

Dr Graeme Cross



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Dear Environment and Planning Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry on the decline of Victoria's ecosystems and measures to restore habitats and populations of threatened and endangered species.

I am making a submission as a member of the public because I am very concerned about the perilous health of many parts of Victoria's environment.

I am very supportive of the findings of the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability's State of Environment Report (August 2019) and was dismayed to note that the Government has failed to respond to the Report with a plan of action within the mandated 12 months.

It is vitally important for the Victorian Government and MPs from all parties to take action to protect and restore our environment so that it is not lost for future generations. Last year's report into the state of the Victorian environment showed that it was going backwards in 30% of surveyed areas. This is an alarming trend that requires proactive policy and action to reverse.

In addition to the areas highlighted in the Report, my key concern is the ongoing deforestation and land clearing in Victoria, the most cleared state in Australia.

VicForests has repeatedly operated in breach of the code of practice that governs forest management in Victoria<sup>1</sup>, illegally logging old growth forests. Furthermore, the declining state of biodiversity in Victoria was made profoundly worse with the 2019/2020 Black Summer fires, which burned 1.4 million hectares in Victoria, destroying more than half of the habitat for many rare and threatened Victorian animals and plants. The combination of Government-sanctioned illegal logging and bushfires has been a disaster for what little old growth forest remains in this state.

There are four actions that I recommend for the consideration of the Committee to address Victoria's deforestation crisis:

1. At a time when the state's old growth forests, native flora and fauna are under increased stress and threat of extinction due to climate change and bush fire damage, end native forest logging now, not in a gradual phased plan until 2030.  
An immediate transition plan, with government support for forestry workers, towns

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.judgments.fedcourt.gov.au/judgments/Judgments/fca/single/2020/2020fca0705>

and the industry, should be implemented. The Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office estimates this would save the Victorian budget \$192 million.<sup>2</sup>

2. The Victorian Government should be held to its commitment to provide new grassland and woodland reserves by 2020,<sup>3</sup> purchasing the required area of grassland and woodland reserves outlined in the Melbourne Strategic Assessment Plan and fully restoring these areas.
3. Actively support the restoration of private land through the use of a revolving fund, or similar mechanism, to purchase, restore and resell private land for conservation purposes. This approach has been successfully carried out by organisations such as Bush Heritage and Trust for Nature and would significantly benefit grassland, woodland and forest restoration with Government support.
4. Strengthen the Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act so that the Environment Minister no longer has the discretion to prevent environmental destruction but must act to prevent or limit commercial or government activities that threaten the environment. This is particularly critical given the Federal Government's plans to devolve the Commonwealth's legal responsibilities under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act to the states.

While the focus of local, state and federal governments is currently on COVID-19, this does not provide an excuse for the Victorian Government to ignore the parlous state of our environment, and I look forward to seeing strong action from this committee, and hopefully the Victoria Government, to protect and restore Victoria's environment.

I am happy for my submission to be made public.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/13/ending-logging-in-victoria-now-would-save-taxpayers-192m-budget-office-estimates>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/madness-how-governments-failed-victoria-s-endangered-grasslands-20200723-p55ewf.html>