

Biodiversity Inquiry Victoria – BE BOLD! Merri Action For Forests

<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-lc/article/4452>

Merri Action For Forests is a new group of people who have settled in the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri, who come together to defend Victoria’s forests in this time of climate emergency. We demand that State of Victoria uses its power to stop all habitat destruction by VicForests, and address the climate crisis by transitioning from fossil fuels to renewables. State government has powers over State forests, gas exploration and mining, and power generation. We urge decision makers to intervene at this historic moment to protect species. We address the terms of reference as follows:

a) Victoria’s Biodiversity

Victoria leads the world in mammalian species [extinction](#) (1), but during this [biodiversity collapse](#), lacks the ecologists to measure, and the conservation effort that could protect species (2). Past State Government’s removal of the ecology staff results in Victoria’s [biodiversity indicators](#) not being measured (3). The [United Nations](#) state that the climate emergency threatens biodiversity (4). Already threatened species in Victoria had further habitat destruction with the 2019/20 bushfires, in addition to their direct deaths (5). Ward’s group (5) showed how these [mega fires](#) devastated species and forests and were exacerbated by the climate emergency. Horrifying estimates of the 3 billion bushfire-related wildlife deaths have recently been published by the [BBC](#). We must preserve what habitat is left for our iconic and endangered native wildlife. State Government can do this.

(b) Adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria’s environment

Victoria has the [Office of the Environmental Regulator](#) , which is incapable of compelling VicForests to operate within the law, recent court cases brought by environmentalists have shown (6). Environmental groups cannot be expected to do the Government’s work generating enough Court decisions to force the required environmental protection for biodiversity, particularly endangered species.

The Victorian Government has power to protect the environment, particularly State forests, but has vacated its responsibility by rolling over Regional Forest Agreements, which exempt State forest industrial logging from environment protection. This arrangement locks in biodiversity loss. We call for the values of biodiversity and climate protection to be given precedence, and the Regional Forest Agreement cancelled. World-leading ecologists call for “more stringent protection” of forested lands, in response to the bushfires, climate and extinction emergencies (7).

(c) Adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria’s ecosystems

Past Victorian Governments have stripped out the ecology and conservation workforce (2), and restoring these jobs and careers will be necessary to achieve protection and restoration of Victoria’s ecosystems. Funding gas exploration and forest destruction are not programs that we support. Nor do these programs support a safe climate or protect biodiversity. Current Victorian government funded programs as they stand, are damaging our ecosystems and making bushfires more likely. Victoria unfortunately leads the world in mammalian extinction, so we recommend urgent transition to safe renewable forestry and energy practices.

(d) Legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions

Victoria can immediately protect threatened ecosystems by de-funding VicForests. There is massive scope for re-forestation in public lands and plantations on private land, which could address biodiversity loss through habitat restoration. Further benefits include drawing down carbon dioxide to mitigate climate, and ensuring water and oxygen supplies into the future. Mountain Ash forests, the target species of VicForests, are the most [carbon dense](#) in the world, and must be protected. The just transition to renewable power and sustainable fibre production will require real funded investment, which will be much cheaper than the current trajectory of ecological collapse. The subsidies to fossil fuel industries and lack of a Future Fund are becoming widely known, and State Government needs to extricate itself from these poisonous and damaging arrangements.

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

Aboriginal people and groups wish to retain their ancestral lands. Ideally, both land and people would benefit, but it is not for us non-Aboriginal people to say. Diverse employment opportunities in rural and regional Victoria, such as The Slipway at Lakes Entrance exemplify local tourism with jobs for artists, eco projects, hospitality, food and beverage and co-operatives. The current State Government has achieved wonderful outcomes with transition with the [La Trobe Valley Authority](#). The just transition for local workers from forestry and fossil fuels to sustainable long-term meaningful work is a project the Victorian Government could be proud of.

References

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