

Submission to Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Issues of concern by FNCB:-

1. Inappropriate and ineffective fire prevention activities on public lands.
We urge the adoption of more sustainable traditional burning regimes which reduce the incidence of severe wildfires in the future.
2. Wetland loss.
Loss of wetlands specifically due to interruptions to natural streamflow from rampant housing developments in regional and rural towns.

We wish to see more stringent requirements placed on developers and councils to ensure water movement is not altered to the detriment of streams and wetlands. We'd also like to see greater accountability placed on councils where damage is caused, perhaps via fines imposed by the EPA.

3. Native Forests.
In May 2020, the federal court ruled that VicForests had breached national environmental protection laws when it logged the habitat of Leadbeater's Possums and Greater Gliders. VicForests has not been complying with the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 in respect of threatened species, particularly in applying the precautionary principle, and as a result has not been acting in accordance with their Regional Forest Agreement. We therefore request that the government abandon the West Regional Forest Agreement and conduct a review of all Regional Forest Agreements in wake of the landscape-scale fire and breaches of national environmental protection laws.

We request that the native forest logging industry make an earlier transition to plantation only timber production than the current 2030 plan.

We also request that VicForests stop using taxpayer dollars to subsidize the logging and destruction of public native forests and threatened species habitat. In 2014 the Victorian Government's logging agency VicForests was given management of forestry in the west and received a \$3.3 million grant in advance to run its so-called "Western Community Forestry". In their 2018–19 Annual Report, VicForests reported total revenue from western native forests was around \$700,000. State government funding to VicForests' "Western Community Forestry" in that same period was \$678,000. We submit that the \$3.3M grant should not be renewed to prop up the damaging logging industry in the region, when it expires this year.

4. Critically Endangered Grasslands.
Victoria has an array of highly endangered temperate grasslands and grassy eucalypt woodlands that are unique and full of threatened species. Once covering almost a third of Victoria, now just 2–5% of natural grasslands remain in small and fragmented pockets of remnant vegetation, making it one of the most endangered ecosystems in Australia.

As part of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment the Victorian government committed to establish by 2020, a 15,000-hectare Western Grassland Reserve (between Werribee and Melton) and a 1,200-hectare Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve (near Donnybrook), along with a range of other measures. 10 years later DELWP has still not met its commitments to

establish the reserves and has purchased only 10 % of just one reserve to date, while property developers have continued apace.

We seek the Parliamentary Inquiry to recommend that the Victorian Government:

- Recognise the importance of ensuring that all Victoria's diverse vegetation communities including unique grasslands are adequately represented and properly managed within the reserve system to better secure the future of threatened species, and
- Deliver on their promises to protect endangered temperate grasslands and grassy woodlands immediately, by meeting the commitments to establish the Western Grassland Reserve and the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve.

5. New national parks and nature reserves.

Over the last 150 years Victoria has developed an extensive network of national parks and conservation reserves, covering roughly 18% of the state (about 4.1 million hectares) including 70% of Victoria's coastline and 5% of state marine waters. However, there are still significant gaps to be filled on both public and private land.

A detailed analysis by the VNPA in 2010 identified the need to secure the permanent protection of around a further 3.1 million hectares of both public land (1.5 million hectares) and private land (1.7 million hectares). Various government reports have highlighted gaps. The top three Victorian areas with poor habitat representation include South West Victoria, and Central Victorian Uplands (this includes the current central west proposals for new parks near Daylesford, Beaufort, Avoca and Bendigo) Strzelecki Ranges and Gippsland Plains. This does not include areas with high numbers of threatened species such as the Central Highlands or East Gippsland or areas vulnerable to climate change and other threats like logging, which deserve better protection.

The last decade has been a low point in the creation of parks, with few areas being formally added to the park estate by either side of politics. The current Andrews Government has struggled to make a decision about proposals for 60,000 hectares of new national parks in Victoria's central west, in the Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Forests which is currently seeing logging and mining exploration in the Wombat and Mount Cole Forests. The central west forests are within the Central Victoria Uplands bioregion, which only has approximately 10% of the Ecological vegetation classes (EVC's) (units for assessing ecosystem representation) targets met. Of the 107 important EVC's identified in the central west investigation area, implementation of VEAC's proposals will significantly improve representation in the Comprehensive Adequate Reserves system (CAR) system, for 43 of these important EVC's. This will add up to 16,000 hectares of particular EVC's, either meeting or significantly adding to ecosystem representation targets.

The forests of the central west are home to 380 threatened species, and the Wombat Forest, near Daylesford, is a vital refuge for the Greater Glider, with a regionally significant population. A new national park here would secure long-term protection for this species that is in decline across much of the state. This is now increasingly important with at least a quarter of Greater Glider habitat in eastern Victoria having been impacted by the landscape scale fires.

The forests are also significant for many headwaters of many rivers providing water supply to northern and western Melbourne and will be important climate change refuges as species shift in a changing climate.

We request the Parliamentary Inquiry to recommend that the Victorian Government:

- Call on the government to make a decision on the proposals to create much needed 60,000 hectares of new national parks in Victoria's central west Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Forests to help better secure the future of threatened species such as the Greater Glider, Brush-tailed Phascogale and Mount Cole Grevillea,
- Highlight that Victoria was once a leader in the creation of national parks, but has now had one of lowest levels of new parks in a decade,
- Speed up the process of registering the status of Regional Parks which put the parks at risk of degradation due to the continuing processes that declaration of Regional Park status is meant to prevent and protect against. Creswick Regional Park and Woorekarung Regional Park are two local examples, and
- Initiate new Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Investigations or similar to fill significant gaps in the reserve system, including underrepresented habitat areas, areas with high numbers of threatened species and areas under threat.



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