



# **Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline Parliamentary Hearing**

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# Acknowledgement of Country

- We acknowledge Ecological Consultants represented by ECA Vic work on a range of Traditional Lands across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.





A group of people at a social gathering, possibly a conference or networking event, with a semi-transparent text overlay. The background shows people in various attire, some holding drinks, in an outdoor or semi-outdoor setting with trees and buildings visible.

# Ecological Consultants Association of Victoria (ECA Vic)

**Who we are:**

- **Industry representative to government/industry, professional development**
- **133 paid members (Consultants, Associates, Students)**
- **611 subscribers**

**Our submission, informed by a survey of our members, provides on the ground ('from the coalface') insight**



## What ecological consultants do:

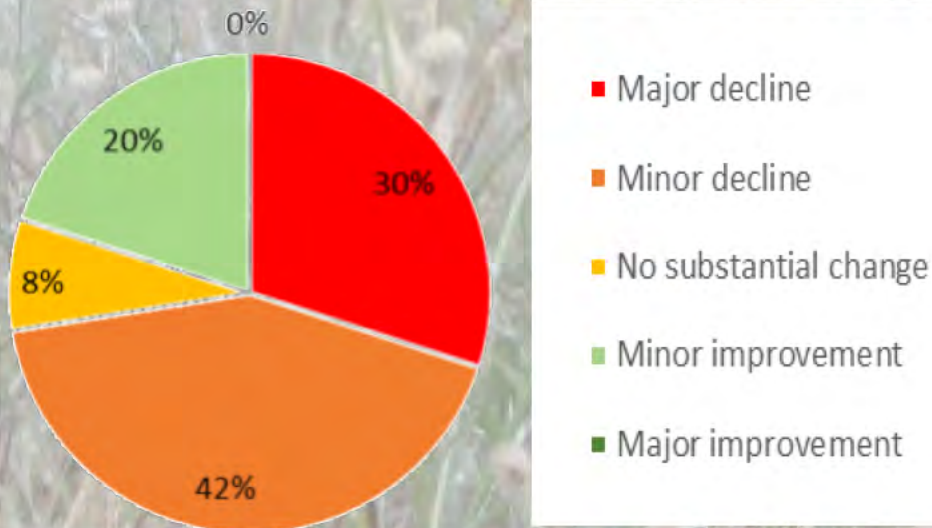
- Work on both private and public land for diverse range of clients
- Ecological monitoring (NRM works, threatened species populations)
- Research – many are recognised experts
- Development projects (range of scales: local – federal)
- Calculate ecological impacts and offset requirements
- Assess offset sites
- Environmental Management Plans
- Advise clients on planning, policy and legislation

Unique position: we bridge the very important gap between ‘developers’ and ‘policy makers’



# Key findings

- Management and monitoring programs aimed to improve biodiversity:
  - only 20% showed improvement
  - 80% showed declines or no change
  - Management insufficient for threats



## Threats many, varied

- Land clearing
- Pest plants, animals, pathogens
- Hydrology changes
- Exploitation - logging, mining, fishing
- Reduced connectivity, fragmentation
- Climate change



# Key findings

- **Legislation inadequate to reverse decline**

- **Native Vegetation Regulations:** offsetting locks in loss; accepted next step rather than last resort
- **FFG Act:** only applies to public land, under-utilised with key elements absent/barely used (discretionary)
- **EPBC Act:** provides strongest regulatory requirement to encourage minimisation, Victorian legislation is less effective
- **Wildlife Act:** does not adequately protect native wildlife (e.g. on development sites)

- **These acts:**

- Do not promote good environmental stewardship
- Rarely enforced, few rejections, little compliance, weak penalties
- Subject to potential influence by politics
- Largely seen as 'tick the box' exercise



# Recommendations

- 1. Investment
  - Jobs
  - Specialist biodiversity expertise in government agencies
  - On-ground works (private and public land)
- 2. Improve and use biodiversity legislation
  - Native Vegetation Regulations, FFG Act
- 3. Accountability
  - Transparency, monitoring, compliance



# 1. Investment

- Jobs (First Peoples and regional)
  - **Conservation land management roles**
    - Parks Victoria, Councils, Catchment Management Authorities and Melbourne Water, Trust for Nature and other private conservation organisations
  - **Specialist biodiversity expertise** in government authorities
    - Councils, DELWP departments (e.g. policy), Parks Victoria, Water Authorities, etc.
    - Metro and regional areas





# 1. Investment

- On-ground works
  - Long-term investments
  - Improved funding for trained and skilled Natural Resource Management contractors
  - Private land conservation organisations (e.g. Trust for Nature, Bush Heritage)
  - Stewardship incentives for conservation works on private land



## 2. Improve & Use Legislation

- FFG Amendment Act
  - Recent review of FFG Act statuses excluded 'Poorly Known' and 'Data Deficient' listed species
  - Amended Act is still discretionary (e.g. no mandated requirements for use of provisions)
  - Develop designated critical habitat maps, Action Statements, etc.



## 2. Improve & Use Biodiversity Legislation

- Native Vegetation Regulations
  - Decrease reliance on flawed models, favouring ground-truthed data.
  - Stronger requirement to Avoid and Minimise ecosystem losses. Offsetting to be used only as a very last resort.
  - Increase offset requirements to achieve No Net Loss and slow (halt?) ecosystem decline.





### 3. Accountability

- Improve transparency
  - Native Vegetation Regulations report on:
    - Clear and regular reporting on permitted, exempted and non-permitted losses
    - Monitoring results for offsets – specifics
  - Reporting on threatened species investments and outcomes





## 3. Accountability

- Improve compliance
  - Impact mitigation
  - Offset implementation
  - Include native vegetation and threatened species accountability in the Office of the Conservation Regulator
  - Prosecution of breaches



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