Plan, to be released alongside the Strategy.

2.27 The interim action plan was developed concurrently with the strategy and released at the same time in May 2021.²² The interim action plan outlines 13 'new actions' to be implemented by the Australian Government. These include the nine soil initiatives that were announced as part of the National Soil Package in the 2021–22 Budget.

2.28 Two of the 13 initiatives are being implemented by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), and one by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). Paragraphs 3.20 to 3.30 outline implementation of the initiatives in the interim action plan in more detail.

2.29 On 22 February 2021, the department sought information from selected Australian Government entities, via a template feedback form, on whether the entities had any 'current and active' or 'in development' programs 'that align with the progress measures of the National Soil Strategy and might be included in the Interim Commonwealth Action Plan'.

2.30 The department did not keep records on how many entities returned the feedback form. The department saved one internal response from its Waste Policy and Planning Branch. The ANAO received two more responses from the NIAA and Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) in DCCEEW²³ during the audit. The department informed the ANAO that:

After conducting a search, the department was unable to locate any further records of information received from agencies as input to the Commonwealth Interim Action Plan. The department is unable to confirm if additional inputs were received.

2.31 Two of the programs mentioned by the AAD and NIAA as being 'in development' were incorporated into the interim action plan: the 'Fast Track to Clean Up Antarctica' project; and the seven-year extension of the Indigenous Rangers Program.

2.32 The 'Fast Track to Clean Up Antarctica' project is listed in the interim action plan with funding of \$2.5 million. The project was not funded in the 2021–22 Budget.

2.33 The NIAA informed the ANAO in July 2023 that the funding listed in the interim action plan for the Indigenous Rangers Program (\$761 million) reflected a figure that had not been finalised. The funding allocated for the seven-year extension of the Indigenous Rangers Program was \$746.1 million, as jointly announced by the Minister for Indigenous Australians and the Minister for the Environment on 10 March 2020. The funding amount was increased in July 2023 to \$748.3 million.

22 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *Commonwealth Interim Action Plan*, available from <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/commonwealth-interim-action-plan-national-soil-strategy.pdf> [accessed 19 February 2024].

23 At the time the AAD returned its feedback form to the soil policy team, the AAD was part of the same department (DAWE).

2.34 There were two other initiatives listed in the interim action plan that were not part of the National Soil Package:

- National Soil Carbon Innovation Challenge, which is a competitive grant program being delivered by DCCEEW; and
- Future Drought Fund: Drought Resilient Soils and Landscapes, which is a grant program under the Future Drought Fund being delivered by the department.

2.35 The program teams were largely unaware of how the initiatives they were delivering came to be listed in the interim action plan. Both teams noted that they had engaged with the team developing the strategy at various points due to linkages to soil in their programs.

2.36 In July and August 2023, and in response to the draft report in December 2023, the department advised the ANAO that the interim action plan was intended to be ‘a summary of existing activities that support soil undertaken by the Commonwealth rather than any deliberately designed approach to address the National Soil Strategy’. The department stated the initiatives listed in the interim action plan were ‘not delivered or funded **under** the auspice of it [emphasis in original]’, and that the interim action plan was not intended to be the mechanism for driving the actions.

2.37 This is inconsistent with the department’s 2021–22 Budget proposal to the Australian Government, seeking funding for a package of measures to ‘implement the National Soil Strategy and the associated Commonwealth Government Action Plan’. The proposal stated that the interim action plan ‘sets out immediate practical actions outlined in this proposal’ for implementation, as well as providing information on existing measures. The department received \$5.9 million over four years to implement the strategy and the interim action plan in the 2021–22 Budget. Implementation of the initiatives in the interim action plan is examined at paragraphs 3.20 to 3.30.

Development of the national action plan

2.38 The strategy states that:

By June 2022, the National Soil Strategy Action Plan (the National Action Plan) will be developed to implement this 20-year Strategy. The National Action Plan will detail specific actions (programs and activities) required to achieve the vision, goals and objectives of the Strategy. These actions will meet the SMART principles – that is, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.

2.39 The strategy also notes that the national action plan will replace the interim action plan once it is published, with ‘[a]ctions from the Interim Action Plan [to] be integrated into and inform the actions in the National Action Plan’.

Development and approval of the national action plan

2.40 The department commenced working on drafting the national action plan in August 2021. It established the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee (NSSISC) and the National Action Plan Working Group (NAPWG) for consultation and input during the development process. The department chaired both bodies. The operation of the two bodies and the stakeholder consultation process for the national action plan are examined further at paragraphs 2.69 to 2.81.

2.41 As specified in the strategy, the national action plan was intended to be developed by June 2022. The terms of reference for both the NSSISC and the NAPWG specified the intention to

develop the national action plan by 30 June 2022, and an initial workplan presented to both bodies outlined a pathway to meet the timeframe. This timeframe was not met. The timeframe was not raised or discussed at the NSSISC or NAPWG meetings held after June 2022. A revised timeframe was not proposed for finalising the national action plan at either the NSSISC or the NAPWG.

2.42 The department advised the ANAO in June 2023 that it delayed the development of the national action plan during the caretaker period for the 2022 federal election in April 2022, and during the implementation of the machinery of government changes of July 2022.

2.43 There were further delays to finalising the national action plan during the final endorsement process. The department advised the ANAO in July and August 2023 that the launch of the national action plan was being delayed until all partners provided ‘statements of support’ to be included in the national action plan, and for states and territories to brief their ministers on the upcoming launch of the national action plan.

2.44 The department briefed the minister in June 2023 regarding potential sensitivities relating to the delay, in a ministerial brief that was returned unsigned pending finalisation of the national action plan. The delay was noted as a potential sensitivity in the final approval brief for the launch of the national action plan, which was signed by the minister on 27 November 2023.

2.45 The national action plan was launched on 28 November 2023, replacing the interim action plan. The department advised the ANAO in December 2023 that the actions in the interim action plan that are still being implemented remain relevant to the national action plan. Table 2.1 outlines how the initiatives in the interim action plan are referenced in the national action plan. Three initiatives that are in progress are not referenced in the national action plan or its website.

Table 2.1: Initiatives in interim and national action plans

Initiatives in interim action plan	Reference in national action plan
Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program	N/A — program ended.
National Soil Data Review	N/A — program ended.
Historical Soil Data Capture	N/A — program ended.
Australian National Soil Information System (ANSIS)	Activities are continuing under additional funding announced in the May 2023 Budget, which is listed under priority action 1 in the national action plan.
National Land Management Classification System	N/A — program ended.
Soil Science Challenge Grants	Listed under priority action 4 in the national action plan.
Enhancing Soil Education and Expertise	Listed under priority action 4 in the national action plan.
Food Waste for Healthy Soils Fund	Not referenced.
National Soil Carbon Innovation Challenge ^a	Not referenced.
Smart Farms Small Grants: Soil Extension Activities	Activities are continuing under a new initiative announced in the May 2023 Budget, which is referenced under ‘roles and responsibilities’ for the Australian Government in the national action plan.

Initiatives in interim action plan	Reference in national action plan
Future Drought Fund: Drought Resilient Soils and Landscapes ^a	Not referenced in the national action plan. It is listed on the national action plan website under priority action 3.
Indigenous Ranger Program ^a	Not referenced.

Note a: These initiatives were not part of the package of measures funded to support the National Soil Strategy in the 2021–22 Budget.

Source: ANAO analysis of initiatives in the interim and national action plans.

Assessment of actions in the national action plan

2.46 The national action plan outlines four priority actions for 2023 to 2028. Each priority action contains ‘statements of commitment’, comprising a list of activities to be delivered by national action plan partners by 2028. A full list of statements of commitment under each priority action is in Appendix 4.

2.47 The strategy states that the actions in the national action plan will meet the SMART principles — ‘that is, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound’. The ANAO examined whether the four priority actions and the statements of commitments meet the SMART criteria, defined as:

- Specific: Actions are clearly defined, use simple language, and are not vague.
- Measurable: Actions specify how achievement and success will be measured.
- Achievable: Actions are realistic and consider available resources, authority and control.
- Relevant: Actions are aligned to the goals and objectives of the National Soil Strategy.
- Time-bound: Actions include specific timeframes for the completion.

2.48 Of the four priority actions, the ANAO assessed two as meeting all elements of the SMART criteria (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Assessment of priority actions in the national action plan

Priority actions for 2023 to 2028	Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Relevant	Time-bound
1. Develop an agreed national framework to support the measurement, monitoring, mapping, reporting and sharing of soil state and trend information to inform best practice management, decision-making and future investment in soil.	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆
2. Partners to develop a holistic policy and strategy approach where soil function is recognised, valued, and protected for the environment, economy, food, infrastructure, health, biodiversity, and communities.	■	■	◆	◆	◆
3. Accelerate the adoption of land use and management practices that protects soil to improve soil condition trends.	■	■	▲	◆	◆

Priority actions for 2023 to 2028	Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Relevant	Time-bound
4. Identify and develop soil workforce and capabilities needed to meet current and future challenges for Australia and the region.	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆

Key: ◆ The action meets all elements of the criteria, or a reasonable level of consideration has been given to majority of the elements of the criteria.
▲ The action meets some of the elements of the criteria.
■ The action does not meet any of the elements of the criteria.

Source: ANAO analysis of priority actions in the national action plan.

2.49 Of the 22 statements of commitment, five (23 per cent) were assessed as meeting all elements of the SMART criteria (Table 2.3).

Table 2.3: Assessment of statements of commitment in the national action plan

Assessment	Specific	Measurable	Achievable	Relevant	Time-bound
◆	23%	23%	82%	100%	100%
▲	27%	23%	18%	–	–
■	50%	55%	–	–	–

Key: ◆ The action meets all elements of the criteria, or a reasonable level of consideration has been given to majority of the elements of the criteria.
▲ The action meets some of the elements of the criteria.
■ The action does not meet any of the elements of the criteria.

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Source: ANAO analysis of statements of commitment in the national action plan.

2.50 While all priority actions and statements of commitment were assessed as relevant and time-bound, most were assessed as either partially meeting or not meeting the criteria for ‘specific’ or ‘measurable’. The lack of specificity and measurability also affected the ANAO’s assessment of whether the action was achievable.

2.51 The lack of specificity and measurability of the actions was a recurring issue raised by stakeholders during the development of the national action plan (see paragraphs 2.82 to 2.85). The department advised the ANAO in December 2023 that the national action plan was designed to be a ‘higher level document’ to provide flexibility and ensure support from states and territories.

2.52 The strategy states that the national action plan ‘will include specific and measurable targets to underpin the progress measures and ensure the success of the Strategy can be clearly measured, monitored and communicated’. The national action plan does not contain specific and measurable targets against the progress measures. Performance monitoring for the strategy is examined further at paragraphs 3.39 to 3.46.

Evidence and advice underlying the national action plan

2.53 As with the strategy, there was a limited evidence-base used by the department to support the development of the national action plan.

2.54 The department undertook a gap analysis in March 2022 to inform the second draft of the national action plan. It outlined, under each of the three goals of the strategy:

- what is currently happening; and
- gaps that could be filled with future actions.

2.55 The department did not document its approach to analysis and the evidence used to determine the scope of current activities and gaps. For example, the document identified a potential gap in relation to ‘fundamental science and research into soil physics, and the soil microbiome and its influence on soil condition’. The document did not outline evidence indicating that there is a lack of such research being undertaken, or the need for such research to be undertaken more frequently.

2.56 The second draft of the national action plan contained new sections outlining some of the gaps and potential future actions identified in the gap analysis. These sections were removed in the next draft of the national action plan. Changes made to draft versions of the national action plan are examined further at paragraphs 2.76 to 2.78.

2.57 A spreadsheet titled ‘NSAP support document – References list’ was developed in July 2022. It outlined a list of 31 reference sources, such as books, reports and government publications, on topics relating to agriculture, environment, soil, sustainability, climate and other matters, for incorporation in the national action plan. None of the 31 reference sources in the spreadsheet are listed in the national action plan reference list.

Link to strategy’s goals and objectives

2.58 The national action plan states that ‘[e]ach priority action contributes to multiple objectives and goals of the strategy’. The linkages between the priority actions and the strategy’s goals and objectives are not outlined in the national action plan.

2.59 In March 2023, the department mapped the four priority actions to each of the three goals of the strategy, as summarised in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4: Alignment between the strategy’s goals and priority actions

National Soil Strategy goals	Priority action 1	Priority action 2	Priority action 3	Priority action 4
Goal 1: Prioritise soil health	✓	✓	–	✓
Goal 2: Empower soil innovation and stewards	–	✓	✓	✓
Goal 3: Strengthen soil knowledge and capability	✓	–	✓	✓

Source: ANAO summary of departmental documentation.

2.60 In April 2024, the department reviewed and updated its website to specify the linkages between the national action plan’s priority actions and the strategy’s overarching goals.

Was there appropriate engagement with stakeholders during the design processes?

The department established multiple channels for stakeholders to engage with the development processes and provide feedback. There were four recurring themes in feedback provided by stakeholders, three of which were addressed throughout the consultation process. The feedback relating to the goals, objectives and actions was not addressed by the department.

Stakeholder consultation arrangements for the development of the strategy

2.61 The department identified relevant stakeholders for the development of the strategy, and maintained stakeholder lists until the release of the strategy in May 2021. The list included stakeholders from within the department, the Australian Government, states and territories, non-government organisations and members of the public.

2.62 The department established six key stakeholder consultation arrangements for the development of the strategy (Table 2.5).

Table 2.5: Stakeholder consultation arrangements for the development of the strategy

Consultation event	Stakeholders	Purpose	Timeframe
State and territory workshops	Governments and non-government organisations	To seek feedback on proposed outcomes of the strategy and associated actions.	February 2020; July to August 2020
Informal and one-on-one engagement	Representatives from government and non-government organisations	To seek both general input about the strategy, and specific input on drafts of the strategy.	July 2020 to March 2021
Internal workshops and meetings	Departmental staff and Australian Government entities	To identify work done across the Australian Government that may align with the strategy.	August 2020
First public consultation	Members of the public	To seek feedback on the proposed outcomes of the strategy.	August to September 2020
National Soil Strategy Steering Committee (NSSSC)	Representatives from state and territory governments and the National Soils Advocate	To provide oversight and feedback for the development of the strategy.	August 2020 to July 2021
Second public consultation	Members of the public	To seek feedback on the draft strategy.	January 2021

Source: ANAO analysis of departmental documentation.

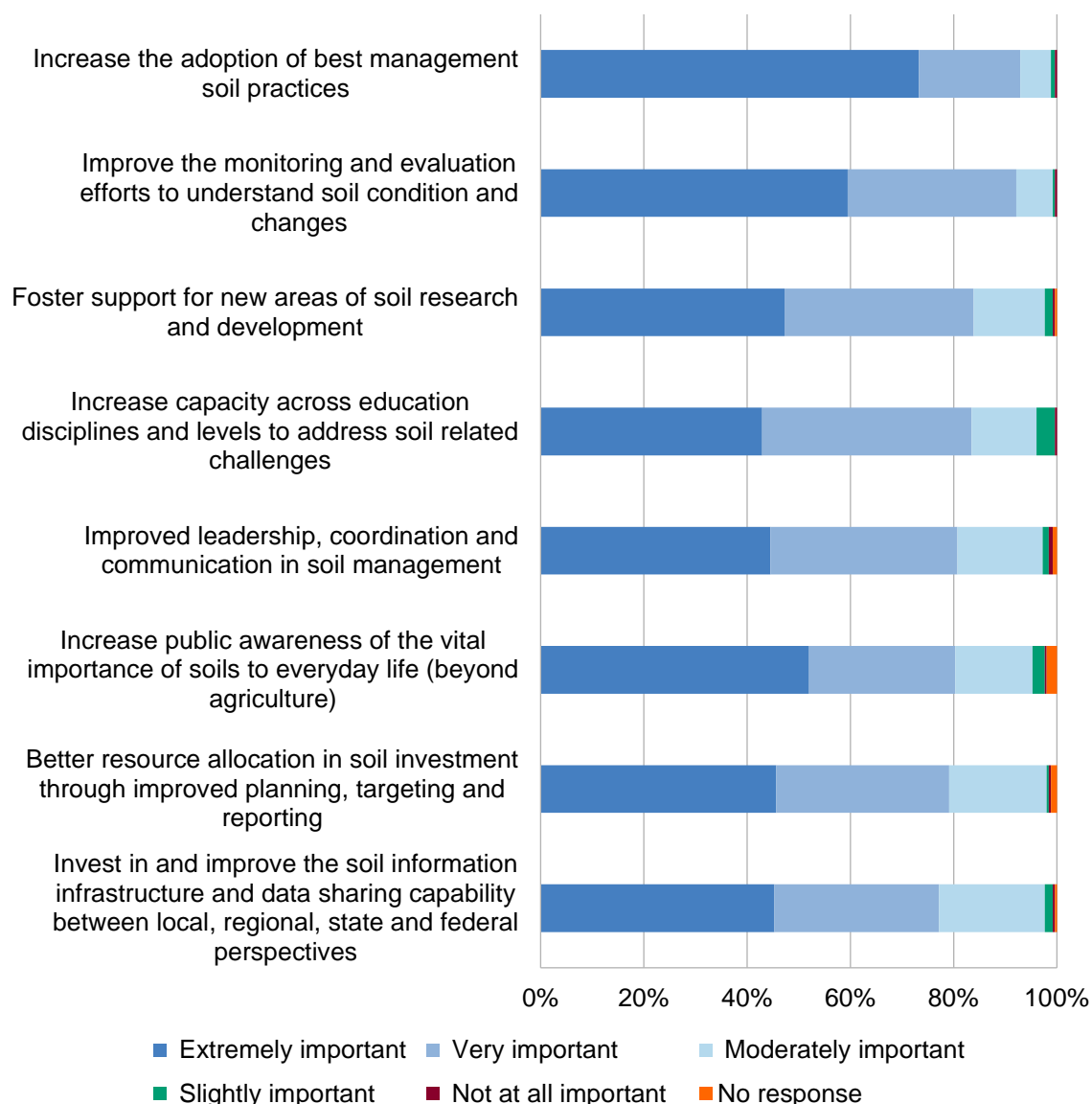
Initial consultation on strategy's objectives

2.63 The department drafted a discussion paper on developing a national soil strategy in 2020 (see paragraph 2.13). It outlined five proposed outcomes and associated actions for the strategy. The discussion paper was provided to the attendees of the 2020 state and territory workshops to

support discussion on proposed objectives of the strategy, and published online to inform the first public consultation held from August to September 2020.

2.64 The department received 254 responses to the first public survey. The survey respondents were asked to rate the five proposed objectives for the strategy outlined in the discussion paper, plus three others identified at the state and territory workshops, by importance. Most survey respondents agreed that all proposed strategy objectives were ‘extremely important’ or ‘very important’ (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Public survey — importance of proposed strategy objectives



Source: ANAO analysis of departmental documentation.

2.65 The final goals and objectives of the strategy largely reflect the proposed national objectives identified as the most important by respondents in the public survey.

Consultation on draft versions of the strategy

2.66 The NSSSC was established on 27 August 2020 to provide advice and support to AGMIN²⁴ on the development of the strategy. Membership of the NSSSC comprised the department as chair, and representatives from state and territory governments and the National Soils Advocate. The NSSSC received and considered seven drafts of the strategy between November 2020 and April 2021. It ceased operations in July 2021 following the launch of the strategy.

2.67 Stakeholders, both within the NSSSC and externally, advised the department that the timeframes specified by the department for feedback were very short. The department acknowledged the ‘tight timelines with the development of the strategy’ at the fourth NSSSC meeting in February 2021. At the ninth and last meeting of the NSSSC in July 2021, the department ‘emphasised that the consultative groups [for the development of the national action plan] will allow more frequent and broader consultation’.

2.68 Table 2.6 outlines the timeframes provided by the department for stakeholder engagement opportunities during the development of the strategy. See paragraph 2.80 for analysis on timeframes for feedback during the development of the national action plan.

Table 2.6: Timeframes for feedback during the development of the strategy

Opportunity for feedback ^a	Start date	End date	Duration ^b
First public consultation	28/08/2020	25/09/2020	28 days
First draft of the strategy	11/11/2020	20/11/2020 ^c	9 days
Second draft of the strategy	18/12/2020	7/01/2021	20 days
Second public consultation (on the third draft of the strategy)	13/01/2021	27/01/2021 ^c	14 days
Draft incorporating feedback from the second public consultation (referred to as version 3.1)	02/02/2021	03/02/2021 ^c	1 day
Fourth draft of the strategy	09/02/2021	11/02/2021	2 days

Note a: The fifth and sixth drafts were omitted from this analysis. No due date was given for feedback of these drafts by the department, other than ‘as soon as possible’. The changes in these drafts were either stylistic or related to case studies and were not substantive changes to the strategy.

Note b: The duration of the consultation period was calculated by the ANAO by considering when the department first sent a communication requesting feedback, and the deadline given by the department for feedback.

Note c: The department received and considered feedback sent by respondents after the deadline provided.

Source: ANAO analysis of departmental documentation.

Stakeholder consultation for the development of the National Soil Action Plan

2.69 The department established five stakeholder consultation arrangements for the development of the national action plan (Table 2.7).

²⁴ Now called the Agriculture Ministers’ Meeting (AMM). AMM consists of Australian and state and territory agriculture ministers who work on national issues relating to the agriculture sector.

Table 2.7: Stakeholder consultation arrangements for the development of the national action plan

Consultation event	Stakeholders	Purpose	Timeframe
NSSISC	Representatives from state and territory governments, Australian Government and non-government entities with an interest in soil	To oversee the development of the national action plan by the NAPWG and assist the department by providing advice and facilitating engagement with relevant jurisdictions and stakeholder networks.	August 2021 to May 2023 ^a
NAPWG	Representatives from state and territory governments, Australian Government and non-government entities with an interest in soil	To support the development of the national action plan by facilitating consultation with stakeholders and providing advice and input to the department.	September 2021 to November 2022
One-on-one meetings (Australian Government and non-government)	Australian Government and non-government entities with an interest in soil	To seek opportunities to align current or future work with the strategy and the national action plan.	November 2021 to January 2022
Public consultation	Members of the public	To seek feedback on the draft national action plan.	September to November 2022
One-on-one meetings (states and territories)	State and territory representatives	To help facilitate state and territory agreement to the national action plan.	October 2022 to January 2023

Note a: 17 May 2023 was the last meeting of the NSSISC that focused on development of the national action plan. The NSSISC is still current. It met on 22 February 2024 to discuss next steps for the national action plan and the role of the committee going forward.

Source: ANAO analysis of departmental documentation.

NSSISC and NAPWG

2.70 Following the cessation of the NSSSC in July 2021, the department established the NSSISC in August 2021. The NSSISC was ‘responsible for overseeing the development of the National Action Plan by 30 June 2022 by the National Action Plan Working Group’.

2.71 Membership of the committee consisted of representatives from state and territory governments, Australian Government entities, the soil science and research community, not-for-profit organisations, Natural Resource Management (NRM) organisations, and industry bodies. Nine meetings of the NSSISC were held from 26 August 2021 to 17 May 2023 to develop the national action plan. At its tenth meeting held on 22 February 2024 following the launch of the national action plan, the NSSISC discussed the next steps for the implementation of the national action plan and the committee’s role going forward.

2.72 The NAPWG was established in September 2021 to support the development of the national action plan. Membership of the NAPWG included the department, and representatives from each state and territory government; industry; research organisations; Rural Research and Development Corporations; and Indigenous soil stakeholders. Eight meetings of the NAPWG were held from 21 September 2021 to 30 November 2022. Minutes were not documented for NAPWG meetings 3 to 6.

2.73 The department chaired both bodies. The NSSISC received updates from the NAPWG on the development of the national action plan from its third meeting in February 2022 until its sixth meeting in September 2022. In November 2022, a joint meeting of the NSSISC and NAPWG was held to discuss the draft national action plan in detail.

2.74 The department developed eight versions of the national action plan between February 2022 and June 2023. Of these, six were circulated to stakeholders and five received feedback from more than one stakeholder.

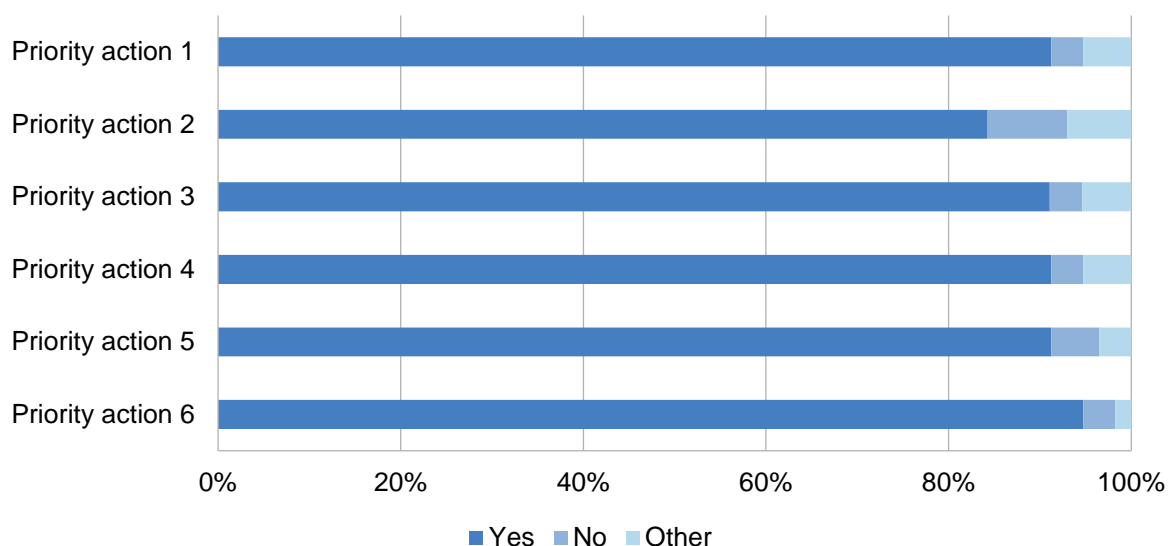
Consultation on priority actions

2.75 The priority actions in the national action plan were developed in consultation with stakeholders through an iterative process. Throughout the consultation process, the department collated the feedback received into high-level themes and discussed how it proposed to address them with NSSISC members.

2.76 As noted at paragraph 2.56, the second draft of the national action plan outlined potential future actions required to address the gaps identified through the department’s March 2022 gap analysis. These sections were removed in the next draft of the action plan and replaced with five priority actions to be delivered by 2027. Following further feedback from the NAPWG, a sixth priority action was added to the fourth draft of the action plan (see Table 2.8).

2.77 The six priority actions were released for public consultation from September to November 2022. There were 57 responses to the public survey²⁵, with the majority of respondents supporting the six priority actions (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: Public survey respondents on whether they support the proposed priority actions



Source: ANAO analysis of public survey response.

25 The department received a total of 134 submissions to its public survey. Seventy-eight of those responses were identical responses from members of one organisation and were treated as a single response by the department.

2.78 At a joint meeting of the NSSISC and NAPWG held on 30 November 2022, the department presented its analysis of feedback provided by stakeholders for each of the six priority actions. Based on the feedback received, the department proposed to consolidate the six priority actions into four (Table 2.8).

Table 2.8: Implementation of feedback of the proposed priority actions

Old priority action	Proposed change	New priority action
Priority action 1: Improve soil health across land uses, sectors and locations through practice change.	Remove. Stakeholder feedback suggested that this was an outcome not a priority.	New priority action 1: Agree on a national framework for the measurement, monitoring, evaluation and reporting of soil condition, which recognises the varying information needs of land users, state and territories and Commonwealth governments.
Priority action 2: Develop and make tools available to demonstrate the return on investment in improving soil health.	Absorb into new priority action 3 as an enabler of that action.	Revised priority action 3: Accelerate practice change to stop further degradation and improve soil condition trends.
Priority action 3: Review, extend and promote current structures for knowledge sharing, peer learning and collaboration that facilitate soil stewardship among land managers.	Absorb into new priority action 3 as an enabler of that action.	Revised priority action 3: Accelerate practice change to stop further degradation and improve soil condition trends.
Priority action 4: Apply a strategic and coordinated approach to research and innovation and encourage investment from relevant sectors.	Absorb into new priority action 3 as an enabler of that action.	Revised priority action 3: Accelerate practice change to stop further degradation and improve soil condition trends.
Priority action 5: Develop a harmonised national approach to the collection, aggregation and analysis of soil information.	Absorb into new priority action 1.	New priority action 1: Agree on a national framework for the measurement, monitoring, evaluation and reporting of soil condition, which recognises the varying information needs of land users, state and territories and Commonwealth governments.
Priority action 6: Identify and address shortfalls to ensure a future pipeline of soil scientific, technical and professional expertise and skills.	Reword into new priority action 4.	New priority action 4: Work together to understand the structural, educational and career path barriers and opportunities to create the soils capability and workforce to meet current and future needs (reworded priority 6).

Source: ANAO summary of departmental documentation.

2.79 Further changes were made to the four priority actions following this meeting to incorporate feedback from the NSSISC and NAPWG members. The final priority actions, along with 'statements of commitments' that outline activities to be delivered by 2028, are listed in full in Appendix 4.

2.80 From the second NAPWG meeting of October 2021 until the public consultation in mid-2022, stakeholders continued to raise concerns with the department that timeframes for consultation were too short. The timeframes provided for feedback on the draft national action plans circulated to NSSISC and NAPWG members were between seven and 14 days in duration. The public consultation, initially planned to take place over four weeks, was extended to six weeks in response to feedback that this timeframe was too short.

Opportunity for improvement

2.81 The department could consider for future programs whether the timeframes provided to stakeholders for consultation provide enough opportunity for considered and substantive feedback. This can improve the overall quality of feedback and assure stakeholders that the consultation process is substantive and genuine.

Recurring themes in feedback

2.82 During the development of the strategy and the national action plan, there were four recurring themes in the feedback provided by stakeholders. The department undertook additional work and proposed changes to address these recurring themes (Table 2.9).

Table 2.9: Recurring themes in feedback provided by stakeholders

Recurring theme	Raised in relation to	How it was addressed by the department
A lack of consideration and emphasis on Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and role as land managers.	First and third drafts of the strategy	<p>◆ The department made the following changes to the strategy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> added Traditional Knowledge as one of the guiding principles underpinning the goals and objectives strategy; included two case studies involving Indigenous perspectives and knowledge; and added a progress measure on developing programs that ‘appropriately engage with and apply Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Knowledge in soil science’. <p>The department also undertook the following steps to improve consultation with Indigenous stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sought feedback on the draft strategy from the NIAA and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS); and for the development of the national action plan, invited the NIAA to participate in the NAPWG and the Indigenous Carbon Industry Network to participate in the NSSISC and the NAPWG.
Linkages to soil from other areas such as climate change and	Various drafts of the strategy and	<p>◆ Suggested linkages, such as soil contamination, urban living and water storage, and soil loss, were directly incorporated into the strategy.</p>

Recurring theme	Raised in relation to	How it was addressed by the department	
biodiversity could be strengthened. ^a	the national action plan		In response to further comments on the need for better linkages to other sectors during the development of the national action plan, the department developed priority action 2 to make clearer links to policies and strategies in related sectors. ^b
Key terms were used inconsistently or lacked clear definitions.	Various drafts of the national action plan	◆	The department incorporated a glossary into the fifth draft of the national action plan and removed some of the terms that had been flagged by stakeholders as inconsistent or unclear.
The goals, objectives, and progress measures in the strategy, and the actions in the national action plan, are very broad, need to be more tangible and measurable, and priority actions do not set out how they will be actioned or implemented.	Various drafts of the strategy and the national action plan	■	In response to this concern raised during the development of the strategy, the department stated that detailed targets and measurable actions that meet the SMART principle will be included in the national action plan. The national action plan does not contain SMART actions or detailed targets underpinning the progress measures outlined in the strategy (see paragraphs 2.46 to 2.52).

Key: ◆ Feedback was addressed.
 ▲ Feedback was not fully addressed.
 ■ Feedback was not addressed.

Note a: Different stakeholders with different specialities and interests had different perspectives on which areas should link more to soil. Consistent across all relevant feedback was that soil linkages to other areas should be explored and strengthened.

Note b: Priority action 2 is: 'Partners to develop a holistic policy and strategy approach where soil function is recognised, valued, and protected for the environment, economy, food, infrastructure, health, biodiversity, and communities'.

Source: ANAO analysis of departmental documentation.

2.83 The department did not address the recurring feedback that the goals, objectives and progress measures in the strategy, and the actions in the national action plan, were 'very broad and need to be made more tangible and measurable', including that the priority actions did not expand on 'how [they] will be actioned or implemented'.

2.84 The fourth draft of the national action plan, which was the version released for public consultation from September to November 2022, received the most extensive feedback with 76 responses provided to the department via the public survey platform on its website, email and written submissions.²⁶ Of these, 22 stakeholders (29 per cent) commented on the lack of implementation details in the action plan, with various respondents noting that the national action plan appeared to be 'more of a call to action', 'a suggestion for focus', 'a guideline', or a 'statement of intent or direction', than a plan to deliver concrete actions.

2.85 At the 22 February 2024 meeting of the NSSISC, the department proposed to the members that an 'implementation progress tracker' be developed, containing more details on the individual partner actions contributing to the four priorities of the national action plan, including key

²⁶ These comprised: 57 responses to the public survey via the department's website; three email responses to the survey; and 16 written submissions from various other stakeholders.

performance indicators, timeframes and allocated resources where appropriate. The NSSISC agreed for the department to commence developing the document. In April 2024, the department advised the ANAO that it has commenced development of the implementation tracker, and that it is expected to be finalised in mid-2024.

Were risks to design and implementation considered and measures put in place to manage them effectively?

There was no consideration of risks to inform the design and implementation of the strategy and the national action plan. Two risk documents were drafted for the development of the strategy and the national action plan, however neither were used. There was no discussion of risks to the design and implementation of the strategy and the national action plan with stakeholders or decision-makers.

2.86 Section 16 of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act) requires accountable authorities of entities to establish and maintain systems and appropriate internal controls for the oversight and management of risk. The Commonwealth Risk Management Policy 'sets out the principles and mandatory requirements for managing risk in undertaking the activities of government', and requires risk management to be 'embedded into the decision-making activities of an entity', including in program and policy design and implementation.²⁷

2.87 The APSC's 'Delivering Great Policy' model emphasises the importance of identifying the key risks of various courses of action when developing policy advice. This enables considerations of risk to be embedded into the decision-making activities of an entity, and supports consistent management of risk when designing and implementing government initiatives.²⁸

2.88 The department drafted a risk assessment for the development of the strategy in June 2020, which was last modified in July 2020. The risk assessment was not finalised or approved.

2.89 The department prepared a risk plan for the development of the national action plan, which was incorporated into a project plan. The project plan, along with the risk plan, was endorsed by the First Assistant Secretary on 20 October 2022. Two risks were identified by the department (Table 2.10). The first risk identified one treatment that did not affect the risk rating. The second risk identified no controls or treatments, and the risk rating was changed from medium to low.

27 The Department of Finance, *Commonwealth Risk Management Policy*, Finance, 2022, available from <https://www.finance.gov.au/government/comcover/risk-services/management/commonwealth-risk-management-policy> [accessed 7 February 2024].

28 Australian Public Service Academy, *Delivering Great Policy: Influential* [Internet], available from <https://www.apsacademy.gov.au/aps-craft/strategy-policy-evaluation/delivering-great-policy/influential> [accessed 8 March 2024].

Table 2.10: National action plan risk plan

Risk	Controls	Actual risk rating ^a	Treatments	Residual risk rating ^b
Jurisdictions do not support or endorse the national action plan.	No controls identified	Medium	1 treatment ^c	Medium
The Australian Government is criticised for the lack of funded programs and concrete actions on soil.	No controls identified	Medium	No treatments identified	Low

Note a: Actual risk ratings assess the consequence and likelihood of the risk eventuating, taking into account the effectiveness of the existing controls.

Note b: Residual risk rating is the revised assessment of risk after additional treatments are put in place.

Note c: The treatment was to commence bilateral contact with senior officials from states and territories to talk through issues and potential partnerships to support the national action plan.

Source: ANAO summary of departmental documentation.

2.90 Risk was not discussed at any of the meetings of the NSSSC, NSSISC or the NAPWG. Risks to the design and implementation of the strategy and national action plan were not communicated to or discussed by the department's overarching governance bodies: the Executive Board²⁹; the Executive Leadership Team (ELT)³⁰; and the Executive Leadership Team+ (ELT+)³¹. The department's briefs to the minister did not comment on any risks identified for the development of the strategy or the national action plan, or in relation to the proposed package of initiatives accompanying the strategy. Risk management for the implementation of the strategy is examined further at paragraphs 3.12 to 3.17.

Recommendation no. 2

2.91 The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry identify, assess and communicate risks to relevant program participants and decision-makers to support informed decision-making, during policy design and throughout the implementation process.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response: Agreed.

2.92 *The department acknowledges the importance of appropriate risk management to support informed decision-making during policy design and throughout the implementation process.*

2.93 *The department updated its Enterprise Risk Management Framework and Policy in November 2022. The revised policy assists the department with improved guidance materials and tools to identify and capture risk information, including relevant program participants and decision makers, to support more effective monitoring and decision-making.*

29 The members of the Executive Board are the Secretary and Deputy Secretaries. Internal advisers attend Executive Board meetings. The internal advisers are the Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff, two Senior Executive Service (SES) Band 1 officers on 12-month rotation, the Chief Finance Officer, Chief People Officer, Chief Counsel, and a communications and media officer.

30 The ELT membership comprises the Secretary and Deputy Secretaries. Attendees may also include guest speakers and presenters associated with respective discussion items.

31 Membership of the ELT+ comprises the ELT as well as First Assistant Secretaries of Portfolio Strategy Division, and of Strategic Policy Advice (Indigenous Leader).

2.94 *The department will engage with partners and identify, assess and communicate risks to relevant program participants and decision-makers throughout implementation of the National Soil Action Plan, in line with the Enterprise Risk Management Framework and Policy and the action plan implementation package currently being developed.*

3. Implementation

Areas examined

This chapter examines whether the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department) established effective arrangements to support the implementation of the National Soil Strategy (the strategy), the Commonwealth Interim Action Plan (the interim action plan) and the National Soil Action Plan (the national action plan).

Conclusion

Effective arrangements are not in place to support implementation of the strategy and the national action plan. While progress has been made in implementing the initiatives in the interim action plan, the department had no framework or process in place to assess the impacts of individual initiatives on the overall implementation of the strategy. The department has developed and launched a website to report on initiatives under each priority action. There are no arrangements in place to monitor or report on the progress towards the goals and objectives of the strategy.

Areas for improvement

The ANAO made four recommendations aimed at: establishing appropriate risk management arrangements; developing an implementation plan and a monitoring and evaluation plan; and establishing evaluation arrangements.

3.1 The National Soil Package provided \$214.9 million in funding over four years in the 2021–22 Budget for a suite of soil initiatives to be delivered under the interim action plan. The May 2023 Budget provided a further \$56 million to implement the priority actions in the national action plan. The department³² is leading the implementation of the strategy and the two action plans.

3.2 The Australian Public Service Commission's (APSC) 'APS Craft' series and associated resources outline key capabilities required to deliver great policy and services. These include:

- establishing arrangements to oversee implementation progress, enable coordination of responsibilities, and assist in the achievement of desired policy outcomes³³;
- identifying, implementing and delivering policy and services to ensure timely progress towards the achievement of desired outcomes³⁴; and

32 The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) was the Australian Government entity leading the design and implementation of the strategy. It was renamed the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) in the machinery of government changes that took effect on 1 July 2022. This report refers to the entity as 'the department', unless distinction is required.

33 Australian Public Service Commission, *Develop an effective governance structure*, available from <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/workforce-information/taskforce-toolkit/governance/develop-effective-governance-structure> [accessed 7 February 2024].

34 Australian Public Service Academy, *APS Craft: Implementation & Services* [Internet], available from <https://www.apsacademy.gov.au/aps-craft/implementation-services> [accessed 8 March 2024].

- establishing monitoring and evaluation arrangements to regularly review and test that outcomes are on track to being achieved.³⁵

Have appropriate oversight arrangements been established?

Each initiative under the interim action plan has its own arrangement to oversee delivery. The department had no whole-of-program oversight over all the initiatives in the interim action plan. In February 2024, the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee (NSSISC) agreed for the department to commence developing a suite of documents to support oversight of progress in implementing the national action plan. There are no arrangements to manage risk to implementation at a whole-of-program level.

3.3 The strategy states that it is to be implemented through actions detailed in the national action plan. The strategy and the national action plan are the joint responsibility of the Australian Government and state and territory governments. The national action plan is being delivered in partnership with the soil science and research community, not-for-profit organisations, Natural Resource Management (NRM) organisations, and industry bodies.

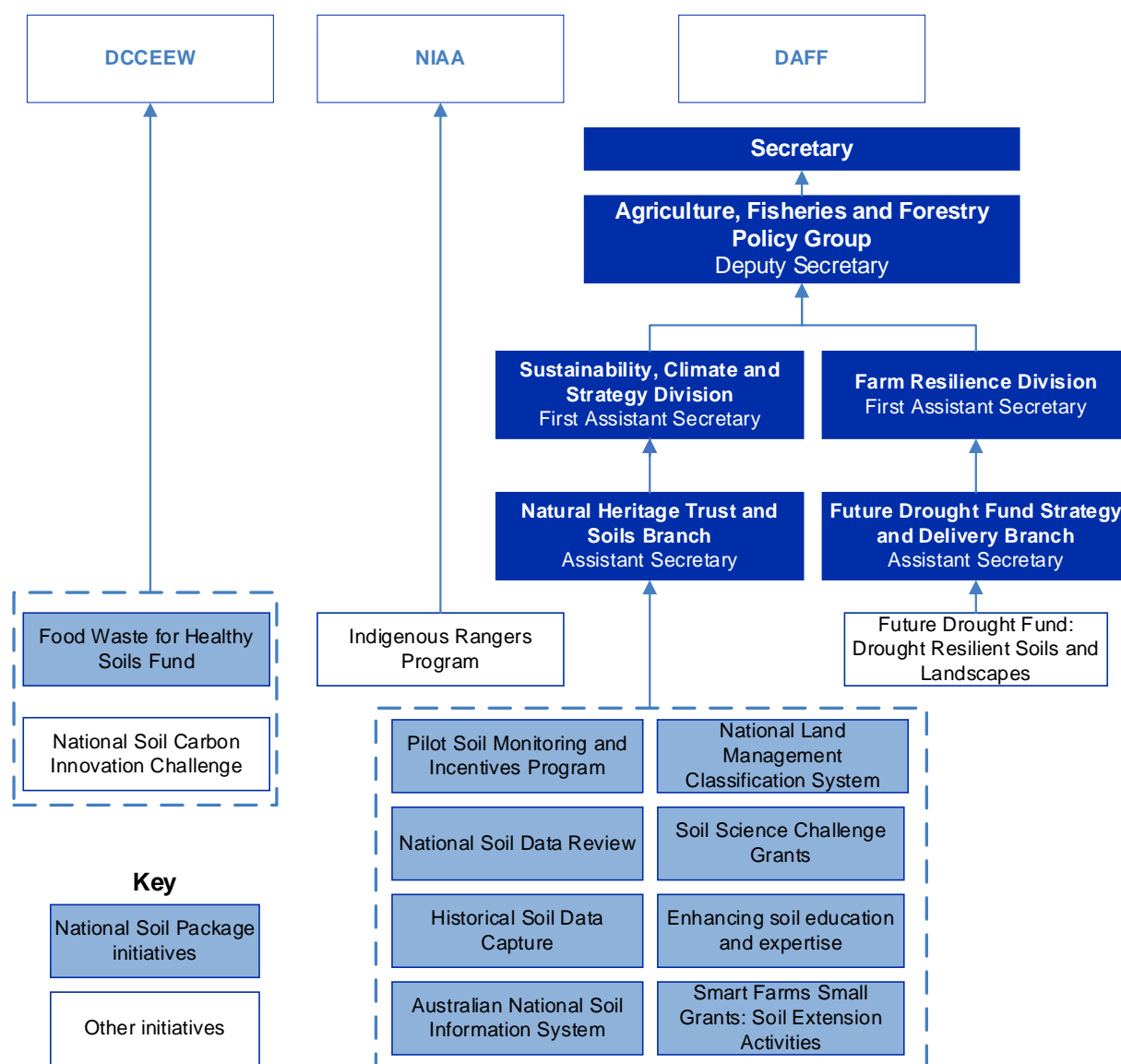
3.4 The strategy states that prior to the release of the national action plan, ‘the Australian Government will implement soil-related measures which contribute to the objectives of this Strategy’ under the interim action plan. Of the 13 initiatives listed in the interim action plan, the department is responsible for implementing nine initiatives.

Oversight arrangements for the interim action plan

3.5 The department has arrangements to provide line management oversight for the implementation of individual initiatives it is responsible for delivering under the interim action plan. Three initiatives are being delivered by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) and the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). Figure 3.1 illustrates the division of responsibilities for the initiatives listed in the interim action plan.

35 Australian Public Service Academy, *APS Craft: Strategy, Policy & Evaluation* [Internet], available from <https://www.apsacademy.gov.au/aps-craft/strategy-policy-evaluation> [accessed 8 March 2024]. See also Department of the Treasury, *Commonwealth Evaluation Policy*, available from <https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/about/commonwealth-evaluation-policy> [accessed 7 February 2024].

Figure 3.1: Entities responsible for initiatives listed in the interim action plan



Note: The 'Fast Track to Clean Up Antarctica' project was listed in the interim action plan. It was not funded in the 2021–22 Budget and is not being implemented. It has been omitted from the above diagram.

Source: ANAO summary of implementation arrangements.

3.6 In August 2022, the department developed a proposal to establish arrangements to oversee the delivery of the initiatives in the National Soil Package. The brief to the First Assistant Secretary stated that '[d]elivering the National Soil Package requires good governance and delivery practices in accordance with the Project Management Framework'. It proposed that a three-tiered arrangement be established, comprising: a divisional-level policy board chaired by the First Assistant Secretary; an overarching Soil Program Board chaired by the Assistant Secretary; and project management committees chaired by responsible Directors.

3.7 The proposal was approved by the First Assistant Secretary on 31 August 2022. These arrangements were not established. The department advised the ANAO in December 2023 that 'a decision was made to not proceed with establishing those arrangements' when 'it became clear that soils programs would not be expending the funds allocated'. The department was not able to

provide analysis of program underspend that informed this decision and advised the ANAO in February 2024 that the decision was ‘made informally’.

3.8 Within the line management approach adopted by the department (illustrated in Figure 3.1), no whole-of-program oversight arrangements were established. The department did not monitor how the initiatives were performing against the overall goals and objectives of the strategy. The department also did not coordinate risk management (see paragraphs 3.12 to 3.17), program linkages (see paragraph 3.25), and reporting (see paragraphs 3.57 to 3.62) across all initiatives.

3.9 There are no arrangements between DCCEEW, NIAA and the department to share information on the progress in implementing the initiatives, including what outcomes are being achieved that may be relevant to the strategy. Paragraphs 3.40 to 3.46 outline the department’s monitoring arrangements.

Oversight arrangements for the national action plan

3.10 Under the Administrative Arrangements Orders, the department is the Australian Government entity responsible for matters relating to ‘soils and other natural resources’. Within the department, the Sustainability, Climate and Strategy Division holds responsibility for the implementation of the national action plan. Its 2023–24 divisional business plan lists as one of its ‘business as usual activities’ the:

Finalisation of the National Soils Action Plan to advance national leadership on the soils agenda and implementation of the National Soils Strategy and support its implementation through engagement with states and territories, research organisations and industry.

3.11 The national action plan lists statements of support from 17 partners to the action plan.³⁶ As at February 2024, there are no arrangements in place with national action plan partners to jointly oversee and coordinate the implementation of the priority actions in the national action plan. On 22 February 2024, the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee (NSSISC), which oversaw the development of the national action plan (see paragraphs 2.70 to 2.74), agreed for the department to commence developing a suite of documents to support oversight of progress in implementing the national action plan, including a progress tracker and a monitoring and evaluation plan. At the meeting, the NSSISC decided to revisit the role and purpose of the committee in relation to implementation, monitoring and reporting at a later date. In April 2024, the department advised the ANAO that ‘[e]arly indications suggest this will be possible before the end of 2024.’

Management of risk to implementation

3.12 The Department of Finance’s Resource Management Guide 211 on *Implementing the Commonwealth Risk Management Policy* outlines the importance of constantly identifying and managing risk, including shared risks and risk interdependencies between projects when managing a program. It states that good risk management involves incorporating dependencies and potential

36 The 17 partners to the action plan are: DAFF; DCCEEW; all states and territories; CSIRO; Soil Cooperative Research Centre; Soil Science Australia; Natural Resource Management Regions Australia; National Farmers’ Federation; Grains Research Development Corporation; and Meat and Livestock Australia.

negative consequences into the strategic and operational decision making associated with designing and carrying out projects or programs.³⁷

3.13 The department's Enterprise Risk Management Framework and Policy (ERMFP) was published in August 2020 and was last updated in November 2022. It describes the principles, expectations, accountabilities and responsibilities for staff in applying effective risk management practices, and sets out a model for encouraging a positive risk culture by ensuring that risk management activities are integrated into everyday activities and decision-making.

3.14 The accompanying Enterprise Risk Management Guide (the guide) provides guidance to staff on developing a risk strategy for large programs or business areas. The guide states that a risk strategy should:

- provide a structured and coherent approach to identifying, assessing and managing risk;
- outline a process for regularly updating and reviewing risk assessment;
- describe the roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders and the approach of any performance monitoring, review and reporting; and
- include an approach for the management and oversight of shared risks.

3.15 The department has not established arrangements to manage risk to the implementation of the strategy and the achievement of its goals and objectives. No risk assessments have been conducted and no risk strategy has been established.

3.16 The department had no arrangements to manage risk to the implementation of the interim action plan. There was no risk plan outlining how risk would be identified, assessed, escalated, or managed in a consistent manner across the initiatives. There was no process to aggregate risks identified for individual initiatives and consider them at a whole-of-program level. The department did not assess and manage the overall impact of risks across the initiatives to the achievement of the goals and objectives of the strategy, or make informed decisions on the direction of program delivery more broadly.

3.17 The department has not assessed the impact of the delay in finalising the national action plan to implementation, including to the achievement of the goals and objectives of the strategy. The department has not established arrangements to identify and manage shared risks with national action plan partners. At a meeting held on 22 February 2024, the NSSISC agreed to the department's proposal to commence developing a risk strategy to 'identify, evaluate and propose mitigations for collective risks to the implementation of the action plan'. In April 2024, the department advised the ANAO that the risk strategy is expected to be completed in the second half of 2024, 'noting the need for engagement with the NSSISC before this document can be finalised'.

37 Department of Finance, *Resource Management Guide 211: Implementing the Commonwealth Risk Management Policy*, 'Element 1: Embedding Risk Management', available from <https://www.finance.gov.au/government/managing-commonwealth-resources/implementing-commonwealth-risk-management-policy-rmg-211/rmg-211-element-1-embedding-risk-management> [accessed 8 March 2024].

Recommendation no. 3

3.18 The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry establish arrangements to coordinate the management of risk to the implementation of the National Soil Strategy and the National Soil Action Plan at a whole-of-program level, including management of shared risks.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response: *Agreed.*

3.19 *The department notes that at its meeting on 22 February 2024, the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee agreed for the department to develop an implementation package for the National Soil Action Plan, which will include a risk management strategy and approaches to manage shared risks. In addition, for Australian Government-led programs and initiatives that support the priority actions of the National Soil Action Plan, the department will develop appropriate program-level risk management plans, aligned with the department's revised Enterprise Risk Management Framework and Policy.*

Are actions under the interim and national action plans being implemented effectively?

While progress has been made in implementing the initiatives under the interim action plan, not all completed initiatives achieved their planned objectives or expended the allocated funding. The impact of the initiatives not meeting or partially meeting their planned targets to the achievement of the strategy's goals and objectives has not been assessed or managed. The department has commenced implementing the initiatives to progress the priority actions of the national action plan following its launch in November 2023.

Implementation of the interim action plan

3.20 The interim action plan lists 13 initiatives to be implemented by the Australian Government (Table 3.1). Of these:

- nine are being delivered by DAFF;
- two are being delivered by DCCEEW;
- one is being delivered by NIAA; and
- one measure, the 'Fast Track to Clean Up Antarctica' project, was not funded in the 2021–22 Budget and is not an existing program (see paragraphs 2.29 to 2.32).

Table 3.1: Initiatives in the interim action plan

Initiative	Lead entity	Part of National Soil Package	Funding as listed in the interim action plan	Timeframe
Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program	DAFF	✓	\$62.6 million	2021–22 to 2022–23
National Soil Data Review program	DAFF	✓	\$2.2 million	2021–22 to 2022–23
Historical Soil Data Capture Payments program	DAFF	✓	\$21.3 million	2021–22 to 2022–23
Australian Soil Resource Information System	DAFF	✓	\$15.3 million	2021–22 to 2022–23
National Land Management Classification System	DAFF	✓	\$0.6 million	2021–22 to 2022–23
Soil Science Challenge Grants	DAFF	✓	\$20.9 million	2021–22 to 2024–25
Enhancing soil education and expertise	DAFF	✓	\$1.1 million	2021–22 to 2022–23
Food Waste for Healthy Soils Fund	DCCEEW	✓	\$67.0 million	2021–22 to 2024–25
National Soil Carbon Innovation Challenge	DCCEEW	✗	\$36.7 million	2021–22 to 2024–25
Smart Farms Small Grants: Soil Extension Activities	DAFF	✓	\$18.0 million (met from within the existing resources)	2021–22 to 2022–23
Future Drought Fund: Drought Resilient Soils and Landscapes	DAFF	✗	\$23.0 million	2021–22 to 2023–24
Indigenous Rangers Program	NIAA	✗	\$761.0 million	2021–22 to 2027–28
Fast Track to Clean Up Antarctica	DCCEEW	✗	\$2.5 million	This measure was not funded.

Source: ANAO summary of initiatives in the interim action plan.

3.21 Of the 12 initiatives being implemented, 11 had established a project plan (or a similar document) that outlined project background, scope, outputs, outcomes with project targets, high-level milestones, budget and resources. The remaining initiative, the Indigenous Rangers Program, was an extension of funding to an existing program.

3.22 All initiatives had established a risk plan, with eight of 10 initiatives that were being delivered via a procurement or a grant process establishing specific risk assessments for those processes.

3.23 The department engaged a probity adviser to provide probity services in relation to four initiatives in the National Soil Package. Initiatives that were not covered by this service established their own probity arrangements. Two of the initiatives, Australian National Soil Information System

(ANSIS) and National Land Management Classification System, did not establish specific probity arrangements as they were respectively intra-government and internal departmental arrangements (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Summary of implementation planning

Initiative	Lead entity	Project plan	Risk plan	Probity arrangements
Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program	DAFF	✓	✓	✓
National Soil Data Review	DAFF	✓	✓	✓
Historical Soil Data Capture	DAFF	✓	✓	✓
ANSIS	DAFF	✓	✓	N/A — intra-governmental transaction
National Land Management Classification System	DAFF	✓	✓	N/A — internal departmental arrangement
Soil Science Challenge Grants	DAFF	✓	✓	✓
Enhancing Soil Education and Expertise	DAFF	✓	✓	✓
Food Waste for Healthy Soils Fund	DCCEEW	✓	✓	✓
National Soil Carbon Innovation Challenge	DCCEEW	✓	✓	✓
Smart Farms Small Grants: Soil Extension Activities	DAFF	✓	✓	✓
Future Drought Fund: Drought Resilient Soils and Landscapes	DAFF	✓	✓	✓
Indigenous Rangers Program	NIAA	N/A — funding extension only	✓	✓

Source: ANAO analysis of implementation planning for initiatives in the interim action plan.

3.24 There was no planning at the whole-of-program level that mapped out the implementation of the 12 initiatives in the interim action plan and how they will contribute to the goals and objectives of the strategy. Each initiative was delivered as a separate program with its own deliverables and outcomes by the respective program teams, rather than as part of a broader package of initiatives intended to achieve a common policy objective.

3.25 There was limited consultation between program teams regarding how the initiatives are intended to link to or support each other, resulting in issues in coordination and timing during implementation. An example of two initiatives is examined in case study 1.

Case study 1. Soil extension services to support participants in soil testing

The Smart Farms Small Grants: Soil Extension Activities (SFSG) program was a grant program that was intended to fund soil extension officers and Regional Soil Coordinators (RSCs) to ‘encourage farmers to test their soil and help them interpret and act on results’.

Part of the role of the soil extension officers and RSCs included supporting farmers and land managers to participate in another initiative funded in the National Soil Package, the Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program (PSMIP). Under the PSMIP, farmers and land managers were eligible for benefits of up to \$10,000 to arrange, conduct and interpret their soil test results.

The award of SFSG grants was approved by the minister in November and December 2021, providing funding to nine grantees totalling \$4 million via direct grants and to 32 grantees totalling \$13.8 million via competitive grants. A procurement process for a service provider to deliver the PSMIP was conducted from December 2021 to January 2022, with the contract awarded in February 2022.

In May 2022, the team delivering the PSMIP sought legal advice in relation to the program. In the request for advice, the program team noted that:

DAWE had originally envisaged the land manager/farmer would call the Commonwealth-funded soil extension officer if they wanted their help to interpret soil test results and to discuss land management practices. On further reflection, we have realised it would be more helpful for the land manager to have the extension officer contact them directly (less work for them), and for that extension officer to have their results (so land manager doesn’t have to email them results themselves).

The PSMIP team asked whether the data sharing deed that was being used for the program allowed the service provider to share details of the participant with the soil extension officers and RSCs funded under the SFSG program. The department’s legal team advised that current data sharing deed did not enable participants’ personal information to be shared by the service provider.

On 9 September 2022, the legal team provided suggested changes to the PSMIP cover letter and program application form to enable the department to share participants’ personal information with RSCs and soil extension officers. This was approved by the Assistant Secretary on 11 October 2022.

This change did not improve the use of RSCs and soil extension officers by PSMIP participants. The department’s review of the program from July 2023 noted that:

In total [the service provider] received only 3 requests from participating land managers who were interested in accessing advice from soil extension officers and RSCs. The department understands the land managers did not follow through on discussing their results or seeking advice from the extension officers and RSCs. ...

The department promoted extension officers and RSCs as being available to assist land managers to interpret soil test results. This program linkage was not designed prior to the program launch, and concerns about insurance coverage for providing advice and administrative burden for land managers and extension officers/RSCs limited this linkage being

realised in practice. Consideration of these linkages and possible limitations before future programs launch would assist to minimise unintended blockages.

Status of initiatives in the interim action plan

3.26 Of the 12 initiatives being implemented under the interim action plan, seven were funded over two years and due to be completed by 30 June 2023 (see Table 3.1). Of these seven initiatives, five were completed by 30 June 2023. The Enhancing Soil Education and Expertise program and the Smart Farms Small Grants: Soil Extension Services program underwent variations to extend the activity end dates to May 2024 and June 2024 respectively.

3.27 The remaining five initiatives were funded over four years (to 2024–25) or more. These initiatives are in progress. Appendix 5 outlines the implementation status of the 12 initiatives in the interim action plan.

3.28 Not all completed initiatives achieved their planned objectives. There were two initiatives that recorded substantial underspends due to low uptake. The two initiatives are examined in case studies 2 and 3.

Case study 2. Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program

The Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program (PSMIP) was initially intended to be rolled out in three tranches with a six-week review period between each tranche.

Tranche 1 of the program ran from 14 March 2022 to 30 June 2022. As planned, the department commenced a review of tranche 1 on 20 June 2022, which was finalised in late August 2022. The review noted that there were a number of constraints that resulted in higher than expected soil sampling and testing costs, which was presenting 'additional issues in terms of supporting program uptake'. Soil sampling had not yet started at the time of the review as the department was finalising elements of program design and there had been delays to onboarding soil sampling providers.

Based on the recommendations of the review, changes were implemented for tranche 2, which commenced on 1 July 2022. Soil sampling commenced in mid-August 2022.

On 28 November 2022, the department and the service provider mutually agreed to not proceed with tranche 3 of the program. At the date of decision to terminate the program, no payments had been made under the program. The program was finalised on 23 December 2022.

Feedback on the program from various stakeholders noted barriers to participation, including high out-of-pocket costs, confusion around requirements, and complex soil testing parameters that did not align with industry practice and imposed additional administrative burden on participants. One stakeholder commented that:

In hindsight it appears that the PSMIP was set up to fail through announcing the Program whilst it was still in development and without the necessary infrastructure (e.g. service providers, application to upload soil data) in place to ensure that it could function effectively.

At the end of the PSMIP, 101 sampling jobs had been completed against the program target of 5,400. Total program expenditure comprised \$3,362,108 (excluding GST), including termination costs of \$2,961,795 (excluding GST) paid to the service provider, against the allocated total

program funding of \$54.42 million. This results in total program underspend of \$51,057,892, or 94 per cent.

The department advised the ANAO in October 2023 that \$20.8 million from the remaining funds was returned to the Consolidated Revenue Fund in 2021–22, and that \$28.2 million was reallocated to other soil initiatives and ‘government savings for other profiles’ in 2022–23. In April 2024, the department clarified that ‘government savings for other profiles’ comprised ‘Budget measures across the portfolio, in addition to the \$20 million allocated to the “Partnering to Implement the National Soil Action Plan” program’ introduced in the 2023–24 Budget.

Apart from a request to approve an internal reallocation of \$5.567 million from the PSMIP to other soil initiatives in March 2023, the department has not briefed the minister on the outcomes of the program or the redistribution of the remaining program funds.

Case study 3. Historical Soil Data Capture program

Under the Historical Soil Data Capture (HSDC) program, four data brokers were contracted to engage with ‘data owners’ (such as farmers and land holders) to obtain soil data, cleanse or transform it into an acceptable format, and make it available for public use via ANSIS.

The HSDC program was planned to be delivered in three tranches, with a six-week review period between each tranche. Tranche 3 was scheduled to be completed by May 2023, with the final review conducted over June and July 2023.

Internal reporting on the status of the project in January 2023 noted that:

Following the 2022 federal election and a change in government, the program was shortened and rolled out in a single tranche from 1 April 2022 to 31 December 2022.

The department advised the ANAO in September 2023 that the reasons the program was shortened included:

- delayed uptake and lack of interest from farmers;
- a view that the department could get more value for the investment if it was redirected elsewhere;
- data quality was not as high as hoped and there was no consistency in data received; and
- the department had no control over the location or quality of data, so it was poor value for money.

Out of a total program budget of \$21 million, \$5,361,545 (excluding GST) was expended, resulting in an underspend of \$15.6 million or 74 per cent. The department advised the ANAO in September 2023 that \$7.38 million of the unspent funds was returned to the Consolidated Revenue Fund in 2021–22, and that program funding was increased by \$887,000 in 2022–23 before \$9 million was reallocated to ‘other departmental priorities’. In April 2024, the department clarified that ‘other departmental priorities’ comprised ‘Budget measures across

the portfolio'. The department has not briefed the minister on the outcomes of the program or the redistribution of the remaining program funds.

3.29 As noted at paragraphs 3.6 to 3.8, there was no overarching arrangement established to oversee the implementation of the initiatives at the whole-of-program level. While there was monthly project status reporting to relevant program delegates on the progress and outcomes of some of the initiatives (see analysis of internal reporting at paragraphs 3.57 to 3.62), these reports were not considered on an aggregate level against the goals and objectives of the strategy.

3.30 There is no information on how the five completed initiatives have contributed to the goals and objectives of the strategy. Similarly, the impact of some of the initiatives, such as those outlined in the case studies above, not meeting or partially meeting their planned targets to the achievement of the strategy's goals and objectives has not been assessed or managed.

Implementation of the national action plan

3.31 The national action plan outlines four priority actions and a list of 'statements of commitment' under each priority action. A full list of statements of commitment under each priority action is in Appendix 4.

3.32 As outlined at paragraph 2.51, the department advised the ANAO in December 2023 that the national action plan was designed to be a 'higher level document' to provide 'flexibility for jurisdictions to implement practical and appropriate initiatives, tailored to achieve local, regional and state-based outcomes, while still contributing progress towards the priority actions'. It does not contain details on who will be delivering the priority actions and commitments, what programs or initiatives those actions will comprise, or how progress will be measured.

3.33 On 13 October 2023, the department advised the ANAO that it is considering proposing to the NSSISC that an implementation plan for the national action plan be developed. At the NSSISC meeting held on 22 February 2024, the department proposed to the NSSISC that an 'implementation progress tracker' be developed to 'track individual partner actions contributing to the 4 priorities of the action plan, key performance indicators, delivery timeframes and allocated resources (where appropriate)'. The NSSISC agreed for the department to commence developing the document.

3.34 Effective implementation planning helps to support the delivery of initiatives on time, within budget and to an acceptable level of quality.³⁸ Both the strategy and the national action plan are high-level documents that contain limited detail on what is being delivered, by whom and in what timeframe.

38 Australian Public Service Commission, *Effective project management* [Internet], available from <https://www.apsc.gov.au/node/386> [accessed 8 March 2024].

Recommendation no. 4

3.35 The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry develop an implementation plan for the National Soil Action Plan, which clearly documents and captures roles and responsibilities, timeframes for delivery, and resources allocated to the relevant actions.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response: *Agreed in principle.*

3.36 *The department acknowledges the importance of effective implementation planning. The department notes the National Soil Action Plan is a joint, collaborative commitment across partners which includes all levels of government, the soil science and research community, not-for-profits, Natural Resource Management organisations, industry bodies and the private sector. On 22 February 2024 the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee agreed the department develop an implementation plan for the National Soil Action Plan. The department will oversee progress on the implementation plan, which will identify roles and responsibilities and timeframes for delivery, where possible. However the department notes that, as some activities under the action plan are delivered by partners, it may not be possible to accurately define all resources or other specific details allocated to relevant actions where they may be considered sensitive by partners. The department is working with the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee to progress this work.*

Initiatives funded in the May 2023 Budget

3.37 The May 2023 Budget provided \$56 million in funding for soil initiatives under the national action plan. The initiatives are listed in the national action plan under roles and responsibilities for the Australian Government, which are '[i]n addition to the partner commitments made under the priority actions'. The National Soil Action Plan website (see paragraphs 3.71 to 3.73) outlines how the 2023–24 Budget measures are aligned to the priority actions (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Soil initiatives funded in the May 2023 Budget

Initiative	Description	Alignment to priority action	Funding
Soil Health Information initiative	Design and deliver a new National Soil Monitoring Program to monitor soils nationally.	Priority action 1	\$21,600,000
	Data collected will be made publicly available on ANSIS, which will also be further enhanced.		\$6,000,000
Soil Capacity Building grants	Continue to support the Regional Soil Coordinators program.	Priority action 3	\$6,200,000
	Continue the National Soils Community of Practice to support networks for researchers, primary producers, and community groups to work together, and provide a forum for soil practitioners to share the latest soil science information and tools.		\$2,200,000

Initiative	Description	Alignment to priority action	Funding
Partnering to Implement the National Soil Action Plan	Funding for states and territories to deliver initiatives that contribute to priority actions of the national action plan.	Priority action 2	\$20,000,000
Total			\$56,000,000.00

Source: ANAO summary of May 2023 Budget initiatives.

3.38 In September 2023, the department advised the ANAO that it had commenced implementing the May 2023 Budget initiatives. Status of the initiatives as at February 2024 is outlined in Appendix 6.

Is there a sound performance monitoring framework, including reporting and evaluation arrangements?

The department has not finalised or used the draft monitoring and evaluation framework that was developed for the National Soil Package. No arrangements are in place to monitor progress in implementing the strategy. A website has been launched to report on initiatives being implemented under the priority actions of the national action plan. There has been no internal or external reporting on progress against the goals and objectives of the strategy.

Performance monitoring arrangements

3.39 In November 2021, the department procured an external service provider, ThinkPlace, to deliver monitoring and evaluation services for the National Soil Package.³⁹ Its deliverables included:

- developing a monitoring and evaluation plan for initiatives under the National Soil Package; and
- undertaking a mid-program and end-of-program evaluation.

Monitoring and evaluation framework

3.40 In June 2022, ThinkPlace delivered a draft monitoring and evaluation framework (the framework). The framework outlined monitoring and evaluation activities for the individual initiatives in the National Soil Package, as well as for the package overall. It outlined the ‘Package-level outcomes’ each initiative was expected to contribute to, as well as short- (0–2 years), medium- (2–5 years) and long-term (5–20 years) outcomes for the individual initiatives.

3.41 In January 2023, in accordance with a variation agreed with the department, ThinkPlace submitted a proposed workplan to develop a revised monitoring and evaluation plan. The workplan noted that a mid-term evaluation had been planned at this time, but due to challenges with implementation, ‘there would be value in a review of what has been put in place and what is still planned for implementation’. The workplan proposed to undertake ‘research and diagnosis’, and produce a final report by 5 April 2023 which would summarise the research undertaken and provide

³⁹ The contract with ThinkPlace had a total value of \$499,699.60. See AusTender, *Contract Notice View – CN3833888*, available from <https://www.tenders.gov.au/Cn/Show/79605627-aabd-4c3b-bafb-9fd7c1077d20> [accessed 20 March 2024].

recommendations to ‘further improve program design towards achieving National Soil Strategy goals’.

3.42 On 14 March 2023, the department decided to conclude the contract with ThinkPlace early ‘due to the department’s budgetary pressures’.⁴⁰ The final deliverable completed by ThinkPlace was a progress report on the review of the monitoring and evaluation plan, provided at the end of March 2023.

3.43 The progress report made observations on challenges to measuring the impact of the strategy, including that ‘[t]he National Soil Strategy puts forward a vision, goals and objectives that are often blurring together three levels of concept’, which can lead to policy intent becoming ‘unclearly linked or lost’. It further noted that:

the current iteration of the Action Plan, similar to the Strategy itself, can benefit from a more clearly focused view [of] the pathway to impact. This would include aligning actions with clear Strategy outcomes and return on investment.

3.44 The progress report made 20 recommendations to better define the impact being sought, scale the impact, and sustain the impact over time. The recommendations have not been considered or actioned by the department.

3.45 As the contract was terminated early, the final report on revising the monitoring and evaluation plan was not delivered. The department advised the ANAO in August 2023 that:

The department intends that the ... progress report can be used by individual program areas to support development of monitoring and evaluation approaches for continuing programs, and discussed with the National Soil Strategy [Implementation] Steering Committee to determine what can be evaluated across partner activities.

3.46 As at February 2024, the monitoring and evaluation plan has not been revised and remains in its June 2022 draft form. On 22 February 2024, the NSSISC agreed to the department’s proposal to ‘prepare a suite of documents to support tracking and Monitoring and Evaluation’, including a monitoring and evaluation plan ‘to ensure the action plan delivers against its priorities and intended outcomes and supports the NSSISC [to] assess progress and take strategic decisions on implementation’.

Recommendation no. 5

3.47 To support the measurement of progress in implementing the strategy and the national action plan, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry finalise the draft monitoring and evaluation plan to:

- (a) establish specific targets, baselines, and data sources for relevant Australian Government initiatives;
- (b) propose and coordinate the development of processes to monitor and report on progress against the national action plan with action plan partners; and
- (c) measure and report on the achievement of the strategy’s overarching goals and objectives.

⁴⁰ The total expenditure under the contract was \$363,211.38 (including GST).

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response: *Agreed in principle.*

3.48 *The department acknowledges the importance of appropriate monitoring and evaluation practices to measure progress on achieving intended policy and program outcomes. Following the release of the National Soil Action Plan in November 2023, the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee agreed on 22 February 2024 for the department to develop an implementation package which will include a new monitoring and evaluation framework for the actions under the National Soil Action Plan.*

3.49 *Work has commenced on developing the new monitoring and evaluation framework to measure progress on achieving the priority actions of the action plan. This will include consideration of the previous monitoring and evaluation material for soil programs produced by ThinkPlace, including the final progress report and recommendations. Further, as outlined in the action plan, progress on activities that contribute to the priority actions will be outlined on the action plan website. Priority actions have also been mapped to the three goals of the National Soil Strategy on the website to illustrate how progress on priority actions contribute to achievement of the strategy's overarching goals and objectives.*

Evaluation

3.50 The Commonwealth Evaluation Policy states that:

Commonwealth entities and companies are expected to deliver support and services for Australians by setting clear objectives for major policies, projects and programs, and consistently measuring progress towards achieving these objectives.⁴¹

3.51 The accompanying Commonwealth Evaluation Toolkit further states that:

Effective monitoring and evaluation is important at all stages of the policy development and implementation cycle. From early design and decision-making in the Budget and Cabinet processes, to the ongoing measurement and assessment of activities and programs across performance reporting cycles.⁴²

3.52 The strategy states that it and the national action plan 'will be reviewed every 5 years and revised to ensure changes to priorities and emerging science are reflected appropriately'.

3.53 As noted at paragraph 3.41, the mid-program evaluation originally planned to be conducted by ThinkPlace in November 2022 was not undertaken following a variation to the contract. The contract with ThinkPlace was terminated before the planned end-of-program evaluation activity in May 2023.

3.54 On 13 October 2023, the department advised the ANAO that since the ThinkPlace contract was concluded, the money set aside for evaluation is no longer available. The department further advised that there are no plans for an evaluation of the National Soil Package and how it contributed to the goals and objectives of the strategy, as 'the strategy is a commitment of the previous government, and the current government's priorities have evolved from this point'. Although background information about the strategy was provided to the minister as part of 'briefing on

41 Department of the Treasury, *Commonwealth Evaluation Policy*, available from <https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/about/commonwealth-evaluation-policy> [accessed 20 February 2024].

42 Department of the Treasury, *Commonwealth Evaluation Toolkit: Why evaluate*, available from <https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/why-evaluate> [accessed 20 February 2024].

other matters', the department has not provided advice to the minister on how the strategy is meeting its intended outcomes.

Recommendation no. 6

3.55 The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry establish arrangements for periodic reviews of the strategy and the national action plan as outlined in the strategy, to ensure changes to government priorities and emerging science are reflected appropriately in both documents.

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry response: Agreed.

3.56 *As outlined in the National Soil Action Plan, each of the four action plans will be subject to a 5-yearly review to ensure new or emerging government and soil-related priorities can be incorporated into subsequent action plans. The first review will take place in 2027, and findings will inform the development of the 2028-2033 action plan. The department will establish arrangements for these periodic reviews as part of the action plan implementation package and monitoring and evaluation framework and engage with relevant partners, including the National Soil Strategy Implementation Steering Committee, on these reviews.*

Reporting

Internal reporting arrangements

3.57 The department's Enterprise Project Management Framework (PMF) was first published in February 2021 and revised in May 2023. The purpose of the PMF is to establish a structured approach for the direction and management of the portfolio of programs and projects within the department.

3.58 The PMF outlines three tiers of projects.

- Tier 1: substantial projects. These projects have a major political profile with high sensitivities, constrained deadlines and a notional threshold of more than \$5 million.
- Tier 2: significant projects. These projects have a minor to moderate political profile with some sensitivities, somewhat constrained deadlines and a notional threshold of between \$1 million and \$5 million.
- Tier 3: standard projects. These projects do not have a political profile, have low sensitivities, flexible deadlines and a notional threshold of less than \$1 million.

3.59 Tier 1 and Tier 2 projects must report to a project board or a shared program board, and provide monthly status reports to the board and the Project Management Office (for Tier 1 projects) or the Senior Responsible Officer (for Tier 2 projects).

3.60 Of the nine initiatives in the interim action plan that the department is responsible for delivering, there is evidence of internal reporting to program delegates for seven initiatives (Table 3.4). Three Tier 1 or Tier 2 projects established a forum to oversee the delivery of the projects: ANSIS, the Enhancing Soil Education and Expertise program, and the National Soil Data Review. No project board or shared program boards were established for the remaining three Tier 1 or Tier 2 projects.

Table 3.4: Reporting for soil initiatives

Initiative	Project tier	Reporting
Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program	Tier 1	Monthly, from December 2022 to May/June 2023.
Historical Soil Data Capture	Tier 1	Two reports, in January 2023 and February 2023.
ANSIS	Tier 1	Monthly, from December 2022 to April 2023.
Soil Science Challenge Grants	Tier 1	Monthly, from October 2022 to May 2023. Two quarterly reports ^a for July–September 2023 and October 2023–January 2024.
Enhancing Soil Education and Expertise	Tier 2	Monthly, from October 2022 to May/June 2023. Two quarterly reports ^a for July–September 2023 and October 2023–January 2024.
National Soil Data Review	Tier 2	None for Stage 1. Four monthly reports for Stage 2 — December 2022 and February to April 2023.
National Land Management Classification System	Tier 3	No project reporting was required as a Tier 3 project.

Note a: The department advised that the delegate has approved for project status reporting frequency to move to quarterly from 30 June 2023.

Source: ANAO summary of internal reporting.

3.61 For the remaining two projects being delivered by the department:

- Smart Farms Small Grants: Soil Extension Activities — there was no internal project reporting; and
- Future Drought Fund: Drought Resilient Soils and Landscapes — the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Plan for the program outlines program reporting arrangements, comprising: a six-monthly MEL progress report; an annual MEL plan review; a final program report; and an end-of-program evaluation report.

3.62 There is no internal reporting on the progress of implementing the strategy. The progress reports for the individual initiatives were not aggregated to determine progress against the strategy's goals and objectives.

External reporting arrangements

3.63 Australian Government entities are subject to performance measurement and reporting requirements under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act), the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2014* (PGPA Rule) and accompanying guidance issued by the Department of Finance. These are collectively referred to as the Commonwealth performance framework.

3.64 Under the framework, entities must publish corporate plans for each financial year. Corporate plans must set out the entity's purpose and provide performance measures that will measure the entity's performance in achieving its purpose. Results against these performance measures are required to be provided in the entity's annual performance statements, to provide information to the Parliament and the public.

3.65 In its 2021–22 Annual Report, the department reported against a performance measure for the ‘[d]elivery of the National Soil Strategy’, which specified the following targets:

- Review of historical soil data.
- Delivery of soil testing rebates.
- Development of a federated soil data platform.

3.66 The department reported that it had ‘partially achieved’ the target, by outlining its achievements in relation to the Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program to date.

3.67 This measure was removed in the department’s subsequent corporate plans. In the 2022–23 Corporate Plan, the strategy became one of several contributing programs to a broader performance measure on ‘[t]he percentage of farms using sustainable management practices’, with the 2022–23 target: ‘[s]hare of farms using sustainable management practices is maintained or increases by 2025’.

3.68 In its 2022–23 Annual Report, the department noted that the data it intended to use to report against the measure were not collected in 2022–23, and as such it was unable to accurately determine its progress towards the 2025 target. The department stated that ‘[a]t 30 June 2023, there was no evidence to suggest the 2025 target will not be met’, and reported that the measure was ‘on track’.

3.69 The ANAO’s audits of annual performance statements of Australian Government entities in 2022–23 noted the need for entities to consider carefully when planning their measures whether the limitations of systems and data will inhibit reporting of meaningful information, and identify strategies to address any identified limitations. The ANAO did not assess any of the 2022–23 performance statements auditees, including the department, as ‘mature’ in terms of their ability to use data and systems to generate and demonstrate complete and accurate performance results.⁴³

3.70 The same performance measure is included in the department’s 2023–24 Corporate Plan. There are no performance measures that report on progress in implementing the strategy.

National Soil Action Plan website

3.71 The national action plan states that the Australian Government will:

host a National Soil Action Plan portal on the department’s website which highlights and promotes work underway to address the action plan’s priorities and provide a regular e-newsletter for subscription.

3.72 The website was launched along with the national action plan on 28 November 2023.⁴⁴ It contains a high-level outline of different soil-related programs and projects being delivered by action plan partners under each priority action. The website does not contain information on progress in implementing the strategy’s goals and objectives.

43 Auditor-General Report No. 16 2023–24 *Audits of the Annual Performance Statements of Australian Government Entities — 2022–23*, paragraphs 3.14–3.19, available from <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-statements-audit/audits-the-annual-performance-statements-australian-government-entities-2022-23> [accessed 10 May 2024].

44 The portal is available on the department’s website: <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/natural-resources/soils/national-soil-action-plan>.

3.73 On 22 February 2024, the department proposed to the NSSISC that it will lead a review of the action plan's progress and provide a report to the NSSISC on a quarterly basis, and publish an annual progress report on the national action plan website. The NSSISC agreed for the department to commence developing an implementation progress tracker, which will be used to develop the quarterly and annual reports.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rona Mellor'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning.

Rona Mellor PSM
Acting Auditor-General

Canberra ACT
20 May 2024

Appendices

Appendix 1 Entity response



Australian Government
Department of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry

ADAM FENNESSY PSM
SECRETARY

19 April 2024

Ms Rona Mellor PSM
Acting Auditor-General for Australia
Australian National Audit Office
GPO Box 707
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Ms Mellor

Thank you for your email of 25 March 2024 providing the proposed audit report under section 19 of the *Auditor General Act 1997* on the 'Design and early implementation of the National Soil Strategy' and for the opportunity to respond to the report.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department) supports all of recommendations made by the ANAO and work is well underway to implement the recommendations.

The department will continue to adapt our work programs in line with the priorities of government, including as part of government's sustainable and climate-smart agriculture agenda, of which soil is an important component.

Please find enclosed the department's summarised response to the report and response to the recommendations.

Best wishes

Adam Fennessy PSM

Encl:

1. Department summary response to s19 audit report
2. Department response to recommendations

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Appendix 2 Improvements observed by the ANAO

1. The existence of independent external audit, and the accompanying potential for scrutiny improves performance. Improvements in administrative and management practices usually occur: in anticipation of ANAO audit activity; during an audit engagement; as interim findings are made; and/or after the audit has been completed and formal findings are communicated.

2. The Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit (JCPAA) has encouraged the ANAO to consider ways in which the ANAO could capture and describe some of these impacts. The ANAO's Corporate Plan states that the ANAO's annual performance statements will provide a narrative that will consider, amongst other matters, analysis of key improvements made by entities during a performance audit process based on information included in tabled performance audit reports.

3. Performance audits involve close engagement between the ANAO and the audited entity as well as other stakeholders involved in the program or activity being audited. Throughout the audit engagement, the ANAO outlines to the entity the preliminary audit findings, conclusions and potential audit recommendations. This ensures that final recommendations are appropriately targeted and encourages entities to take early remedial action on any identified matters during the course of an audit. Remedial actions entities may take during the audit include:

- strengthening governance arrangements;
- introducing or revising policies, strategies, guidelines or administrative processes; and
- initiating reviews or investigations.

4. In this context, the below action was observed by the ANAO during the course of the audit. It is not clear whether the action and/or the timing of the action was planned in response to proposed or actual audit activity. The ANAO has not sought to obtain assurance over the source of the action or whether it has been appropriately implemented.

- In December 2023, the department published the updated record management policies on its intranet (paragraph 2.21).
- In April 2024, the department updated its website to specify the link between the national action plan's priority actions and the strategy's overarching goals (paragraph 2.60).

Appendix 3 National Soil Strategy goals, objectives and progress measures

Objectives	Progress measures
Goal 1: Prioritise soil health	
1a: Recognise the value of soil.	Services provided by soil are recognised, understood, measured, mapped and valued within environmental, socio-cultural and economic accounting frameworks.
	Soil and the impact of an action or activity on soil is recognised as a critical consideration for relevant government portfolios, policy and programs.
1b: Strengthen leadership and partnerships to address national soil priorities.	Engagement across multiple jurisdictions, portfolios, industries, sectors and First Nations Peoples on soil-related matters is improved.
	Leadership and partnerships that increase cooperation and co-investment for joint soil programs across governments, industry, the private sector, First Nations Peoples and others are improved.
	National, regional and local coordination of soil activities is improved to increase leverage from past and present investments.
1c: Advocate the importance of soil.	An independent, influential and effective voice for soil health is continued by maintaining government support for a National Soils Advocate.
	Governments, industry, the private sector, First Nations Peoples and others have an increased knowledge and awareness of the importance of soil to Australia's environmental, socio-cultural and economic wellbeing.
1d: Improve Australia's international leadership in soil knowledge, awareness and management.	Australia effectively contributes to significant international fora to progress efforts to improve soil health.
	Australian soil policy, research, standards and other relevant information, skills and capabilities are shared with other countries, demonstrating leadership and commitment internationally.
	National soil data and information is publicly available in a format that supports Australia's international reporting obligations under international conventions.
Goal 2: Empower soil innovation and stewards	
2a: Promote soil stewardship.	The factors that motivate land managers to adopt better soil and landscape management practices are better understood and applied to program design.
	Initiatives that support land managers to adopt best-practice soil and landscape management practices are in place.
	Best-practice soil management is better promoted within and across industry boundaries.

Objectives	Progress measures
	<p>Soil information and tools are available to support land managers in the development and adoption of locally appropriate management practices.</p> <p>First Nations Peoples are engaged and employed in the planning, management and implementation of soil initiatives.</p>
2b: Optimise soil productivity, sustainability and resilience.	<p>Land managers are supported to make better soil management decisions through effective extension and knowledge management tools and services.</p> <p>Areas are identified where changes to soil management could significantly and sustainably increase agricultural productivity, environmental outcomes and the health and resilience of soil.</p> <p>Innovative soil management, science and technologies that enable sustainable productivity growth are supported.</p> <p>Trade and marketing opportunities for food, fibre, forestry and soil technologies are improved by demonstrating the use of sustainable soil management practice.</p>
2c: Help protect and enhance Australia's environment through effective soil management.	<p>An accurate assessment of the costs of soil degradation on the environment has been made.</p> <p>Land managers understand and mitigate the risks of their land management practices on the broader environment and community.</p> <p>A baseline of strategic soil assets (including 'at risk' soils) is identified, valued in land use planning frameworks and policy and utilised in decision making processes.</p>
2d: Increase and maintain soil organic carbon.	<p>Improved management of soil organic carbon is achieved through improved understanding of the mechanistic processes, the carbon storage potential of soil, its current status, and threshold levels of soil carbon loss at which irreversible impacts occur.</p> <p>Locations with the greatest potential to increase soil organic carbon stocks through the adoption and maintenance of appropriate management practices have been identified.</p> <p>There is an increased understanding of the costs and benefits of adopting different management and landscape practices attempting to increase soil organic carbon content.</p> <p>Effective, aligned approaches have been developed to promote the adoption of best management practices to increase soil organic carbon.</p> <p>A cost-effective way to measure, estimate and model soil organic carbon has been developed which will enable better monitoring of stocks at an appropriate scale and confidence.</p>
Goal 3: Strengthen soil knowledge and capability	
3a: Increase soil knowledge for better decisions.	The National Soil Monitoring Program to assess the condition of Australian soil and enable a commitment to long-term data collection is established.

Objectives	Progress measures
	<p>National standards for the generation, management and exchange of soil data and information have been developed.</p> <p>There is a national understanding of baseline soil condition, targets and trends that helps inform cross-sectoral decisions at the national, regional and local levels.</p> <p>Soil research that provides knowledge to improve productivity and sustainability is applied.</p>
3b: Measure benefits of improved soil management.	<p>Nationally consistent key performance indicators and methods are used to measure and report on the impact of soil investment on soil condition and trend.</p> <p>There is a better understanding of the relationship of soil condition and trend to land management practices, soil organisms and climate for different soil classes in different landscapes.</p>
3c: Make Australian soil information and data available.	<p>Soil data and information is captured, stored, managed and made available (where appropriate) through an agreed, nationally consistent approach that recognises stakeholders' needs and the multiple scales and uses for soil information.</p> <p>A coordinated national soil information framework is developed and maintained to improve accuracy, governance, accessibility and usability of soil data.</p>
3d: Build and retain diverse soil expertise.	<p>Prospective soil professionals show increased interest in, uptake of and greater retention of career opportunities in diverse soil-related disciplines.</p> <p>Universities, TAFEs and other suitably qualified providers have tailored qualifications to attract new students, and courses are better aligned to new career opportunities and industry needs.</p> <p>There is engagement with national and state curricular authorities to review the teaching of soil science in primary and secondary schools.</p> <p>Programs have been developed that appropriately engage with and apply Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Knowledge in soil science.</p> <p>Initiatives are in place to improve and support diversity in soil-related training and careers.</p>

Source: National Soil Strategy.

Appendix 4 National Soil Action Plan priority actions and statements of commitment

Priority actions	Statements of commitment
1. Develop an agreed national framework to support the measurement, monitoring, mapping, reporting and sharing of soil state and trend information, to inform best practice management, decision making and future investment in soil.	Develop a strong governance framework for soil information nationally to ensure soil information is collected and managed to agreed standards.
	Increase our knowledge of Australian soil through ongoing soil investigations and mapping programs.
	Ensure existing and new soil data and information is publicly accessible through the Australian National Soil Information System (ANSIS) – subject to privacy and permission levels – to inform future soil investment.
	Establish a national agreed set of soil health indicators for soil monitoring to report on national soil state and trends to provide the foundation for future national environmental and natural capital reporting.
	Promote and embed ANSIS as Australia’s national soil data system to inform best practice soil management and assist decision-making.
2. Partners to develop a holistic policy and strategy approach where soil function is recognised, valued, and protected for the environment, economy, food, infrastructure, health, biodiversity, and communities.	Acknowledge the critical importance of soil and its contribution when developing key public policies and strategies, including agriculture, climate change resilience, adaptation and mitigation and human and environmental health.
	Improve the alignment and integration of soil policies and strategies across different levels of governments.
	Improve soil advocacy.
	Increase the number of jurisdiction planning and land use codes of practice that consider new or additional soil protection measures.
	Consider the need for measure to protect, restore and better manage soil whenever opportunities to review existing or develop new related Commonwealth and state and territory legislation arise.
	Strengthen action on soil globally through the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation’s (FAO), Global Soil Partnership (GSP) and other international soil advocacy efforts.
3. Accelerate the adoption of land use and management practices that protects soil and improve soil condition trends.	Increase the number of land managers with access to extension activities, information and decision-making tools that support and demonstrate the benefits of improving land use practices for soil health.
	Share approaches that have been effective in increasing the adoption of land management practices to improve soil health and resilience to the impacts of climate change.
	Ensure regional NRM plans and strategies at the local and state level are consistent with the action plan and align to its priorities.

Priority actions	Statements of commitment
	<p>Review the investment framework for soil research and make suggestions to better target government investment toward programs and projects that align to action plan priorities.</p> <p>Engage a broader set of agricultural and rural industries on their role in helping to achieve this priority.</p>
<p>4. Identify and develop the soil workforce and capabilities needed to meet current and future challenges for Australia and the region.</p>	<p>Better promote the range of opportunities and careers in soil.</p> <p>Review soil education in the Australian curriculum and identify opportunities for new soil education programs.</p> <p>Assess the gaps, barriers and incentives for improving the soil workforce's knowledge and capacity and develop the scope of work required to address this workforce issue.</p> <p>Develop long-term, field-based, on-the-job soil training employment programs for recently graduated tertiary students.</p> <p>Understand new and emerging agricultural and environmental activities and the implications for soil workforce requirements by working closely with relevant organisations, including Soil Science Australia (SSA) and the Agribusiness Job and Skills Council.</p> <p>Support programs such as the SSA Certified Professional Soil Scientist and Registered Soil Practitioner programs to increase the pool of accredited trained soil scientists and programs, including the Soil Science Challenge, to address fundamental soil knowledge gaps.</p> <p>Support the capabilities needed in our region to improve soil management for human and environmental health, food security and climate adaptation through the GSP Pacific Soils Partnership, the Pacific Community and South Pacific Regional Environment Program.</p>

Source: National Soil Action Plan.

Appendix 5 Status of initiatives in the interim action plan — as at February 2024

Initiative	Allocated program funding ^a	Total funding spent or committed as at February 2024 ^a	Delivery method	Status	Progress and outcomes
Pilot Soil Monitoring and Incentives Program	\$54,420,000.00	\$3,362,108.00	Procurement — open tender	Program ended early	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 101 sampling jobs were completed (against a target of 5,400). Program was cut short due to adverse weather events and low uptake.
National Soil Data Review	\$2,000,000.00	\$2,000,000.00	Stage 1: Procurement — panel. Stage 2: Procurement — limited tender	Completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stage 1: produced reports that are available on request. These were not published on the department's website due to potential sensitivities. Stage 2: six states and territories have identified and assessed historical soil data sets (against a target of eight). Final report for the project outlined future steps and recommendations for the department, which are being considered.
Historical Soil Data Capture	\$21,000,000.00	\$5,361,545.39	Procurement — open tender	Program ended early	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 553 data owners submitted 291,203 soil test results into CSIRO containers (against a target of 750 data owners and 50,000 soil data sets). Project was shortened due to low uptake, following change in government in 2022.
Australian National Soil Information System (ANSIS)	\$15,000,000.00	\$15,000,000.00	Procurement — limited tender	Completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Five states and one non-government organisation have federated to ANSIS (against a target of all states and territories and three non-government organisations). Approximately \$6 million was received in the May 2023 Budget for the next phase of improvements, which has commenced (see Appendix 6).

Initiative	Allocated program funding ^a	Total funding spent or committed as at February 2024 ^a	Delivery method	Status	Progress and outcomes
National Land Management Classification System	\$615,000.00	\$615,000.00	Letter of Understanding with ABARES	Completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A National Land Management Classification System was developed and approved in October 2022. The system was not published as subsequent stakeholder engagement indicated that adoption is unlikely in its current form. In a June 2023 stakeholder engagement report, the department noted further funding is required to improve user-friendliness of the new system. The department advised the ANAO in September 2023 that it is not seeking additional funding.
Soil Science Challenge Grants	\$20,000,000.00	\$19,666,818.29	Grants — open competitive	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11 projects were awarded a total funding of \$19.7 million (excl. GST). Activities end in June 2025.
Enhancing Soil Education and Expertise	\$1,000,000.00	\$1,000,000.00	Grants — one-off ad-hoc	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As at April 2024, 29 applications were received (against a target of 30), with another 20 expected to be received by the end of the agreement in May 2024. The program has been varied to extend the activity end date to 31 May 2024.
Food Waste for Healthy Soils Fund	\$60,500,000.00	\$40,477,288.00	Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 25 projects were announced, with total Commonwealth funding amounting to \$40.5 million (excl. GST). There are five more projects to be announced.
		\$10,000,000.00	Grant — one-off ad hoc	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A one-off grant was awarded in September 2023 to End Food Waste Australia to support development of a nationwide behaviour change campaign to reduce household food waste. The project is scheduled to complete in mid-2025.

Initiative	Allocated program funding ^a	Total funding spent or committed as at February 2024 ^a	Delivery method	Status	Progress and outcomes
National Soil Carbon Innovation Challenge	\$39,895,313.00	\$39,706,273.00	Grants — open competitive	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were three rounds of funding. • 17 organisations received \$1.04 million (excl. GST) in the first round (Feasibility Study Grants). These projects have all concluded. • 8 projects received \$28.9 million (excl. GST) in the second round (Development and Demonstration Round 1 Grants). These projects will run until late 2024. • 5 projects received \$9.81 million (excl. GST) in the final round (Development and Demonstration Round 2 Grants). These projects are commencing and will run until late 2025.
Smart Farms Small Grants: Soil Extension Activities	\$18,000,000.00	\$17,804,403.97	Grants — mix of open competitive and direct	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nine direct grants and 32 competitive grants were awarded, totalling \$17.8 million (excl. GST). • The program has been varied to extend the activities to June 2024.
Future Drought Fund: Drought Resilient Soils and Landscapes	\$23,000,000.00	\$23,109,559.00	Grants — open competitive	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 grantees were awarded \$23.1 million (excl. GST). • Funding has been fully committed. There are no plans for a second round.
Indigenous Ranger Program	\$748,300,000.00	\$748,300,000.00	Grants — targeted (closed competitive)	In progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80 projects are approved for \$748 million (excl. GST) in funding from 2021–22 to 2027–28 for 128 ranger groups.

Note a: All figures exclude GST.

Source: ANAO analysis of implementation status of initiatives in the interim action plan.

Appendix 6 Status of soil initiatives funded in May 2023 Budget — as at February 2024

Initiative	Description	Funding	Status
Soil Health Information initiative	Design and deliver a new National Soil Monitoring Program (NSMP) to monitor soils nationally.	\$21,600,000	The project agreement for phase 1 of the NSMP (the design and preparation phase valued at \$1.8 million) has been executed with CSIRO. Phase 2 NSMP (project delivery) is currently under development. This contract will also be with CSIRO and valued at \$19.8 million. It is expected to be executed by May 2024.
	Data collected will be made publicly available on ANSIS, which will also be further enhanced.	\$6,000,000	A new project agreement and activity work plan with CSIRO was signed in December 2023.
Soil Capacity Building grants	Continue to support the Regional Soil Coordinators program.	\$6,200,000	The application for the two grant opportunities opened on 7 February 2024 and closed on 5 March 2024.
	Continue the National Soils Community of Practice to support networks for researchers, primary producers, and community groups to work together, and provide a forum for soil practitioners to share the latest soil science information and tools.	\$2,200,000	
Partnering to Implement the National Soil Action Plan	Funding for states and territories to deliver initiatives that contribute to priority actions of the national action plan.	\$20,000,000	The department received 23 project proposals from states and territories for consideration. The department has commenced negotiating Schedules to the Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations Federation Funding Agreement (Environment) with states and territories.

Source: ANAO analysis of departmental documentation.