

Jim Walker submission to the Inquiry into the Impact of the State Government's decision to change the Urban Growth Boundary.

Suicide or sustainability?

On the 19th of May this year the Victorian Planning Minister, Mr Justin Madden, announced there would be yet another extension of Melbourne's urban growth 'boundary,' this time mainly to the west. He said the increase in the area considered for urban expansion came because of new information on the volcanic plains vegetation of this area.

"We now know the grasslands are not as prolific in this area as originally thought. This allows the Government to consider land use and transport that may be improved by the current investigation area," said Mr Madden in his media release.

This badly expressed *non-sequiter*, possibly the result of the Minister trying to reconcile the demands of the financial and development lobbies with the inevitable environmental destruction, indicates the government does not have any policies (unless policies include completing extermination of native grassland ecosystems).

The proposed westward extensions, together with more northward extensions of Melbourne's urban ocean will obliterate much of the last and best remnants of Victoria's critically endangered volcanic plains grasslands.

The developers want reserved native grasslands that fall within the new urban growth boundary to be used for housing, and government suggests offsets for the loss of these grasslands will be new larger grassland reserves further away from the city limits. There is little native grassland left to put in reserve. The government's answer to that is that it will purchase suitable sites and recreate native grassland.

In the audit of Australia's terrestrial biodiversity in 2002¹ the Victorian Volcanic Plains (VVP) was ranked in the highest stress class. Only one per cent of the Plains Grassland and Grassy Woodland that once covered three-quarters of the region remains, and much of this is degraded. Sixty-five species are listed as nationally threatened, and 173 are listed as threatened in Victoria. Twelve are listed as extinct.

In 1841, George Augustus Robinson, the Protector of Aborigines, noted that the basalt plain in Western Victoria known as Spring Plains was covered with millions of Murnong (the Yam Daisy *Microseris lanceolata*) and described women "*spread over the plains as far as I could see them — and each had a load as much as she could carry*"²

The volcanic plains of western Victoria are the third biggest in the world, and the rich soil carried vast areas of rich native grasslands at that time. The early entrepreneurs in their haste to claim the bounty ran vast flocks of sheep and herds of cattle on the land, which was not accustomed to hard hooves or the grazing habits of ungulates. Stock soon grazed out the succulent forbes or trampled them. The Yam Daisy was relished by sheep. Watercourses were mired by stock and planted with willows. Aboriginal languages and culture were deliberately destroyed, their land management and thousands of years of acculturation, adaptation, and knowledge ignored.

The Brumby Government claims urban expansion is required to satisfy the demand for housing by Melbourne's rapidly growing population. Both Federal and State governments promote population growth, so the claim is disingenuous. The first Victorian proposal to cope with this population growth 'problem' was to increase urban density – the 2030 vision – by allowing more high-rise development within the existing city boundaries to accommodate an extra one million people.

The second proposal was to increase Urban Growth Boundaries (UGB). The reason given for expanding the UGB is that there is too much popular resistance to high-rise urban development within existing urban boundaries. We now have the worst outcome, which is the adoption of both solutions, because high-rise development is occurring within the city, albeit more slowly than suits the developers. Thus, planning is in place to expand Melbourne's population by at least two million people in the next few decades – one million within existing boundaries, and another million on the outskirts.

New and better grasslands?

The Victorian Government's Strategic Impact Assessment Report proposes land less than 150 hectares in area will not be protected, regardless of its conservation value, and the new reserves are to be two areas west of Melbourne, but these areas do not replicate the remnant grassland Environmental Vegetation Classes which will be obliterated by urban growth, especially to the north.

The track record in enhancement and creation of grasslands is not good. John Morgan in a 1998 study of tube-stock plantings in three Victorian native grassland sites found that most species failed to recruit. Broad-scale native plant establishment techniques on highly degraded sites have proved effective but whether this has recreated what was there originally can only be guessed at. Whether enhanced or recreated grassland systems will survive in the long term is not known.

Translocation is often unsuccessful. An attempt was made, during construction of the Eastlink Freeway, to translocate some endangered grassy wetland vegetation. The attempt failed miserably, mainly because the hydrology of the site was changed due to Eastlink earthworks acting as a barrier to overland flow of surface water, which had previously maintained the wetland.

Offsets are a common way of trying to mitigate the impacts of development on native vegetation, but are only useful where there is some vegetation to be found as a replacement for what will be destroyed. The Victorian Government is proposing 15,000 hectares of restored and recreated native grassland as compensation for remnants (at least 7,000ha.) obliterated by developers. I wonder if this will happen? Not likely, going by past performance. For grassy native vegetation there has been a net loss of about 1,150 hectares per year over the period 1994 to 2004.³

Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain are Federally listed. The Victorian system of native vegetation evaluation is not the same as native vegetation assessment under the EPBC Act. It is possible that grasslands that do not qualify as a remnant patch under the Victorian framework will trigger the EPBC Act.

A new vision?

There was originally 870,000 ha of native grassland on the Victorian western volcanic plains according to the UGB study. So at least 87,000ha of Victoria's volcanic plains grasslands should be in reserve under a Comprehensive Adequate and Representative (CAR) system. CAR reserves are

one of the tools of conservation signed up for by Australia under the International Convention on Biodiversity.

As well as satisfying international obligations, larger grassland reserves would allow for reintroduction of native fauna – dingoes, quolls, bandicoots, bettongs, kangaroos, wallabies, emus, invertebrates etc. No ecosystem is complete or fully functional without its associated fauna. But we had better maintain the existing reserves, as these are established and there is no good reason to destroy them.

Australia's temperate grasslands do not attract public sympathy, and local and international visitors, because there are no large temperate native grassland ecosystems in existence in Victoria or elsewhere in south-east Australia. Victoria's remnant native grasslands are tiny patches, largely sterile of native animal life. Compare the vast grasslands of Africa where there is still large numbers of native animals.

Other Issues

There was 30 days consultation on native vegetation issues, and that has finished. Given the scale of the proposals, and the diverse and complex issues involved in assessing possible impacts, the time frame was far too short.

A great deal of the work of maintaining and restoring the existing native grassland reserves has been done by volunteers. The message to all these volunteers from government is that, in many cases, all their good work and faith in a lasting outcome will have gone for nought, if reserves are bulldozed to make way for more suburbs. Volunteers may want to review their commitment.

Inevitably, some of the costs of extending the urban boundary will fall on all existing residents of Melbourne and Victoria. For example, access to open space for existing Melbourne residents will shrink e.g. the loss of existing grassland reserves close to the suburbs. What will be the benefits for existing residents? The cost of building infrastructure will fall partly on all Victorians e.g. more road traffic will be generated, and thus more and bigger roads will be needed. Demand for already scarce resources, such as water, will increase. Greenhouse emissions will multiply. Native species will continue to decline and disappear, the genetic resources lost forever.

1. (NLWRA, 2002a)
2. (Presland, 1980).
3. *Native Vegetation Net Gain Accounting: First Approximation Report*, Department of Sustainability and Environment, April 2008

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12 October 2009

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