Submission to Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee
Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads

To Whom It May Concern,

Parklands Albury Wodonga thanks the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee for the opportunity to input to the Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads.

Our submission is over page.

Regards

Ant Packer
Community Ranger
Parklands Albury Wodonga – *bushparks and trails connecting community*

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To Whom It May Concern,

Parklands Albury Wodonga thanks the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee for the opportunity to input to the Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads.

Parklands Albury Wodonga (PAW) is a not-for-profit community managed organisation that works in partnership with over 100 community, business, government, and friends groups in managing public land (including roadsides) for conservation, heritage and recreation outcomes.

PAW is also Committee of Management / Lessee of 2,300 hectares of Crown land in Wodonga, Indigo and Towong Shire Councils, with at least 40km of these corridors abutting VicRoads land.

Below are comments on the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry.

1. the effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads;

Our main roads are some of the most substantial in maintaining biodiversity across the state and in some cases the last remaining corridors for the movement of native species and genetic exchange in many areas. Over the years, VicRoads has done minimal maintenance work and slashing of these roadside corridors. This is perhaps one of the reasons why some of these roadsides remain in good environmental condition.

Recommendations for VicRoads:

a) Focus maintenance works along the road verges, with minimal works on the rest of these corridors;

b) Develop roadside management policies and enforcement to protect these key biodiversity corridors. Policies such as control of environmental weeds, stopping firewood harvesting, protecting large hollow bearing trees and limiting landholder clearing / planting of exotic species; and

c) Rationalise slashing, such as along the Hume Freeway between Melbourne and Wodonga. In recent years, VicRoads has responded to pressure to manage fuel loads by slashing the entire roadside corridor, rather than just sections of this key corridor. This recent shift in approach by VicRoads to fuel management poses significant risks in spreading new and emerging weeds (eg Chilean Needle Grass) by contractors undertaking the slashing work. The slashing also adversely impacts on native vegetation and habitat for threatened species, as fallen logs and leaf litter are cleared. Over time, the slashing of native grasses just prior to the seeding period will mean a shift from summer growing native grasses (with low fuel levels) to higher fuel level exotic grasses and hence ongoing higher maintenance costs, and loss of remnant bushland for our threatened species.

2. the existing funding model and its lack of effectiveness for country Victoria;

PAW is the community public land manager for 2,300 hectares of Crown land in Wodonga, Indigo and Towong Shire Councils, with at least 40km of these corridors abutting VicRoads land. For the past two decades, the lack of VicRoads funding for roadside maintenance has meant that vegetation management such as weed control and mosaic burning is undertaken and funded by community.

Environmental burns undertaken periodically, but not too frequently, are a valuable tool in restoring and maintaining high conservation value grasslands and threatened species, such as various Orchid species. The North East Victoria Country Fire Authority units invest significant resources (volunteer
time) into planning and undertaking fuel reduction burns along VicRoads corridors, which abut Crown land. In recent years, VicRoads has funded Traffic Control for these volunteer delivered environmental burns. However, there has been no consistent commitment from VicRoads to fund the increasing costs of Traffic Management Plans and the hire of Traffic Controllers.

PAW has partnered with local landcare groups to undertake weed control on both high conservation value VicRoads roadsides as well as VicRoads roadsides with thick infestations of blackberries. The funding for time and chemicals has been a mix of community contributions and one-off landcare grants.

PAW and partner organisations deliver a range of community events that utilize VicRoads roads. The time that these event permits take to process and the associated traffic management costs have grown considerably in recent years.

**Recommendations for VicRoads:**

a) Allocate annual budget for traffic control management plans and traffic controllers, to support local Country Fire Authority fuel reduction burns;

b) Allocate annual Good Neighbour program to financially support community groups and neighbours to maintain priority sections of VicRoads roadsides, so that these key biodiversity corridors are protected and enhanced, supporting the Victorian Government’s Biodiversity Recovery Plan 2030.

c) Allocate annual budget for off-road pedestrian / cycle paths / rail trails. This fund needs to be accessible to local government and not-for-profit organisations to enable delivery of community cycling projects. Rural and remote Victorians struggle to compete for infrastructure funding with the needs of the growing urban areas around Melbourne and other larger regional cities.

d) Allocate resources (staff) to process event applications in a timely manner and reassess whether the level of traffic control management requested is commensurate to the relatively low risk events.

3. **the lack of consultation with regional communities and their subsequent lack of input into prioritising which roads are in dire need of repair; and**

PAW has had limited interaction with VicRoads over the years. Requests are either dismissed take years to be responded to.

**Recommendations for VicRoads:**

a) Improve response time and responsiveness to community, business and community group input.

4. **the option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body.**

The issues in regional Victoria are different to metropolitan areas. However, there are efficiencies in scale.

**Recommendation for VicRoads:**

a) The establishment of units within VicRoads that focus on Metropolitan issues and Country issues is surely more efficient and effective use of limited funds than establishing two separate entities with two separate administration functions?

Thank you for your time in considering this submission.

Parklands Albury Wodonga – *bushparks and trails connecting community*