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The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Environment and Planning
Parliament House, EAST MELBOURNE
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SUBMISSION: Ecosystems Decline in Victoria

EEG is pleased to see this enquiry taking place. EEG has a membership of over 350, a supporter base of over 1,000 and an interactive following on social media of over 11,500. We have been speaking out for the East Gippsland region's forests, wildlife and ecosystems for almost forty years.

Our group and its supporters look forward to an effective outcome from this enquiry and its findings and recommendations.

The recent [score of less than 1/10](#) for Australia's environmental protections by ANU researchers and professors is a shocking indictment on the disregard our successive governments have had for Australia's ecosystems, waterways, wildlife and habitats. We need to see Victoria lead the way to start turning this appalling situation around.

We are in an era of catastrophic climatic conditions, there is a decline in water quality and quantity, weakening ecosystem health and robustness, wildlife decline and habitat impoverishment at all levels, from soils and invertebrates to Mountain Ash and top-order native predators such as our owls.

The degraded state of Victoria's environment is also catastrophic, yet decisions are still being made to push ecosystems and species further towards collapse. The shocking [report](#) on [grassland management](#) is just one recent example of the disregard shown more widely.

It is clear to us and our members that the unparalleled influence on all governments by vested interests including logging is a major driver for this degradation.

Political impediments to ecosystem restoration and to halting environmental decline

Many of Victoria's environment laws are weak and ambiguous. The Government enforcement agencies are not effective.

The recent Federal Court judgement in the Leadbeater's Possum case has illustrated that logging industry demands are influencing government decisions at the expense of our ever-ailing environment, to the extent of causing the government to authorise illegal acts.

While we appreciate the slight increase in funding for DELWP's compliance section last year, it is still woefully inadequate.

Resources and expertise have been regularly stripped from the environment section at a time when there have been increased assaults on natural areas and habitats.

Prosecution over the slaughter of over 400 Wedge-tailed eagles is an example of a case which should have succeeded but didn't.

Stronger laws must be written with decisive input from qualified biologists and scientists and not rendered valueless by weak or aspirational wording.

Reforms to the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act were welcome but, without resourcing, have had no effect. This is despite adding a new duty for public authorities, and new conservation tools. Without resourcing and serious intent, the reforms are window dressing.

Setting up the Office of the Conservation Regulator was welcomed but has proven to be more of a brick wall for deflecting community reports and concerns than a helpful regulator with integrity.

Bushfires

The environmental losses caused by the catastrophic bushfires in both protected and unprotected forests called for a major effort to calculate those losses for each area and ecosystem. Every effort must be made to restore and protect the unburnt areas of the environment yet we are seeing the exact opposite with current logging.

Logging continues in forests known to support listed threatened wildlife and rare plants. This is an outrageous situation!

There is understandable anguish over the burning of millions/billions of native animals and loss of habitat, including National Parks, reserves and rainforests.

The handling of this bushfire was both brilliant and appalling. There must be a review of the unnecessary added burning of intact ecosystems by fire managers. They show zero understanding of or regard for environmental values and an appalling ignorance of the protective nature of enclosed healthy vegetation types. The culture and management of fire within government agencies is overdue to be investigated and overhauled. Instead the outdated belief systems are rewarded.

In places such as Conran and coastal areas, 'fire management' bordered on arson.

Planned burning dogma must be reviewed. It has caused extreme ecological losses over the years with up to 350,000ha a year deliberately set alight. These are commonly as hot and destructive as serious bushfires. And they occur more regularly in reserves and protected conservation areas. This needs investigating.

We estimate that of all the planned burns carried out, the vast majority, possibly 90%, had absolutely no moderating effect at all. In fact [planned burns](#) are now seen to do more harm than good in many forest types. The science is overwhelming and far outweighs a drone photo claimed to be taken by Garry Squires along one track of unknown whereabouts.

Planned burns, like all fires, open up the canopy, dry soils and reduce damp, ground level microclimates. There is an increased wind speed when understorey is

removed in planned burns. Burning also destroys the rich humus layer which supports the bottom of the forest's food chain and thousands of animals. Burnt forests deprive surviving ground mammals, reptiles and amphibians of shelter and food, leaving them more vulnerable to predation by feral animals. Ecology and related [sciences](#) should inform fire management.

Hazardous tree removal must also be properly reviewed and appropriate risk assessments applied to all trees deemed hazardous along road and tracks. Currently any contracted machinery operator is given the task of determining hazardous trees. There could be a major conflict of interest which needs reviewing.

Tree removal has added unnecessarily to the trauma suffered by locals to see their surviving landscapes demolished, as well as the loss of important habitat trees, which further reduces the resilience of the ecosystem.

This degradation, together with worsening climate chaos, leaves our natural areas in a perilous state.

The current simplistic and outdated fire-promoting culture within DELWP must be questioned and reset, using science and research. It is counterproductive. We cannot afford to play politics. Placating a fearful public with fairy stories and simplistic messages has come at an extreme cost to our struggling ecosystems.

Forests and wildlife

For the past 50 years, Victoria's logging regime has effectively converted public forests into industrial tree crops for a predominantly single commercial purpose—pulpwood. The woodchip market has driven management and volumes.

With the legality of logging in threatened species habitat under question due to the recent Federal Court decision in the Leadbeater's Possum case, logging should stop, the logging regime reviewed and forest management changed.

The vast areas of [young regrowth forests from clearfell logging have](#) burnt more fiercely in the recent bushfires, caused massive and permanent (under the current

logging regime) loss of carbon stores, reduced water yield and quality, and caused ongoing decline in native species such as [gliders](#), owls and quolls. This needs to be acknowledged and remedied. Political blindfolds need to be removed.

Fires are now so frequent, that our beautiful ash forests are described as the walking dead. [Salvage logging burnt areas](#) is clearly putting the commercial interests of one large pulping company over the long-term ecological interests of native forests trying to recover from an incredibly severe fire season. The public is ready for a serious about-face on priorities and the realities that inform decision making. The CFMMEU must not dictate government policy.

Old growth forests and older, larger trees have been almost obliterated from the landscape now – due to clearfell logging, major bushfires and planned fires. This is despite their role in providing critical nesting and roosting hollows for hollow-dependent animals has finally been acknowledged. However, their [role as both fire and climate moderators](#) is again overlooked by govt land managers despite the research and peer reviewed science. Protection should go down to the level of mature forests, not just old growth.

This government's decision to [renew the failed Regional Forest Agreements](#), regardless of the 'modernised' version, is causing ongoing forest destruction.

This is the most pressing environmental issue related to the collapse of ecosystem services. Forest ecosystem services include water purification and yield, stream and lakes health, wildlife habitat, climate moderation, carbon sequestration and soil health.

Of the state forests in East Gippsland, 85% was impacted by fire, some severely and possibly beyond recovery. Other recoveries could take decades. Threatened species have not been assessed as to their likely current or future survival prospects. Even a preliminary assessment screams for an urgent end to logging.

We hope this enquiry's report and recommendations will refer to the multiple failures of VicForests to obtain even the weakest of FSC certificates indicating the appalling breaches of basic legal requirements and community expectations.

We would like to see this enquiry examine the very thorough judgment by Justice Mortimer of the Federal Court in the Possums case, as to how VicForests, DELWP and Victorian laws, codes, management plans, procedures and prescriptions have failed two threatened species. It is a major case and cannot be ignored.

The Greater Glider has declined in population by 80% over the last 20 years and the other being critically endangered (Leadbeaters Possum). These findings alone speak volumes of the urgent need for robust and urgent reform of laws and subordinate laws that are claimed to protect our ecosystems and species.

A small sample of species that have recently been highlighted as at great risk of population crashes or extinctions include:

- * The [Platypus](#) - one step closer to being listed as vulnerable to extinction in Victoria.

- * [Galaxias](#) fish species – are vulnerable to a wide range of impacts including bushfires

- * [Threatened reptiles](#) – it was once considered that East Gippsland was a refuge for threatened reptiles but in a single summer, the fires changed that. Scientists say the loss of millions of reptiles in Australia's summer bushfires will have a huge impact on ecosystems and biodiversity.

The invasive species problem urgently needs far more funds allocated to the humane control of the worst of feral animals. Research into target specific and effective control of deer, cats, brumbies, pigs and foxes should be given priority and generously resourced to start getting this problem under control.

Indigenous issues

Environment East Gippsland welcomes the Land Use Activity Agreement with the Taungurung Corporation, and the forthcoming settlement of their native title claim.

Upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria is a worthy objective.

We hope that Taungurung Corporation will have absolute power to say 'no' to destructive proposals on their land and this be the end of it, rather than simply collect compensation for the destruction of country.

We sincerely hope the Taungurung agreement and others to follow takes serious heed of Traditional Owners' direction as to land management.

Conclusions

As a progressive state on many social issues, Victoria should have strong environment laws, accompanied by an appropriately resourced compliance section.

This government has seen that where it has taken decisive action on progressive issues, it has been rewarded by public approval, despite (and even encouraged by) the derision of vested interests and other pro-destruction voices.

The need for urgent reform of environment protection to reverse devastating decline is now *critical*.

The current Morrison government's plan to wipe their hands of national environmental oversight is astonishing but in keeping with many similar backward leaps. While Victoria still maintains weak, obsolete and in many instances unenforceable legislation, this would be a total disaster akin to nuking what is so special in this state.

Thank you for considering our submission and we look forward to a new approach to ecosystem protection and restoration in this term of government.

Liz Ingham

Secretary