

Inquiry into Air Pollution in Victoria

by

Extinction Rebellion Darebin



Members of Extinction Rebellion protested the lack of action on the climate emergency by State Parliament in March 2021. The mock corpses drew attention to the fatal effects of air pollution by greenhouse gases, causing the climate emergency. Darebin activist Helen Bowman (on right of image) was the sole arrestee (photo by Julian Meehan).

Climate Crisis = Health Crisis. Photo by Leslie Cannold of Darebin Extinction Rebellion.



Introduction

Thank you for considering our response to Inquiry into Air Pollution in Victoria.

We represent Extinction Rebellion Darebin Local group.

Extinction Rebellion is a decentralised, international and politically non-partisan movement using non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to persuade governments to act justly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency. We are here for you!

Extinction Rebellion has expanded rapidly from humble beginnings in the UK in 2018, to now include 650 groups across 45 countries. We remain united in our commitment to pursuing the action necessary to avoid climate system tipping points, further biodiversity loss and the risk of social and ecological collapse.

Our local group meets weekly to discuss and plan non-violent direct actions addressing the climate emergency, which is technically fuelled by air pollution. Some members of the group have contributed decades of environmental and conservation volunteering to Landcare, TreeProject, Darebin Climate Action Now, Transition Darebin and Anti-Toxic Waste Alliance. For others, Extinction Rebellion is their first foray into environmental advocacy, driven to action by the dire consequences of the climate and extinction emergencies, and a sense of personal responsibility.

We live Darebin municipality, which was the first to declare a climate emergency.

Extinction Rebellion Darebin are parents of young children, teenagers and adults; we are Grandparents; we are nurses, teachers, tradespeople, university researchers, artists, carers and retired professionals. Collectively, we are committed to taking whatever action is necessary to ensure that this climate emergency is addressed and the future of our planet and our children is protected. Nothing less is acceptable.

Submission structure

Positive suggested actions for the state of Victoria are evidenced in hyperlinks, structured around this Inquiry's Terms of Reference and Extinction Rebellion's 3 demands, i.e.

1. TELL THE TRUTH

Government must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change.

2. ACT NOW

Government must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025.

3. BEYOND POLITICS

Government must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice.

Current Scenario

We are in a climate emergency.

The science is clear. The climate crisis is here. We face a environmental and economic devastation if the continued generation of greenhouse gases is not reined in.

The state of Victoria legislated the “Climate Change Act” in 2017 to set out a clear policy framework and a pathway to 2050 that is consistent with the Paris Agreement to keep global temperature rise less than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

Inquiry Terms of Reference (TOR)

- a) state-wide practical, real-time, cost-effective mitigation strategies;
- b) ensuring that Victorian air quality continues to track towards meeting or exceeding current international best practice standards and is enforced;
- c) the impact of economic and population growth on air pollution and health outcomes;
- d) strengthening commitments across all Victorian Government portfolios to reduce air pollution and minimise the impact on health;

Action: No new gas refineries, mining or export facilities.

Gas is a fossil fuel with climate-killing gas corporations currently calling in on their investment in political parties, under current State capture, as documented by Stephanie Tran and published by [Michael West](#).

The pursuit of new fossil fuel projects is in complete contrast to the actions required for greenhouse gas mitigation (TOR a). Investment in gas will lock in further emissions of powerful greenhouse gases that will accelerate global warming. This is the complete reverse of improving air quality toward best standards (TOR b) and reducing air pollution (TOR d). This week, [Michael Mazengarb](#) stated that Australia’s largest electricity companies and the Australian Energy Market Operator have rejected the economic arguments and assumptions of a ‘gas led recovery’.

The only energy industries we should be transitioning to and investing in, are clean energy sources - that is renewables. Citizens are committing our own money and lifestyle to renewable energy, and urge Government to support this. Real scenarios, relevant research and costings which demonstrate how to do renewable energy is available from local NGO [Beyond Zero Emissions](#).

Action:

Inform planned burns with evidence by measure air pollutants from Government mandated logging and fuel reduction fires. Consider their risks and benefits. Tell the truth.

The Victorian Government permits planned or prescribed burns in State forests after conversion to logging coupes and fuel reduction burns. Currently the State government fails to regulate air pollution from such deliberately lit forest fires.

There are two ways that air pollution from logging practices can be regulated under the existing *Environment Protection Act 1970*. The first is to designate public forest land marked for logging and private plantations as scheduled premises and require a licence to regulate discharges to the atmosphere. The *Environment Protection (Scheduled Premises) Regulations 2017* (Vic) state that premises that discharge or emit at least 100 kilograms per day of various air pollutants are not exempt from a licence, meaning that such premises must be licensed to discharge pollution into the atmosphere.² In developing the Draft Regulations, EPA and DELWP had an opportunity to assess the amount of air pollution from forest burns and require a licence for logged land that would be burned by designating this land as scheduled premises (*Environment Protection (Scheduled Premises) Regulations 2017* (Vic) Sch. 1., category L01.)

Secondly, at present, the *Environment Protection Act 1970* requires that discharges to air must comply with a declared State Environment Protection Policy and any standards prescribed under the Act for emissions to the atmosphere.³ The *State Environment Protection Policy (Air Quality Management)* contains a clause that requires the EPA – in partnership with relevant Government agencies, fire authorities, protection agencies and other stakeholders – to:

“develop a protocol for environmental management for managing the potential impacts of prescribed burning; develop measures to minimise the impacts of prescribed burning without compromising the protection of human life and property and the health of native ecosystems; and develop and promote practicable alternatives which can achieve equivalent benefits to the use of prescribed burning.”

Forests burns are likely to emit air pollution in amounts that meet or exceed the daily limits set for Australia, but in the absence of monitoring, we cannot know.

Failure to regulate air pollution from forest burns continues to be a regulatory gap that is detrimental to the environment, human health and survival. The lethality of air pollution is being understood, with new reports each week, [for example](#).

Telling the truth about levels of air pollution produced by State government planned and prescribed deliberate fires satisfies TOR b, ensure that international air quality standards are met.

Action: Enforce penalties on air polluters

When independent, accurate, local, transparent and timely pollution monitoring has been introduced as above, breaches to be effectively prosecuted by the State government. This will have the effect of discouraging air pollution and satisfy all of the terms of reference above, particularly the enforcement indicated in TOR b.

Action: Roll out some rolling stock of electric buses to control urban air pollution

Knowing what we now know about the [lethality](#) of particles less than 2.5 microns diameter (PM 2.5), the Victorian government needs to do more to limit this pollutant in heavily populated areas. Electric buses are popular in Canberra and do not emit carcinogenic diesel fumes or PM 2.5. This would be an immediate measure to benefit public health via air quality, and satisfies all of the four TOR, as well as Extinction Rebellion's demand to act now to address greenhouse gas emissions.

Action: Immediately cease logging of native forests

Victoria's state government has made the decision to end native forest logging. On the ground and despite this decision and devastating bushfires that destroyed over 30% of our forest, it is currently being felled and burnt just as fast as ever. Four decades of research by [ANU scientists](#) has demonstrated that Victoria's central highlands forests are the most carbon dense in the world, and that their logging releases huge amounts of carbon. Regrowth trees do not trap as much carbon daily, and also require more water.

Because native forest operations offer very few jobs and run at a loss to the state, transitioning these to plantations on private land is prudent and possible, and will improve air quality by precluding industrial logging burns.