

The Committee Manager  
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

To whom it may concern,

My name is Mark Feltrin.

I am a resident of Strath Creek in central Victoria situated on the Hume Plateau. I live in the forest and I went through Black Saturday. My background is 30 years in natural resource management around Australia. I represent an independent viewpoint whose life experience is both extensive and broad with involvement in biodiversity conservation, pest animal and pest plant management, forestry (particularly farm forestry), agriculture, renewable energy/carbon/biochar (via bio-energy pathways), fire and more I have worked with all levels of governments and many profit and non-profit organisations as well with indigenous and non-indigenous people alike. (Please refer to my attached CV).

In the Strath Creek region I have initiated, developed and acted as a steering committee member of two successful projects including the Strath Creek Biodiversity & Carbon Project in 2013 (\$270,000) and in 2016 the King Parrot Catchment Fox Control Project (KPCFC Project; \$45,000 to date).

The KPCFC Project has been a successful model and represents the most immediate and cost effective way to both improve terrestrial biodiversity and assist agricultural production in SE Australia. This project is modelled on DELWP's ARK program (carried out on state land), but the KPCFC Project is a model devised and tailored in the context of agriculture dominated by private land and rural communities, and the cross-jurisdictional nature of these landscapes. The success of the project is because it does what jurisdictions are not able to do— bring all parties to work effectively together on common challenges in a multi-jurisdictional and multi-disciplinary manner. Its strength is in “joined-up thinking”; the appropriate way to deal with pest animal species in a landscape, and many other landscapes challenges. But a question arises - why does it take outside people to do the work of what institutions should be inherently doing and should have been doing years ago?

I am writing this brief message to the inquiry into ecosystem decline to state that land management is a failing undertaking in Victoria. Intuitions are broadly inefficient, ineffective and can often be seen as incompetent, to the consternation of good people that still do exist. I'm also fearful these “good” people are in decline with the ascendancy of a bureaucratic and managerial class more interested in box ticking. Instead of recognition of common landscape challenges that have no borders (i.e. pest animal, pest plant, fire....) that should be creating conjunct efficiencies and “joined-up thinking” solutions, instead bureaucratic processes and self-interest are holding back effective actions.

Broadly speaking, land management in Victoria is increasingly incompetently applied (often employing individuals with poor training and little formal qualifications), guided by: risk aversion, social media emotive influence, politicization at many levels, limited institutional memory, overuse of volunteerism and contractors (with a real lack of willingness to get hands dirty) and, in real terms, limited viable and secure employment. When jobs do arise, particularly in jurisdictional organisations, meritocracy of skills and experience is often over-ridden by diversity, gender, age, friendships, and internal political considerations. I have given lectures at University and Tafe to students who have asked about employment to which I have responded that the reality is very limited work opportunities.

Each one of the elements I have described can be personally detailed with stories to underline these on-ground truths. These realities have a direct bearing on ecosystem decline. The issue of ecosystem decline is less about technical solutions and more about sociological limitations.

Australia is typically a poor place for innovation. Land management has seen some innovation success, particularly in the form of the adoption of LandCare, but unfortunately this past success has not kept pace with the challenges of land management through to the present, with large intense infernos (a significant driver of localised extinction) and the broader decline of biodiversity as proof of the inadequacy particularly in light of climate-change present and future realities.

To practically underline the institutional schism:

- Landcare's main task is to plant trees, so why does it not foster (and invest in) carbon or other international environmental trading schemes to derive income?
- The CFA puts out fires in summer, so why does it not do burn-offs in cooler seasons? Furthermore, why does DELWP not facilitate or leverage this potential capacity?
- Why has the adoption of production trees/agroforestry (seen internationally as beneficial for both climate and biodiversity) not permeated ALL private land at all scales as a normative part of agriculture?
- Why has agriculture not adopted sustainable renewable energy in the form of bio-energy, as like in modern European nations?
- Why is fox and cat eradication (the most immediate and cost effective positive impact to terrestrial biodiversity) not prioritized by all agencies? (the CMA's encountered at the time of KPFC Project inception did not even have fox strategies whilst proclaiming the need to address biodiversity)
- Why have integrated land management (ILM) strategies, pushed globally by UNEP and FAO agencies, not been institutionally absorbed in Victoria.
- For the amount of area and potential on offer in regional areas, why is there not a far larger and more sustainable, self-generated and significant broad based NRM economy in rural Victoria?

I would like to add to this last point and the consternation that the decline of ecosystems is not just signalling biodiversity and earth system flaws in human interaction with our landscape but that the viable solution is not a cost drag to the public purse but a drive for more and better productivity that can be actualised in employment that is viable in career terms (rural young people maturing in the same profession) and directed employment to rural communities. There is not just a lack of understanding, but also will and vision. It is clear that singular interests (also from certain farming groups) are distorting longer term potentials to the detriment of not just biological realities but also important social factors like rural liveability. KPCFC Projects synergistic approach has combined biodiversity gains with farmer saving in particularly lamb stock losses which at the time pre COVID -19 where at high market price levels. There was a time the Victorian government orchestrated fox control over the state for sheep production reasons. It is now clear it had a significant positive biodiversity side effect.

It is no surprise to anyone who has worked in this field for any meaningful amount of time that Victoria has ended up in the situation we are in. And the “situation” also entailing that Victorians have become fearful from fire which has cost Victoria alone billions of dollars in losses that could have been mitigated by proactive land management means creating real economic and adaption benefits for rural communities.

While on the issue of fire and native forests. Our typical dry sclerophyll forests response to intense inferno fires is by accumulating higher carbon stocks via high tree stem count responses creating worrying feedback loops, to be encountered into the future. This vegetation response needs clear management particularly where people co-exist in these regions. The management pathways include; thermal (fire), chemical (spraying), and mechanical (forestry) approaches. More reactive adaption by forests near to communities need human interventions, exploration and innovation strategies. These strategies also have biodiversity benefits as intense inferno fires are localised extinction events. The forests I describe do not operate in healthy ways just viewed from accumulated upper limit high carbon volumes. High stem count forests typically have dense canopies shading out and limiting the far higher flora diversity found on the forest floor and middle stories, again another limiting factor to biodiversity. I see this in practise in my forest where I am applying an ecological vegetation management plan I devised (and largely ignored by my council) and enact by thinning my forest.

A current catch cry in the current culture wars in the USA is “DEFUND THE POLICE”. This statement is better understood as the anger and frustration of a community grappling with perceived incompetence and lack of modern adaption. In Victoria, can we not say DEFUND ENVIROMENT DEPARTMENTS? These guiding institutions have failed in their role to actuate the preservation and adaption of both biodiversity and

people in our rural regions, in an age where, “the environment”, “climate change” and “biodiversity loss” has been in normal parlance for now 3 decades. Why has so much discussion and focus over a long period of time equated to so little substantive achievement on-ground? This systemic failure by governments (left and right) and other significant groups questions the lack of fundamental understanding and in consequence, the massive waste of public funds. To highlight this, DELWP is colloquially known as department of name change. As new governments endlessly fluctuate funding and focus in a tail chasing exercise, on ground needs remain. To be clear the environmental challenges are of larger timescales than the short government cycles that exist. All sides of governments need to come together to formulate more singular mission planning with many solutions found through pragmatic synergistic thinking.

Victoria needs to institutionally change its approach to our landscape, but is held back by forces that don't want to change or worse....does not know how.

Regards

Mark Feltrin

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