

Dieback Working Group Conference – Sep 2025

## **Dieback Detector Dogs**

Phytophthora dieback (dieback) is the most significant disease threat to native flora in the southwest of Western Australia. As there is no cure, accurate and early disease detection and mapping is critical to plan effective disease management and stop the spread. Dieback detection and mapping is currently undertaken by specially trained Interpreters. Diagnosis is confirmed through collection and analysis of soil samples. These methods are costly, labour-intensive and time-consuming, and don't allow for real-time analysis to improve hygiene and management in the field. In 2022, a pilot study conducted by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service with Tate Animal Training Enterprises confirmed that dogs could be used to detect *Phytophthora cinnamomi*. Following on from this success, a dieback detector dog consortium, led by the WA Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, secured funding from the Australian Government Saving Native Species program to further develop dieback detector dog capacity in WA and Tasmania. The project includes evaluating the dogs' effectiveness under both laboratory and field conditions, assessing their application across various sectors, and developing national guidelines to support their commercialisation. Currently their applications in laboratory soil sample testing, mapping disease boundaries, assessing threatened species translocation sites, screening nursery plants, hygiene checks during mining and forestry operations are being explored. Results show that dieback detector dogs have promising sensitivity in detecting *P. cinnamomi*. Two detector dogs, Milo and Kellie, have been trained by TATE Animal Training Enterprises and will become WA's first dieback detector dogs. WA handlers for Milo and Kellie were selected through a competitive grant process and will be available to contract to assist with dieback mapping, management and communication. Time permitting, a demonstration of Milo and Kellie at work with their handlers will be conducted as a part of the presentation to help people understand how the dogs work and where their strengths lie in the dieback management toolbox.