

Mordialloc Freeway Submission 2019

FRIENDS OF EDITHVALE-SEAFORD WETLANDS Inc



Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Inc (FESWI) is one of many community groups across Australia working to protect and raise awareness of the environmental value of local habitat with its beauty and diversity.

FESWI hosts hundreds of visitors each year. These include students, curious passersby, enthusiastic bird observers, photographers and visitors who simply wish to spend some time enjoying the tranquillity of life on the wetland from our wonderful bird hide on the water's edge. Our website and Facebook page connect with and inform bird enthusiasts worldwide.

These wetlands achieved global recognition in the 1990's when registered by the Ramsar Convention. This was on the basis of its population of international migratory waders, some of which are vulnerable species. Importantly, also, it offers a refuge for the threatened Australasian Bittern of which around 12 individuals are regularly sighted there.

Our organisation attests to the Ramsarstated vision *"to maintain an international network of wetlands which are important to the conservation of global biological diversity....."* We have a real responsibility here, particularly as we learn only too often of habitat degradation elsewhere on the globe resulting in diminishing bird numbers and species loss.FESWI's goal is to ensure these precious wetland communities continue to thrive.

Firstly, it is important to understand that Edithvale and Seaford Wetlands although not adjoining are linked, as are the wetlands in the project area, as integral parts of a network, which has been labelled by Birdlife Australia as the Carrum Wetlands Important Bird Area (IBA).

This IBA extends from the wetlands of the Eastern Treatment Plant (ETP) at Carrum Downs, through to the Braeside Park and Woodlands Wetlands (as explained and depicted in Richard Loyn's evidence to this hearing.) There is a synergy at work within this complex array of sites across the former Carrum Lowlands all supporting marvellous biodiversity and rich habitat over which a multitude of bird species range seeking favorable feeding conditions, eg the Sandpipers will seek receding shallow mud flats, which provide abundant invertebrates, for which Edithvale is famous, while Snipe prefers the longer grasses at the edges.

When conditions are right these areas provide a haven for thriving bird populations. Of primary significance for these wetlands are the migratory waders that fly in from as far as northern Europe, Alaska and Japan annually to escapetheir winter, egthe Sharp-tailed Sandpiper which amazingly makes a journey of 12,000 km from Siberia each year,and importantly the threatened Australasian Bittern.

The summer of 2018/19 was an amazing year for Sharp-tailed Sandpipers with Edithvale and surrounds hosting more than 3,000 'sharpies' for a short time, this being about 5% of the world population.... we owe it to the rest of the world to keep these sharpies safe and well fed whilst they are here. The 'sharpies' were spread between the Eastern Treatment Plant, Edithvale and Seaford Wetlands and possibly Braeside Park and the bird counters were keeping track of them on a weekly basis. The birds fed at Seaford up until early January and then moved into the more natural ponds at the ETP and Edithvale wetlands ... the ponds at the ETP dried up very quickly and the birds moved to Edithvale until the water and food ran out there there is the probability they then moved to Braeside where the wetland was drying out a more slowly.

Although these birds and others that feed and breed at the wetlands can move around we are rapidly running out of "other places" for them to go, for instance a small, but very productive Melbourne Water wetland on the corner of Thompson and Rossiter Roads has just been filled in to make way for a solar farm. The report for this project made mention of the fact that the Bitterns don't nest there, but failed to recognise that the birds have to feed somewhere in order to breed. Another great little wet grassland area the Snipe used to feed in on Learmonth Road, in the Kingston Green Wedge, is now the Pony Club's cross country paddock and is mown regularly. (local bird expert Alison Kuitert, pers comm.)

The continuing threat of habitat loss and cumulative effects of predicted disturbance from the initial freeway construction, the physical barrier of the raised embankment and acoustic wall, traffic including large commercial vehicles moving at high speeds, the footprint of the project robbing natural habitat, continual traffic noise drowning out bird calls, and the light and air pollution caused by the increased traffic must surely diminish what has largely been a nature reserve until now.

Maintaining and extending ecological connectivity across the project area and surrounds, we believe, is important for the long term viability of some species and may also aid the adaptation of others to climate change where previous habitat conditions are altered unfavorably. Governments should take every opportunity to aid protection, management and restoration of ecosystems.

FESWI have a concern about the disruption the proposed freeway will cause to connectivity over the extent of this wetland cluster due to resulting restricted flyways of certain bird species, eg, the magnificent Australasian Bittern, which has been observed moving frequently from wetland to wetland. A six lane freeway will no doubt deter birds from moving through this corridor to a considerable extent. Birds described as lumbering in their habit and not agile in flight eg cranes, swans and bitterns will be vulnerable to speeding trucks and other high motor vehicles even with a high and solid fauna barrier as is proposed. The freeway plan acknowledges that bird mortalities will occur and no amount of mitigation can totally avoid injury and mortality rates of these vulnerable, and in some cases, highly endangered species. There are no less than 13 migratory birds recorded (including the Latham's Snipe, Sandpiper Curlew) in the 11 report (see EES Chap 10, conclusion),

Large areas of undisturbed wetlands are important for the Australian Bittern's survival. The cumulative effects of disturbance by this project will also diminish this environment for all resident native fauna.

It should be noted that the numbers of these birds are decreasing around the world and that the Edithvale-Seaforth Wetlands, and the cluster of manmade wetlands which, although small, are vital if this decline is to be arrested. It is estimated that only one quarter of the world's known population of Latham's Snipe remains and the numbers of Australasian Bittern is down to between 1,000 and 2,500, of which 13 have been in residence at Edithvale and range over the wetlands in the IBA, including Braeside Park and Woodlands Wetlands.

The wetland sanctuary in Edithvale also offers a permanent or temporary haven to around 113 species of birds (Birdlife Survey 2017 – 2018) and is also important for frogs, reptiles, bats, possums, water rats and macroinvertebrates.

Suggested mitigation aimed at reducing the freeway lighting and lighting from cars on the freeway near the wetlands and Braeside Park is questionable. There is worldwide evidence that migratory birds in low light actually confuse and mistake low lit roadways as watery rivers, particularly after a rain period when puddles appear on roads.

The fact is, this freeway plan acknowledges that bird mortalities will occur (EES Report- Ch 10-39) and that endangered species will be at risk.

Preferred use of the open space in the Freeway alignment is being debated at this hearing. It is plain to see that this envisaged six lane highway built on a 1- 2m embankment with bridge and interchange crossings to a height of 10m would present a most imposing physical and visual feature on the landscape, and with its continual drone of traffic noise, would be to some extent a deterrent to wildlife movement through and across this corridor, not only for bushland creatures, but sadly for certain higher flying water birds as well.

Our ' Friends' share a passion for nature and place high value on the role that human interaction with the natural world plays in maintaining and enhancing personal and societal wellbeing. We support a growing awareness that planning for development of the built environment, and in this case transport infrastructure, must go hand in hand with informed decisions regarding environmental effects which will extend for generations to come, and from which there will be no going back:

- loss or degradation of habitat quality ie of air, land and water
- habitat fragmentation and loss of connectivity within the habitat range of valued fauna and flora
- detrimental impact on the human population residing, working and visiting the area

This hearing has principally been about ascertaining, and where possible minimising detrimental effects of this project. It has also been looking at juggling competing interests of road users, residents, factory owners, workers and visitors to the area who have differing needs and concerns and of course the ecology . This has exposed some real challenges. The

MRPV are seeking to avoid damage and appease all by this process, yet for every solution a new problem arises.

Many of our birds move around at night and light pollution either during or post construction could be a problem as the route the birds would take when moving between Edithvale/Seaford and Braeside would be right along the path of the road. Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Swamp hens, Coots, Swans, Rails and Crakes move between wetlands during the night as well as daylight hours.

Groundwater modelling is complex and experts to this inquiry haven't agreed on the adequacy of baseline data obtained nor provision for an overall ground water audit and clear regime of ground water monitoring into the future along and beyond the freeway alignment. This is of concern as any unintended mobilisation of leachates from landfill, gases or other toxins caused by the construction method of driven piles has the potential for polluting the water table and so risking the wetlands hydrology.

A proposed boardwalk would attract active use eg sailing boats, and promote connectivity between communities at the Waterways bridge site yet would impact further on the aquatic habitat by compounding shadowing and creating activity, noise and possibly littering at the water level.

A 3m plus specially designed solid acoustic fauna wall to lessen the occurrence of bird fatalities has been mooted and yet this would destroy the aim of giving road users a sense connection with the waterways, parkland and surrounds during their trip, and – more important from our point of view - would impact on the connectivity for the birds that now fly between the wetlands. It is unknown if these birds will even return in numbers after such a disruption as the lengthy major construction works.

As FESWI is for biodiversity and preservation of birdlife habitat the proposed Freeway is of great concern. The footprint of the nine kilometre multi-lane freeway with 'on' and 'off' ramps encroaches on natural habitat which provides refuge for a variety of fauna including bird populations in close vicinity to Edithvale Wetlands. We strongly believe that this open space which includes the beautiful and tranquil Braeside Park with its own wetlands, should be preserved, enhanced and promoted, not spoiled.

Information presented in local forums and subsequent submissions to this panel, lead us to cast doubt on the wisdom of this project as a long term solution for the problems of traffic congestion.

What about other options that would be more favourable for environment protection and biodiversity conservation? The plan for this intrusive traffic thoroughfare should be held off until alternative solutions are properly and openly debated eg this process is silent on proposals for an expanded bus network for commuters and alternative proposals advocated by the three relevant Councils ie channelling traffic away from Kingston to the Monash Freeway.

There would be benefits in allocating the \$375 M towards more forward thinking infrastructure projects focused on public transport, rather than staying with a 40 years old

plan. Decisions should not be made before the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)'s *Metropolitan Open Space Strategy for Melbourne* is in place to provide guiding principles for planning and managing of open space. We support its stated mission to *"address complex issues through the prism of open space, including the provision of amenity and a healthy environment on the suburban fringes, and the improvement of quality, access and connectivity of public open space"*. (*Mosaic Insights.com.au*)

FESWI sees this project as an unnecessary and poorly conceived stop gap measure for solving ever growing traffic congestion which will over time bring an increasing number of vehicles and associated pollutants into the area. We fear habitat loss will put this sensitive ecosystem at risk.

One of the political party volunteers prior to the State Election was heard to say that the freeway alignment was at present "just a wasteland". It suggested to me a level of naivety in public awareness which could account in some cases for the enthusiasm of many of its advocates.

Who will be responsible for ongoing and rigorous implementation of the EPR's and EMF during construction and operation? The placing of responsibility for construction in the hands of the building contractor poses risks. It is the Minister for Planning who should be accountable for the dedicated and rigorous adherence to the EPRs and EMF.

It's so often the case that solutions to challenges and the unexpected problems likely to arise are dealt with a wide latitude of discretionary decision making where exact details seemed too cumbersome. I am thinking here of the risky procedure of pile driving into acid sulphate soils or the construction work in landfill areas where toxic pollutants have been dumped in the past so disturbing and polluting groundwater.

Last week's EPA confirmation that levels of toxic chemical group PFAS have been found in ducks at Macleod Morass at Bairnsdale and the warning to consumers of the contaminated duck meat is a stark reminder of how pollutants released into the water ways threaten not only animal life but also human health through the food chain.

The 'precautionary principle' should apply. FESWI stands firm for sustainable, resilient, liveable landscapes that will support healthy, productive communities of animal and human life well into the future. We say that at this point in time this fraught Freeway plan should be abandoned.

In conclusion

How the competing interests are weighed up will inform the Committee's recommendations and ultimately the Minister's determination.

We say that The Ramsar agreement is of utmost importance. We have been advised on various occasions during the course of the hearing that ecological considerations are paramount. Our contention is that there are uncertainties around containing the toxins in underground water in the construction.

Resolute preservation of this area's unique ecology is what we place first and foremost when weighing up the competing interests represented at this inquiry, and we urge the Committee to do likewise and to recommend to the Minister that this freeway project not proceed.

Beyond this, we support the response to the Terms of Reference provided by Ian Morgans for Residents against the Mordialloc Freeway.

Susan Telfer