

I wish to make a submission for the “Inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria” as a Landcare Facilitator on behalf of Upper Goulburn Landcare Network (UGLN), upon the request of the Committee of Management.

We live in a picturesque and diverse landscape, from the mountains of Kinglake and Cathedral Ranges to the Goulburn River floodplain, however the biodiversity of this region is under threat from the actions of the forestry industry and the inaction of Government to adequately manage and fund pest plant and animal species control.

(a) the extent of the decline of Victoria’s biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts;

Climate change is now a term that we hear daily and we can no longer claim ignorance on the impact of our actions on our environment. There is sufficient evidence supporting the claims of extensive loss of habitat, exponential pest plant and animal species growth and rapidly evolving climate change, that all claims of importance on economic growth become redundant in the face of the ecological crisis.

Weed and pest invasion degrade habitat quality and result in biodiversity decline by outcompeting native plants and native species and climate change exacerbates the problem because it disrupts or weakens native ecological communities and will favour invasive species.

The ongoing destruction by the timber industry, combined with climate change effects, causes drying out of our native forests risking further bushfires and stressing the resilience of the ecosystem; further threatening a range of habitat for endangered species including the Leadbeater’s Possum, the Sooty Owl, the Greater Glider and more.

Landcare Groups in our area work tirelessly towards securing grant funding to revegetate degraded areas, only to have the planting decimated by deer, rabbits or feral goats. Many local producers endure the same fate. Phil and Christine Challen from Little River Wines in Taggerty suffered utter destruction of their vines by deer over 3 nights, causing a loss of more than 6 tonnes of fruit production and a loss of income for 2 years.

At a basic level, the likely impact on all people if we cannot maintain a balanced biodiverse range of native flora and fauna within our ecosystem, is a rapidly reduced amount of productive land to maintain our current levels of consumption.

(b) the adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria’s environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species;

The EPBC Act is severely flawed and urgently needs strengthening so that it fulfils its purpose to protect threatened wildlife species and their habitat. Most of the recommendations to improve the EPBC Act from the first review in 2009 have still not been implemented.

Despite the enormous environmental impacts of the 2019-20 fires, the Victorian Government renewed all of its Regional Forest Agreements for another 10 years in order to allow the government-backed logging enterprise, VicForests, to be exempt from national environmental protection laws while it continues its unnecessary environmental destruction.

The degradation of our native forests, combined with the clearing of native vegetation for agriculture, construction and residential development is causing such extensive habitat loss that we

are seeing a considerable decline in native flora and fauna. Victoria has a shameful 63% of known species on the Threatened Species Advisory List and there is no concerted state-wide effort to restore habitat and species survival.

The legislative framework may be adequate on paper in many regards, however the on-ground implementation is vastly inadequate. Private landholders are not adequately supported, and a lack of land management education results in illegal land clearing, leading to habitat destruction and removal of threatened species.

Under the [Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994](#) (CaLP Act) it is a landowner's legal responsibility to control all declared weeds on their property, yet there is no enforcement of the CaLP Act in our Shire. Funding urgently needs to be provided to local governments that need it, like ours, so that they can effectively run a Pest Plant Compliance Program and enforce the measures in the CaLP Act.

Many local landholders do fulfil their pest species control obligations, but find they discover the species soon return as their neighbours employ no eradication methods. Ken Deacon, a landholder from the Rubicon Valley, is constantly managing his blackberry spread, which he describes as a losing battle because his property adjoins the Rubicon State Forest, where nothing is being done to control the species.

There also needs to be an adequate declaration of the pest plant and animal species in Victoria, specifically on the feral deer population. They are causing destruction in Victoria's state forests and national parks, and rather than being managed as a serious pest, deer are protected under the Wildlife Act 1975 in order to maintain recreational hunting interests. There also seems to have been a downgrading of declared weeds in our region because the problem is simply too big with Paterson's curse and St John's Wort being key examples of this.

(c) the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems;

Through our Landcare volunteer group projects, we aim to continually protect and enhance the local native environment, as well as agricultural land, through revegetation, pest plant and animal control, habitat construction and monitoring, among other activities, however we find our effectiveness increasingly limited by the lack of ongoing funding.

The Murrindindi Shire suffers from rising deer, rabbit, fox, goat and feral cat populations, as well as the recent expanding threat of Queensland Fruit Fly and the uphill battle we face with woody weed control in the region. The Council has inadequate funding for an environmental taskforce, leaving volunteer groups to wade through endless paperwork, grant applications, restrictions and approvals before being able to implement any on ground action.

Landcare's holly control program in Narbethong and the Number Two Creek rehabilitation project in Kinglake are two long term examples of communities and government agencies working together to transform native vegetation that was severely dominated and degraded by weeds into high value conservation areas that now support threatened plant and animal species.

UGLN's King Parrot Catchment Fox Control Project and DELWP's Southern Ark Project have also proven that when collaboration and sufficient funding is provided for pest animal control programs then it is possible to manage pests and achieve a great improvement in native biodiversity as well as agricultural outcomes.

Programs like the Green Army make an amazing, tangible difference to the targeted landscape, however they need to be long term, permanent programs with ongoing funding. The environment is not something we can “fix” and then move on to the next problem area.

(d) legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts;

We need:

- A Government that keeps the environment as the core value in all policy decisions.
- To urgently transition from fossil fuels to renewables, localise our food production and reduce waste production and transportation.
- To have a concerted Government initiative for an ongoing, permanent focus on facilitating ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria and a reduced dependence on volunteer groups.
- To have area wide management of pest plant and animal species, with significantly expanded funding and planning for control measures and mitigating impacts. In addition, specific programs to engage private landholders through education, funding and compliance programs.
- To urgently bring forward the transition of the native forest logging industry to plantation only timber production, not wait until 2030.
- A more thorough long-term monitoring program to get a true understanding of any unexpected changes in the landscape and within ecosystems. Furthermore, we need to study how our flora and fauna are coping with the impacts of climate change, followed up with on ground action.
- To promptly and effectively address any threats observed such as habitat loss, weeds and pest animals to these threatened populations.

(e) opportunities to restore Victoria’s environment while upholding First Peoples’ connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria

The Taungurung Settlement Agreement will strengthen the culture and land management practices of the First Peoples in this region. The Wurundjeri Narrap Natural Resource Management (NRM) team have proven that indigenous NRM teams can work highly effectively and the Taungurung community in the Goulburn catchment are looking at the Wurundjeri model as inspiration for establishing their own NRM team.

These teams will help manage the natural areas on their traditional country by undertaking NRM activities such as the use of cultural burning techniques, which have proved highly successfully in local Landcare projects, including regenerating many significant remnant vegetation sites with the guidance and assistance of Taungurung representatives.

The Taungurung Settlement Agreement is a step in the right direction to providing more employment opportunities, particularly for First People, however we need to focus even more on creating employment within the environment and regenerative agriculture sector. The global pandemic, combined with a renewed focus on climate change, has highlighted the need for our community to operate on a more localised system. We need to be able to produce more of our own food and renewable energy requirements and we need to protect and enhance the local environment to ensure biodiversity within the landscape.