

City growth put before habitat

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NEW housing developments on the outskirts of Sydney will not be subject to environmental laws that protect endangered plants and animals, in the latest move by the State Government to fast-track building in the north-western and south-western growth centres.

The Government has assessed the environmental value of the two areas, where up to 181,000 homes will be built, at the regional planning stage rather than assessing threatened species on individual housing developments. At the same time, it has committed \$530 million to protect 3800 hectares of native bush in Sydney's west.

The decision has delighted developers, who say it will speed up planning decisions and make homes more affordable, but dismayed environmentalists, who see it as little more than government greenwash.

The Assistant Environment Minister, Verity Firth, said landowners and the environment would benefit because an infrastructure levy on all future land releases within the growth centres would fund the purchase of land for reserves and national parks over 30 years. She said the plan for the growth centres was the first to be granted what the Government calls biodiversity certification. This aims to pinpoint key areas and species in need of protection through an all-encompassing assessment of a region instead of individual, site-specific impact assessments.

The move is in line with the Government's hopes to eventually replace the Threatened Species Conservation Act with a "bio-banking" scheme that allows developers to build on environmentally sensitive land if they

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THE STORY SO FAR

2005 State Government says by 2030 up to 40 per cent of new houses will be built on city's fringe. Growth Centres Commission set up to accelerate land releases.

Oct 2007 Levies cut to reduce cost of building homes in growth areas by \$25,000.

Dec 2007 Land for new housing can be cleared without a threatened species assessment.

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offset the damage by protecting plants and animals elsewhere. "The \$530 million will compensate for the vegetation that will be lost as we provide housing and infrastructure for Sydney's growing population," Ms Firth said. "The money will ... target the largest, most intact remains of Cumberland Plain areas for permanent protection, either as new public reserves or through perpetual conservation agreements between private landowners and the Environment Department." The Cumberland Plain Woodlands is the name for a distinct grouping of plants, including grey box and forest red gums, that once covered 30 per cent of the Sydney Basin. Today, the woodland covers less than 6 per cent, or 6400 hectares, scattered across the western suburbs.

The federal Department of Environment says the woodlands will not survive unless they are protected from development.

The NSW Urban Taskforce, a development lobby group, welcomed the announcement, saying individual housing developments would no longer be "bogged down" by endless rules.

"Red tape means that development applications often take up to nine to 12 months to get

resolved," said its chief executive, Aaron Gadiel. "Every day a project is held up, a developer has to pay interest on their debt and lose income on capital tied up in the project. This decision means quicker planning decisions and more affordable homes." But the director of the Total Environment Centre, Jeff Angel, said: "No matter how you dress it up, the endangered Cumberland Plain vegetation takes a giant hit and will be pushed further towards extinction ... The Urban Taskforce might bleat about red tape and suggest environmental results but really their actions in regard to the planning system show they have little interest in protecting threatened species and a sustainable city."