Submission from Sue McKinnon to the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee

Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads

My submission relates to the entire of Vic Roads responsibilities on Country roads – i.e. including their responsibilities for roadside reserve management.

Vic Roads responsibility includes management of roadside reserves as well as trafficable areas, the inquiry should consider the management of these reserves as well as the trafficable areas. Road reserves in Victoria add up to about 500,000 Hectares, making Vic Roads one of the largest public land managers in Victoria. Furthermore, close to 300,000 Ha of roadside reserves lies within degraded landscapes, making it particularly essential for the survival of many threatened species.

Environmental Management

It is essential that the manager of roads understands the responsibility to care for the flora and fauna of the road reserves as well as the transit through these reserves. The small environment management group in Vic Roads is not sufficient for the environmental management task. Vic Roads or any new body formed needs a larger environment department, with more professional qualified environmental managers.

Ecological degradation is occuring under Vic Roads through the removal of old and very old trees. In most cases in the country, this removal causes devastation of landscape, and death of animals reliant on these trees.

Such removals can not be replaced by planting. Old trees provide vast quantities of nectar and pollen for nectar feeding birds, mammals and insects. This provision is more consistent and efficient in old trees than in young trees. Old trees attract vastly more insects for insectivores than younger trees. Hollows can take up to 150 years to begin to form. Surface area is greater in older trees, providing a safer and more

efficient feed source for animals than a number of young trees where movement between trees is required for nourishment.

Vic Roads does not consider options to tree removal in many cases so removes trees unnecessarily.

Management of roadside reserves requires an ongoing commitment to ensure the manager is aware of the value of these reserves and manages to increase that value over time.

**Communications**

Tree removal on country roads occurs without warning. Residents and travellers are devastated when the shade and beauty of their roads are destroyed. In many cases this also affects the tourism in the area.

**Personal experience**

Despite my being a property owner in the Heathcote region and a member of the Conservation Management Network, I received no notification of Vic Roads removal of a significant number of Very large Old Trees on the Heathcote - Costerfield Rd. The removals negate all of the work that residents and fellow conservationists do in the area. As a minimum all landholders in the shire, and all landcare, Friends of - and conservation groups must be informed of pending vegetation removals well before they occur and be provided with the opportunity to engage, and discuss rationale and possible alternatives.

I also received no notification or explanation of the marking with an ominous X by Vic Roads of a large number of Old and Very Old Trees along the Heathcote - Nagambie Rd. This took some time to investigate and the marks were found to have been placed there by a Vic Roads manager with no arboricultural training. The marks were subsequently removed, but if residents had not expressed alarm, these magnificent old trees may have been removed unnecessarily.

**Wider community concern evident**

Outcry of the environmental destruction of enormous scale seen currently on the Western Highway, at Ravenswood, on the Princes Highway – east and west of Melbourne, and at other environmental hotspots like Rushworth, Cathcart, and many around the state we don’t even know of. The lone Lemon Scented Gum on Flemington Rd has galvanised support for environment protection under threat from roadworks from the powerful and well-resourced inner-city folk.

**Consultation**

Vic Roads or the new manager must ensure a baseline consultation process; destruction of country roadside vegetation often occurs with no consultation due to
the sparse population of many country roads and the failure of Vic Roads to adequately inform community of its plans

Must provide for auditing of environmental reports of Vic Roads and other authorities; Vic Roads has underreported proposed tree removals at planning stage of the Western Highway, Ravenswood and Yan Yean Rd projects. Such underreporting at planning stage has resulted in permit approvals without assessment of correct environmental data. (Recent underreporting of Plane Tree removals on Hoddle St was also a concern for city residents and travellers.

Yours

Sue McKinnon