

Submission into the Inquiry into Ecosystems Decline in Victoria

Dear committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Ecosystems Decline in Victoria.

This week, Greenpeace released shocking new research that shows air pollution caused by Australia's 22 ageing coal-fired power stations is responsible for 800 premature deaths, 14,000 asthma symptoms among children and 850 cases of low birth weight in newborns each year. The devastating health impacts of burning coal are clear, and governments must make polluters clean up their act.

The Victorian government should immediately revoke the delay of the Environment Protection Act 2018. Initially due to come into force on 1 July, the Act has been placed on hold potentially until the end of 2021 to ease the impact on industry during the COVID pandemic. Yet again, it appears that the government is choosing the profits of big polluters over the health and protection of the community. The last five weeks have seen several toxic fires at waste plants in Melbourne. No one's health should be put at risk due to preventable pollution. If the EP Act had been in place these events could have been avoided.

Several environment and resident groups oppose the AGL/APA gas import terminal and pipeline project proposed to be built at Crib Point, Westernport Bay, Victoria. Westernport Bay is a wetland of international importance, home to vulnerable, endangered and critically endangered whales, turtles, fish and waterbirds, and yet sadly the project seems likely to go ahead..

The state's beautiful natural places and wildlife suffered a devastating blow in the summer bushfires and are under increasing threat from climate change and other pressures. We have an opportunity to ensure that Victoria's nature laws are strong and get to the core of addressing ecosystem decline, Stronger environmental protections will provide the backbone for a healthier future for Victoria, ensuring the people, places and wildlife we love can thrive for generations to come.

Victoria's environmental laws should be the foundation for addressing ecosystem decline in the state which has been a steady and ongoing process since colonisation. Key contributing drivers include land clearing, impacts of urban expansion, over extraction of natural resources such as water and timber, and the introduction of invasive species. Further to this climate change is now amplifying these threats which makes addressing this issue much more urgent.

The Inquiry into ecosystems decline in Victoria should take into account the following reforms to help ensure that we make the most of this opportunity:

1. Prevent the harmful impacts of new development. While the Morrison government is in a hurry to handover responsibilities under our national environmental law - the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act - to state governments, we know that Victorian laws are not fit for purpose. Victoria's planning laws and environmental impact assessment laws need to be brought up to date to make sure that infrastructure projects properly account for their impacts on Victoria's biodiversity before we even think about handing over responsibilities.
2. Stop the drivers of ecosystem decline. Nature protection laws should be a safety net. We need to address the pressure on Victorian biodiversity protection laws by removing key drivers of ecosystem decline such as native forest logging, unsustainable use of water resources, and the impact of invasive species. Stopping native forest logging sooner rather than later, more sustainable water resource management, and new fit for purpose invasive species management legislation are needed of ecosystem decline is to be turned around.
3. Resource and implement the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988. The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act is the centrepiece of Victoria's biodiversity conservation legislation. Reforms last year have "refreshed and modernised" the Act, updating the objectives, adding a new duty for public authorities, and introducing new conservation tools. However, none of these reforms will be worth the paper that they're written on if they are not properly implemented.
4. Make sure our nature protection laws are climate ready. The past summer's devastating bushfires demonstrate the terrible impact that climate change can have on our wonderful natural places and wildlife. Climate change presents a massive challenge to Victorian ecosystems. Failing to address climate change stops our laws working effectively. Climate adaptation must be a part of our legal frameworks.
5. Improve compliance and enforcement with our environmental laws. A significant change was made last year when, following a damning review of timber harvesting regulation in Victoria, the government established the Office of Conservation the Regulator. This move, while a welcome recognition that the implementation and enforcement of our nature protection laws needs to be improved, does not go far enough. We need an independent conservation regulator

with a clear legislative foundation and all the legal powers needed to ensure Victoria's conservation laws are compiled with.

6. Protect Victoria's precious wildlife. Victoria's Wildlife Act 1975 is out of date and no longer meets community expectations when it comes to protecting our precious wildlife. It should be reformed to make sure that it meets the Victorian community's expectations for how our valued wildlife will be protected and preserved for future generations.

7. Boost ecosystem restoration. Nature protection laws alone will not be enough – our laws must also guide and encourage the restoration of Victoria's ecosystems. With climate change already having a terrible impact on Victorian flora and fauna, the challenge is urgent. Whether it be on public land or private land, our land management must be subject to appropriate obligations to ensure that ecological processes and natural assets are there for future generations to enjoy.

Strong nature protection laws will provide the backbone for a healthier future for Victoria's ecosystems, ensuring the people, places and wildlife we love can thrive for generations to come.

Thank you for considering my submission.