



Victorian
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Council

Central West Investigation Consultation Summary

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Acknowledgement of Aboriginal Victorians

The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council pays its respects to Victoria's Aboriginal peoples, Native Title Holders and Traditional Owners and acknowledges their rich cultural and intrinsic connections to Country. Council recognises that the land is of spiritual, cultural, environmental and economic importance to Aboriginal people and values their contribution and interest in the management of land and natural resources.

Council is pleased to have been able to engage with the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation under the terms of their Recognition and Settlement Agreement with the State, and also with the other Traditional Owner groups with interests in the Central West Investigation area. We would like to acknowledge the collaboration and goodwill of the Djandak project team and all the representatives of Traditional Owner groups who participated in the investigation and advised Council about their aspirations for Country and a range of specific land management issues.

Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Victorian Environmental Assessment Council	1
1.2 Background to the investigation	1
1.3 The investigation process	2
2. Aboriginal community engagement	3
3. Stakeholder consultation activities	5
3.1 Community Reference Group	5
3.2 Communications	5
3.3 Submissions	6
3.4 Community drop-in sessions	8
3.5 Other consultation activities	8
4. Summary of feedback	9
What VEAC heard about...	10
...Natural and biodiversity values	10
...Climate change	10
...Aboriginal cultural values	11
...Non-Aboriginal cultural values	12
...Continued access for recreational activities	12
...Industry and resource utilisation	15
...Public land management and regulation	17
...Implementation of the recommendations	19
...The investigation process	19
...Mount Cole–Pyrenees block	20
...Wellsford block	21
...Wombat–Macedon block	22
5. Final report	24
Appendix: Maps	25
1 Central West Investigation area – current public land	26
2 Traditional Owner Recognition and Settlement Agreement and negotiation areas	27
3 Draft recommendations for Mount Cole-Pyrenees block	28
4 Draft recommendations for Wellsford block	29
5 Draft recommendations for Wombat-Macedon block	30

1. Introduction

The primary purpose of this Consultation Summary is to outline the main points that VEAC heard from Traditional Owners, local communities and other stakeholders about the draft recommendations for public land in the Central West Investigation area (see the draft proposals paper published by VEAC in August 2018). The report also summarises the engagement activities undertaken for this investigation, including an Aboriginal community engagement process and many stakeholder consultation activities that were designed to inform the broader community and encourage input into the investigation from anyone with an interest in this area.

1.1 Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

The *Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001* (VEAC Act) came into effect in December 2001. VEAC is a successor organisation to the Land Conservation Council (LCC), established in 1971, and the Environment Conservation Council (ECC) which replaced the LCC in 1997. The Council conducts its work in accordance with the VEAC Act, including the requirement to consider a set of matters when carrying out an investigation and making recommendations to the Minister (section 18). Public land is defined in the VEAC Act; it excludes private freehold land, land owned by local councils and Commonwealth land.

The current five members appointed to VEAC are Ms Janine Haddow (Chairperson), Ms Joanne Duncan, Ms Anna Kilborn, Dr Charles Meredith and Dr Geoffrey Wescott.

1.2 Background to the investigation

In March 2017, the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, the Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP, asked VEAC to carry out an investigation into public land in the central west of Victoria, including the Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Range forests (see box 1). The purpose of the Central West Investigation is to:

- identify and evaluate the condition, natural and biodiversity values, and cultural, social and economic values and the current uses of public land
- make recommendations for the balanced use and appropriate management arrangements to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural values.

The Central West Investigation area is 403,815 hectares in total of which 161,650 hectares or 40 per cent is public land. The investigation area is made up of three separate blocks (see appendix map 1).

- The Mount Cole–Pyrenees block (165,790 hectares) covers two large tracts of public land on the Pyrenees Range to the north near Avoca and the Mount Cole Range to the south near Beaufort, as well as several smaller patches of state forest and other land units in the areas surrounding these ranges (especially to the east and south). Around 33 per cent of this block (54,750 hectares) is public land.
- The Wellsford block east of Bendigo contains 7,350 hectares of public land, almost all of which forms the Wellsford State Forest.
- The Wombat–Macedon block (228,770 hectares) contains the large tract of public land extending from west of Hepburn Springs to Mount Macedon and Long Forest near Melton, and also includes several smaller forest patches. Some 43 per cent (99,550 hectares) of this block is public land.

Over many tens of thousands of years of occupation, Aboriginal people have developed profound connections with their Country in central west Victoria (see appendix map 2). Today, Traditional Owners continue this relationship and have a cultural responsibility for Caring for Country that involves protecting land, waterways and natural resources from harm.

There have been major changes in the use and management of public land since LCC reviews of these areas in the 1980s and other studies in the early 2000s by the ECC, Regional Forest Agreement process and Wombat Community Forest Management initiative. Significant changes have also occurred in relation to Traditional Owners' rights and roles in land management, population growth in nearby towns and cities, patterns of resource use and recreational activity, knowledge of natural and cultural values, and climate change. All these factors make the Central West Investigation timely.

Box 1 Terms of reference

Pursuant to section 15 of the *Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001*, the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change hereby requests the Council to carry out an investigation into public land in the vicinity of the Wombat, Wellsford, Mount Cole and Pyrenees Range Forests within the area shown on the accompanying map.

The purpose of the Central West Investigation is to:

- a) identify and evaluate the condition, natural and biodiversity values and cultural, social and economic values and the current uses of public land in the specified area; and
- b) make recommendations for the balanced use and appropriate management arrangements to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural values.

In addition to the considerations in section 18 of the *Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001*, the Council must take into account the following matters:

- i. relevant State Government policies and strategies, Ministerial statements and reports by the Victorian Auditor-General; and
- ii. relevant regional programs, strategies and plans.

The Council must also consult with the relevant Traditional Owner Group Entities and any other relevant Traditional Owner groups in the specified area, particularly where the area is subject to an agreement under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*. This includes the area covered by the Dja Dja Wurrung Recognition and Settlement Agreement.

A draft proposals paper and a final report are to be prepared, allowing for two public submission periods during the investigation.

The Council must report on the completed investigation within two years from the commencement date.*

*extended to June 2019

1.3 The investigation process

The key steps for the Central West Investigation are specified in the VEAC Act and in the terms of reference for the investigation. They include two formal submission periods of at least 60 days each.

The primary objective of the engagement processes is to ensure that interested and affected stakeholders are well informed about the investigation and encouraged to participate. VEAC aimed to reach communities and stakeholders across the three blocks of the investigation area through a range of communication and engagement mechanisms.

The draft proposals paper containing draft recommendations for public land use in the investigation area was released on 31 August 2018. Maps of the draft recommendations for the three blocks making up the investigation area are shown in appendix maps 3, 4 and 5.



2. Aboriginal community engagement

VEAC aimed to collaborate with Aboriginal people who have an interest in public land in the investigation area, and particularly Traditional Owners of Country, to inform its recommendations to government. At this stage, two Traditional Owner groups (Dja Dja Wurrung and Taungurung) in the investigation area have entered into Recognition and Settlement Agreements with the State, but Council understood that other Traditional Owner groups are undertaking or considering negotiations towards achieving similar agreements and sought to engage with all groups.

The investigation’s Aboriginal Community Engagement Project was established with the purpose of actively approaching Traditional Owner groups and Registered Aboriginal Parties in the investigation area (see table 1 and appendix map 2) to seek their views on all relevant issues, especially appropriate management and ways to conserve and enhance values. The project included a learning and capacity-building component that supports Aboriginal people’s rights and aspirations to improve their economic, cultural and social standing.

Table 1 Aboriginal Traditional Owner groups/Registered Aboriginal Parties

Investigation area block	
Mount Cole–Pyrenees	Barengi Gadjin Land Council (representing Wotjobaluk Peoples) ¹ Martang Pty Ltd ² Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation Wathaurung Aboriginal Corporation (trading as Wadawurrung) Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation ³
Wombat–Macedon	Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation Taungurung Wathaurung Aboriginal Corporation (trading as Wadawurrung) Wurundjeri
Wellsford	Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation

¹ The investigation area borders the south-eastern part of Barengi Gadjin country but incorporates unallocated country in which Barengi Gadjin has a perceived interest.

² Representatives of the Martang RAP indicated that VEAC should engage with the broader Eastern Maar Traditional Owner group for the purposes of this investigation.

³ The investigation area borders the north-eastern part of the Eastern Maar lodgement of a Threshold Statement seeking settlement under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*.



In the first stage of the Central West Investigation, VEAC formed a partnership with Dja Dja Wurrung Enterprises Pty Ltd (trading as Djandak) to engage with representatives of all six Traditional Owner groups. The aim of stage 1 was to provide VEAC with appropriate information on cultural values, opinion of Country condition, and aspirations for each of the investigation blocks. This was provided as input into the formulation of the draft proposals paper including the draft recommendations for public land. Workshops were able to be held within the short project timelines with representatives of the Barengi Gadjin, Dja Dja Wurrung and Wurundjeri Traditional Owners.

For the other groups, VEAC drew on Country plans and related reports to inform the investigation, and meetings were held with these groups prior to the second stage of engagement. For example, the Eastern Maar Country Plan *Meerreengeeye ngakeepoorryeeyt* (2015) provides guidance on how the people view landscape management; in particular, see goal 4 “Our Country is healthy and our natural resources are managed and used sustainably”. Similarly, *Taungurung Buk Dadbagi* (2016) and Wadawurrung’s Healthy Country Plan (in prep.) address Traditional Owners’ aspirations and goals to heal and care for Country.

Stage 2 of the Aboriginal Community Engagement Project sought feedback on the draft proposals paper from all six Traditional Owner groups. The stage 2 engagement process offered each group a whole day on-Country field trip to assist Traditional Owners to become familiar with the issues being addressed by the investigation and consider their input, before further discussion in a half-day workshop. Djandak consultants engaged with four of the groups (Barengi Gadjin (Wotjobaluk people), Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung and Wurundjeri) and VEAC’s Aboriginal Project Officer consulted directly with representatives of Eastern Maar and Wadawurrung Traditional Owners. VEAC recognises and appreciates the efforts made by all parties to contribute to the investigation as resourcing allowed within the relatively tight timelines.

Details of the engagement activities, information and outcomes are documented in Djandak’s Aboriginal Community Engagement Project reports (stage 1 and stage 2) which will be available on the VEAC website.

Information and advice received from the Aboriginal Community Engagement Project is outlined in section 4 under the relevant feedback themes.



3. Stakeholder consultation activities

Public consultation is an important part of the investigation process. VEAC used a variety of measures to inform, consult with and involve stakeholders across the three blocks of the investigation area during the development of its recommendations to government. All the information, views and opinions from the activities outlined below were considered by Council.

3.1 Community Reference Group

VEAC established a Community Reference Group for this investigation to provide advice to the Council in accordance with section 13 of the VEAC Act. Members of this group represented a broad range of interests related to the investigation (see table 2). The Community Reference Group is independently chaired by Mr Ian Harris.

Table 2 Community Reference Group members

Representative	Organisation
Rita Bentley (from August 2018)	Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria
John Edmonds	Victorian Farmers Federation
Ken Gell	Central Victorian Apiarists Association
Wayne Hevey	Four Wheel Drive Victoria
Terry McAliece	Pyrenees Shire Council
Ann McGregor	Central Victorian Biolinks Alliance Inc.
Tim Morrissey	Victorian Association of Forest Industries
Olly Oleszek (to August 2018)	Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria
John Petheram	Bushwalking Victoria (Ballarat Walking Club)
Wendy Radford	Wellsford Forest Conservation Alliance
Murray Ralph	Wombat ForestCare
Matt Ruchel	Victorian National Parks Association
Michelle Wyatt	Macedon Ranges Shire Council

The Community Reference Group has met four times so far during the investigation (October 2017, February 2018, August 2018 and March 2019) and will meet again in June 2019. Outside of these meetings, individual Community Reference Group members provided additional information on natural and cultural values and patterns of recreational and commercial use, or accompanied VEAC on field visits to check particular sites.

3.2 Communications

VEAC communicates with stakeholders through a variety of mechanisms so that interested stakeholders are likely to hear about the investigation and be enabled and encouraged to participate. VEAC was mindful of the fact that some people in rural areas do not have reliable access to the internet.

Notices advising of each submission period and round of drop-in sessions were placed in the Age and Herald Sun and the following local newspapers: Bendigo Advertiser, Ballarat Courier, Pyrenees Advocate (in Beaufort), Daylesford Hepburn Advocate, Kyneton Midland Express, Maryborough Advertiser and Ararat Advertiser.

Letters were sent to more than 1,000 holders of licences over public land in the investigation area. Licences are issued for a variety of uses of Crown land including: grazing of stream frontages, vegetated blocks and unused government roads; water frontage riparian management and conservation; harvesting of timber and other wood products; earth resources exploration, mining, commercial prospecting and quarrying; and beekeeping. The letters notified licence holders of the investigation and invited them to register their interest with VEAC, attend a drop-in session and make a written submission.

Update bulletins were emailed to the mailing list for the investigation, which had approximately 1,000 addresses in the first round of consultation and grew to approximately 1,500 for the second round. Regular updates were placed on VEAC's website and posted on Facebook.

At the beginning of the consultation process (notice of investigation stage, June 2017), an A3 brochure was produced to provide an outline of the investigation and encourage people to register their interest and get involved. It was included with the first letter to licence holders, published on VEAC's website, emailed to the mailing list for this investigation, distributed to stakeholder groups and handed out at meetings.

In conjunction with the release of the draft proposals paper (August 2018), an A3 summary brochure and A4 fact sheets for key themes and the three blocks of the investigation area were produced and made available as pdfs on the VEAC website. These materials were also provided in printed form at the drop-in sessions and other meetings.

During the consultation period on the draft proposals paper (31 August to 10 December 2018), VEAC's chairperson was available for media interviews and regional and local media organisations sought information from VEAC on aspects of the investigation. Media coverage included interviews with VEAC's chairperson on WINTV (Bendigo) and ABC Central Victoria radio, and articles about the draft proposals paper in most of the newspapers listed above.



3.3 Submissions

The written submissions process is one of the key avenues used by VEAC to seek community views on issues and values associated with public land. Submissions were made via the VEAC website, email or in hard copy. VEAC considers all the information, views and comments made in submissions. Because submitters do not constitute a representative sample of the population, recommendations are not based on the number of times a comment or viewpoint was submitted; rather, it was what was in the submissions that counted.

Submission periods

There were two submission periods for the Central West Investigation. In accordance with the VEAC Act the notice of investigation and the release of the draft proposals paper were advertised in

metropolitan and regional newspapers. Notifications were also published on VEAC's website and Facebook page, a news bulletin was distributed by email and letters were mailed to public land licence holders (see section 3.2).

The first submission period for the Central West Investigation commenced with the advertisement of the notice of investigation on 21 June 2017 and closed on 21 August 2017. VEAC received 643 submissions in this first round of consultation.

The second submission period began on 31 August 2018 when VEAC released the draft proposals paper. It was extended beyond the minimum 60-day period to close on 10 December (a total of 102 days) to provide people with more opportunity to respond to the draft recommendations.

In total, 2698 written submissions on the draft proposals paper were received. Approximately 24 per cent were from Melbourne, 20 per cent from in or near the investigation area, 19 per cent from other parts of rural and regional Victoria, and 3 per cent from interstate; 34 per cent were submitted with no location information. 137 submissions were from organisations and the remainder were from individuals.

There were over 1,500 identical submissions, mostly of two types.

- A pro forma submission opposing a national or regional park in the Wombat forest, and supporting a collaborative ecological restoration plan and continuing access for the current range of uses was submitted by 919 people. This can be viewed on the VEAC website as 'Submission A and list of submitters'. There were some additional submissions based on this pro forma (e.g. with lines removed or comments added); each of these is published under the submitter's name.
- A pro forma submission prepared by the Victorian National Parks Association supported the draft recommendations with the addition of a larger national park at Mount Cole and heritage river listing for the Wimmera River, and called for management and ecological restoration plans. It was submitted by 618 people and can be viewed on the VEAC website under 'Submission B and list of submitters'. There were some additional submissions based on this pro forma; each is published under the submitter's name.

How submissions are analysed

A small team of VEAC staff members processes and analyses all submissions. When a submission is received, it is assigned a unique identification number, individually scanned, and names and contact details recorded in VEAC's purpose-built Microsoft Access contacts database. Council members are each sent a copy of every submission. An acknowledgement is sent to the submitter (where an email or postal address has been provided). Scanned copies of submissions then undergo a second stage of processing before the submissions are published on VEAC's website, when personal contact details are removed. Material that is potentially defamatory, offensive, or could impact on the privacy of individuals – including third parties – may also be redacted.

All submissions are then read and analysed by VEAC staff and entered into VEAC's Microsoft Access submissions database linked to the contacts database. Each submission is analysed according to a framework consisting of geographic areas, themes including activities and values, and the main comments or proposals made in submissions. Identical pro forma submissions are treated in the same way as other submissions and are all individually recorded and analysed.

The submissions database can be queried in a variety of ways to provide qualitative information to the Council as it develops its recommendations for particular issues and areas. This process ensures that the full range of views is thoroughly considered and the implications for the investigation are examined.

3.4 Community drop-in sessions

Community drop-in sessions provided the opportunity for anyone with an interest in public land in the investigation area to engage with VEAC face-to-face in their local communities. These sessions had several purposes. They offered an effective way for people to learn more about the investigation; there was information on display and available in printed form, and attendees could ask VEAC for more detail about specific issues. People who wished to consult directly with VEAC had an opportunity to discuss issues of concern and ensure that their views were understood. VEAC also encouraged and assisted attendees to make a written submission.

The drop-in sessions were advertised in key regional newspapers and on VEAC's website and Facebook page. Notifications of the drop-in sessions were included in VEAC's news bulletin which was emailed to the mailing list. The holders of licences over public land within the investigation area received an invitation to each round of drop-in sessions.

Five drop-in sessions were held in the first round of consultation at locations across the investigation area (Avoca, Bendigo, Beaufort, Daylesford and Woodend) with over 200 people attending.

Six drop-in sessions were held for the draft proposals paper stage – in the five towns above and also in Melbourne in response to requests by stakeholders. About 250 people attended these drop-in sessions and another approximately 200 people attended public meetings held by VEAC at Trentham and Lancefield. Drop-in sessions were held early in the consultation period for the draft proposals paper to avoid the Victorian school holidays when many people would have been away, and to allow sufficient time to write submissions after attending a drop-in session (before the consultation period was extended). Consequently the second round of drop-in sessions had a focus on providing information about the draft recommendations, and many attendees picked up copies of the draft proposals paper, summary brochure and factsheets on the main themes – including quick reference guides to the implications of proposed land categories on uses and activities in each block. People raised concerns and discussed issues with VEAC, and were encouraged to pin location-based comments on maps. Attendees were invited to fill in a short exit survey on either an iPad or a paper form to help VEAC understand how to improve engagement activities in the future.

3.5 Other consultation activities

Meetings with local government, public land managers and other government agencies were held to assist in the preparation of the final recommendations. These included field visits and meetings with DELWP and Parks Victoria regional and head office staff and consultation with water authorities, local councils, VicRoads, VicForests and the then Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources. VEAC also met with businesses that operate in the investigation area and responded to many requests to meet with local resident and community groups, recreation organisations, friends/Landcare groups and conservation organisations; some of these were held in the field at their request.

4. Summary of feedback

VEAC is considering all the input received from the full suite of engagement activities outlined above as it develops final recommendations for public land use in the investigation area.

Helpful information was provided by many people about particular issues, patterns of activity and specific places. The investigation has benefited greatly from the knowledge provided by local residents, visitors, businesses, community organisations and on-ground agency staff.

VEAC heard a diversity of views and opinions about current values and uses of public land, and future directions for management. There were often polarised views about appropriate land use categories and allowable activities in most parts of the investigation area. However, there was common ground in the widespread appreciation and enjoyment of Central West Victoria's forests, and a shared desire to see them looked after.

The following sections summarise the information, opinions and comments that VEAC heard, grouped by themes that reflect the terms of reference for the investigation. Comments about a specific area are usually mentioned in the relevant block section.

The statements made in the following sections are not VEAC's views or interpretations and they are not necessarily factually correct. They present the wide range of views that VEAC heard during stakeholder engagement activities for this investigation.

For further detail on these points and other suggestions and comments, see the submissions on VEAC's website.



What VEAC heard about...

...Natural and biodiversity values

- forests are important for good water quality and supply, soil health, moderating climate, and as carbon and heat sinks
- the natural environment needs to be protected and preserved for current and future generations
- the biodiversity extinction crisis means that conservation is the top priority
- forests in the Wombat, Mount Cole and Wellsford areas are in poor condition because of intensive timber harvesting
- the forests are fine as they are
- national parks are needed to protect the natural values from major threats such as resource utilisation and intensive recreation
- parks and reserves are not managed properly and have a negative impact on biodiversity
- there is a need for increased protection of the natural environment in the context of climate change, especially headwaters and river catchments and habitat for threatened species
- catchment areas and waterways need to be protected to secure future water supplies
- draft recommendations align with Melbourne Water's Healthy Waterways strategy
- our growing population is increasing pressure on the natural environment and public land
- commitments made through international agreements establishing a system of protected areas (including meeting ecosystem targets/benchmarks) should be prioritised
- scientific evidence should be used to inform public land management
- current land management approaches do not protect and prioritise the natural environment adequately
- active management practices can be used to retain forest health (without becoming a park)
- small remnants, biolinks or wildlife corridors are important for improving landscape connectivity which is increasingly important in the light of climate change
- pine plantations should be revegetated to provide for landscape connectivity

...Climate change

- climate models and suggested trends of a hotter, drier climate and more natural disasters
- climate change is one of the biggest threats being faced
- the impacts of climate change are already being felt and we must act now
- healthy forests store a lot of carbon
- there is a need for increased protection of the natural environment under climate change, especially headwaters and catchment areas of rivers and habitat for threatened species
- some areas are especially important as they will become refuge areas
- human population growth will create food and water security problems for future generations
- climate change and current declines in biodiversity and habitat should inform all decision-making
- the remaining large tracts of public land need to be protected
- habitat connectivity is important in allowing species to move across a landscape to find appropriate habitat and increase their chance of survival under climate change
- support for land management that builds a resilient landscape

...Aboriginal cultural values

Traditional Owners expressed a preference for park or reserve categories that protect the cultural and natural values of Country and limit activities with major impacts such as logging and mining. Park or reserve categories lay the foundation for healing and a higher level of Traditional Owner involvement in management (e.g. joint management), while ensuring that the public has access to public land to enjoy recreational activities with low impacts on natural and cultural values. The intent is not to exclude the public but to manage the parks and reserves in partnership for everyone to enjoy while also recognising and respecting Aboriginal cultural practices and customs.

For example, Taungurung Traditional Owners specifically want camping to be permitted in the proposed Cobaw Conservation Park so that they and the public can enjoy Country.

Dja Dja Warrung people were concerned about ongoing timber harvesting in the Wellsford forest. The group participates in forest coupe management commercially under their Recognition and Settlement Agreement but has a Country Plan objective of gardening the environment. The forest needs assistance to regenerate and support flora and fauna, more suitable habitat for the protected species of the area, smoking ceremony plants and other cultural values.

Representatives of Eastern Maar called for protection of Mount Cole in a national park. Barengi Gadjin (Wotjobaluk people) also supported protection for the Mount Cole and Pyrenees ranges through change of status to a park or reserve, although there was a dissenting view because this would restrict recreational shooting. Barengi Gadjin (Wotjobaluk people) have very strong interests in the area including the highly culturally important Baringi Gadjin (Wimmera River) and its headwaters in Mount Cole forest.

Traditional Owner groups found the opportunity to engage in this investigation very positive but limited. They stressed the need for a stronger, more collaborative engagement process in future investigations. This would include a high level of involvement from the very earliest stages of a project, with resourcing to enable Traditional Owners to carry out their own cultural heritage assessments and be embedded in VEAC processes. These kinds of partnerships would enable Traditional Owners to inform the recommendations over public land on their Country.

Traditional Owners also want to be respected and resourced to undertake joint management planning and on-ground management activities on Country when recommendations are accepted and implemented. They supported VEAC's draft recommendations about allocating adequate financial and staff resources for implementation of the recommendations (R2), including for the employment of and engagement with Traditional Owners. Representative of some groups commented specifically in support of draft recommendations about Aboriginal place names for recommended new parks and reserves (R1) and amending legislation to allow future changes to Aboriginal title parks and reserves by agreement of the parties (R7).



...*Non-Aboriginal cultural values*

- the cultural significance of sharing recreational activities such as camping, fishing, hunting and prospecting across generations – it's a tradition
- historic gold mining areas are valued for their cultural significance
- the Wimmera River should be listed as a Heritage River and protected under the *Heritage Rivers Act 1992*
- the Lerderberg Heritage River should be protected within the Wombat-Lerderberg National Park

...*Continued access for recreational activities*

Health and social benefits

- the forest is for everyone to enjoy
- access to outdoor activities is a vital part of children's wellbeing and a healthy alternative to screen time
- social connections across generations or amongst friendship groups are strengthened through recreational activities
- communities need continued access to the forest for health and social benefits
- some people shared accounts of how they – or people they are close to – personally benefited from recreation and access to public land
- the proposed parks would mean that many recreational activities would be restricted or stopped entirely
- the physical and mental health benefits of outdoor activities have been underestimated in the draft proposals paper
- dogs provide reassurance and safety for people walking alone in the forest

Economic impacts

- recreation in the forest should remain an affordable option for everyone
- many recreational activities especially prospecting, four wheel driving, trailbike riding and hunting bring people into rural towns who contribute to local economies
- visitors spend large amounts on consumables, specialised equipment and services including accommodation
- an increase in parks would reduce the number of visitors who contribute to small business and the local economies
- national parks attract more visitors to the region
- larger organised events such as the Tom Quilty endurance ride and the Eureka car rally bring economic benefits to local towns, and these may be affected by proposed changes
- businesses that rely on access to public land for their service, such as horse riding schools, school camps or organised adventure experiences, may be negatively impacted
- expensive camping fees could be introduced within the proposed national parks which disadvantages people on lower incomes
- hunting is a way to provide food

Availability of tracks

- the current track networks provide variety and a chance to get away from crowds
- forest tracks provide a safe alternative to main roads
- poor resourcing would result in track closures, which would happen without community consultation
- tracks would become inaccessible through a lack of active management and lack of use
- keeping tracks open is important for firefighting access
- some recreational activities damage tracks more than others, but this is not reflected in the permitted uses
- better enforcement is required to prevent the creation of illegal tracks, such as trail bike and mountain bike tracks
- need to manage conflicting uses along tracks, such as horses and trail bikes or bushwalking and mountain bikes

Caretakers of the forest

- many recreational users are taking responsibility for their environment by removing rubbish
- people call the land manager to advise them of fallen trees over tracks, or remove the trees if they can
- more people present in the forests reduces occurrences of illegal or irresponsible activities
- recreation clubs are working with land managers on tasks such as improving facilities, maintaining tracks and clearing rubbish
- Landcare and friends groups work on programs to improve biodiversity
- recreational hunting of pest animals helps to control feral populations

Horse riding

- residents living close to public land enjoy riding horses in the local forests regularly
- horse riding can be dangerous on main roads and riders need access to safe tracks
- groups and larger organised events such as the Tom Quilty cup also use public land
- horse riding is often combined with other activities such as dog walking and camping
- horses spread weeds from feed at their camps and in their droppings
- horse riding is not as damaging to the environment as other activities, such as four wheel driving or trail bike riding



Four wheel driving and trail bike riding

- there would be more restrictions in the proposed national parks, in particular an increase in track closures
- four wheel driving is often combined with other recreational activities such as camping, dog walking, hunting and prospecting
- trail bike riding and four wheel driving cause erosion and disturbance to wildlife
- trail bike riding creates networks of illegal tracks off-road
- trail bike riding disturbs wildlife and other recreational users of the forest
- not enough is being done to regulate these activities and reduce conflicts with other users

Prospecting

- prospecting is a popular activity across the investigation area, not just in the known goldfields
- it is part of our cultural heritage
- most people are fossicking with metal detectors and hand tools, not doing more damaging types of prospecting
- prospecting does not damage natural or cultural values – it is a very low impact activity and prospectors clean up rubbish including lead shot
- there should not be any more restrictions on prospecting, as available areas for prospecting are being reduced across the state
- prospecting should be restricted because some activities disturb the environment
- many prospectors travel into local towns and add to the local economies
- some people travel from interstate and internationally to prospect in Victoria

Camping

- camping is often enjoyed with other activities such as bush walking, four wheel driving, hunting and horse riding, and often with dogs
- camping in the forest is an important cultural and social experience
- allow dispersed camping; do not restrict camping to formal campgrounds
- dispersed camping will be removed in national parks
- fees are likely to be charged in national parks, which will make camping an unaffordable activity for many people

Bushwalking and nature study

- bushwalkers' experiences will be improved through added protection of natural values
- conflicts with other users can occur in places where mountain biking and trail bike riding are also popular
- some bushwalking trails in the investigation area attract interstate and international visitors
- the Beeripmo walk needs added protection as it goes through areas available for logging
- hunting should not be permitted around the Beeripmo walk which is popular with school camps and other groups

Hunting

- recreational hunting is a cost-effective way to reduce the populations of pest animals
- banning hunting will lead to an increase in feral animals such as foxes, goats and pigs
- pig hunters release breeding sows into the forest to increase feral pig populations
- recreational hunting does not negatively impact on natural values

- hunting disturbs wildlife
- hunting is dangerous in areas with high visitor numbers
- local residents feel unsafe with more hunters coming to the forest
- people rely on hunting to feed themselves and their families
- the deer sanctuary at Mount Cole should not be removed
- the deer sanctuary at Mount Cole should be removed, but this will not offset the loss of other hunting areas

...Industry and resource utilisation

Timber harvesting (including commercial firewood)

- there will be a reduction in timber supply to local mills, which will have implications for employment - particularly for local communities in rural and regional Victoria
- alternative employment opportunities are needed for young people if forestry jobs are lost
- individuals affected by any changes need support to ensure their mental health and wellbeing are looked after
- selective harvesting methods are sustainable
- current timber harvesting practices should be maintained
- commercial forestry is not viable in these areas
- timber harvesting should not be allowed as it threatens the natural values of the area
- forests are a sustainable and renewable resource
- forests should be protected rather than logged to help with water conservation and supply
- the areas available for timber harvesting in Victoria are already too small
- shifting the commercial firewood supply further away will increase prices for local residents
- Special Protection Zones (SPZs) in state forest should be recognised as contributing to the comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system
- SPZs should be included in VEAC's ecological vegetation class shortfall calculations
- the large state forests in the investigation area will be covered by the Regional Forest Agreement process so the VEAC investigation should be abandoned to avoid duplication
- forest roads and tracks are maintained by the timber industry and will degrade if timber availability decreases
- contributions to fire control by the timber and forestry industry are not recognised



Domestic firewood

- many local people rely on firewood as a source of heating and cooking
- firewood from public land is more affordable than gas and electricity
- many people take much more than the allowable amount and some is sold in Melbourne
- the firewood areas are cleared out in the first few weeks of the season
- domestic firewood collection permits should be reintroduced
- develop a long-term strategy for domestic firewood provision so that it can be sustainable
- firewood should be sourced from private land plantations, not public land
- changes to supply could lead to more illegal collection
- domestic firewood requirements cannot be met from the proposed available areas
- the public should be able to collect fallen timber as firewood prior to fuel reduction burns

Earth resources – exploration and mining

- access to public land for exploration and mining should be maintained
- the contribution that mining makes to both the local and Victorian economy, through jobs and product sales, has been under-represented in the draft proposals paper
- investment in mining infrastructure will decline if there is nowhere left to mine
- licence holders are concerned about reduced opportunities for mining
- opposition to mining on public land due to environmental impacts
- concerns about contamination of waterways during mineral extraction and processing
- ongoing access to exploration and mining under existing licences should not be allowed in national parks

Social and economic impacts

- there is quite significant disadvantage in some communities - people suffering from trauma, poverty and mental health issues which restrict future work options
- people in a temporary state of homelessness use the forests as a safe place to camp under Forests Act provisions
- VEAC has not addressed the social and economic impacts of the draft recommendations including: reduced business opportunities and fewer visitors spending money in local towns
- some people can't afford camping fees in parks

Tourism

- creating more national parks will increase tourism (especially for outdoor environment or nature-based businesses)
- walking tracks such as the Beeripmo walk and the Pyrenees endurance walk attract visitors who contribute to local economies
- there is no evidence that making an area a national park increases tourism
- tourism from parks should be an alternative industry to timber harvesting

Beekeeping

- beekeepers use public land forests to rest bees over winter, prior to using them for pollination services especially in almond orchards; this is a much more valuable sector than honey production
- retain current access for beekeepers

- remove bee sites from parks and reserves to reduce competition for resources between honey bees and native pollinators
- look to increase the available bee sites
- honey bees are critical to food security

Grazing

- Crown land licensees want continued access to public land for grazing purposes
- unused roads and waterways are often treated as an extension of the adjacent private land (i.e. there are no fences, the land has been cleared or it offers shade trees for livestock)
- some licence holders would like to purchase the Crown land

...Public land management and regulation

Ecological restoration of degraded forest

- forests in the investigation area are in poor condition because of intensive timber harvesting
- overcrowded regrowth forest is ecologically 'locked' or 'suppressed' and becomes more susceptible to drought, disease and fire, and needs to be actively restored
- thinning the regrowth will allow more carbon to be stored, improve water yield, restore the forest to a more natural structure, improve biodiversity habitat and make the ecosystem more resilient to climate change
- a continued supply of domestic firewood could be obtained from ecological management activities
- resourcing should be provided for ecological restoration purposes
- related issues of fire risk and weed management (see below)

Fire management

- current fire management strategies and approaches are not adequate to protect our communities both now and into the future
- national parks are not managed appropriately for fire making them a safety risk for those living near areas recommended as national park
- current fuel reduction burning regimes are inappropriate for some native plants and animals
- support for ecological burning and Aboriginal fire (cool burning) management
- forests should be thinned to reduce fire risk
- VEAC should make recommendations around appropriate fire management and for further research to be undertaken to determine best practice fire management



Pests and weeds

- improve the management of pest plants and animals on public land
- additional resources are needed so that pest plant and animal management can be improved
- private land owners adjacent to public land spend their time and money on pest plant and animal control
- pest plants and animals negatively impact on native plants and animals
- recreational shooting reduces pest animal populations
- recreational hunting is not an effective method for controlling pest animal populations
- land managers should organise shooting programs for recreational hunting groups
- professional hunters are needed for control of feral animal populations, especially for pigs

Resourcing

- resourcing for the management of public land (regardless of tenure) is insufficient at present and should be increased so that more active management can be undertaken
- concerns around different levels of resourcing for public land depending on the land manager – in particular, parks are inadequately resourced
- requests for park management plans for regional parks (as well as national parks) in the investigation area
- VEAC recommendations should include specific estimates of the funding required for appropriate public land management

Track rationalisation and management

- clarification sought around track rationalisation and the likely impact of land manager changes on track management
- some tracks in parks will not be adequately maintained for firefighter access or for recreational users
- fewer people in the forests due to track rationalisation or reduced track maintenance will result in reduced surveillance and more illegal activity

Compliance

- recreational users are having their access restricted because of a minority of users who do not follow the rules or regulations
- public land managers should increase compliance activity and management efforts to enable recreational use to continue unchanged and/or to achieve better environmental outcomes and protect the natural values of the area
- increased compliance will ensure that public land users are respectful of the environment and other users, and improve public awareness and education of public land use
- illegal activity by some people conflicts with legal uses and decreases the amenity and safety of many other recreational users

...Implementation of the recommendations

- adequate funding needs to be allocated to the implementation of the recommendations
- new parks and reserves need to be adequately funded, especially in the light of current under-resourcing
- Aboriginal interpretive signage and structures are needed
- the provision of infrastructure (such as toilets, signs and picnic tables) in forests encourages and provides additional opportunities for tourism
- adequate compensation must be provided for those affected by the recommendations
- the actual impacts of the recommendations on recreational users is uncertain due to fine scale decision-making taking place later at the park management plan stage
- land managers will struggle to accommodate high intensity recreation in a smaller area of state forest
- areas of Special Protection Zone in state forest will not be appropriately protected in recommended regional parks
- some parts of the investigation area might subsequently be part of a joint management planning process with Traditional Owner and further changes to land use could occur

...The investigation process

- the investigation's outcomes were pre-determined and Council is not independent
- appreciation and acknowledgement of the comprehensive body of work that has gone into the draft proposals paper
- there was a lack of scientific evidence supporting the draft recommendations
- there was insufficient socio-economic analysis to determine the effects of the draft recommendations on rural and regional communities
- the draft recommendations provide a good balance between conservation and recreational access to forests in the area
- the consultation process was inadequate
- there was insufficient time for the community to consider the information and the draft recommendations in detail before the community drop-in sessions
- the drop-in sessions were useful for getting information and getting questions answered
- the information around which activities will be permitted in the different land categories was unclear or misleading



...Mount Cole–Pyrenees block

The Mount Cole–Pyrenees block was specifically mentioned in approximately 850 submissions, of which 618 were pro forma 'Submission B'. Some points made about the Mount Cole–Pyrenees block have been covered in previous sections. There were specific statements about support for or opposition to some or all of the draft recommendations for public land in the Mount Cole–Pyrenees block, including the Mount Cole, Pyrenees and Mount Lonarch forests; the proposed Ben Nevis, Ben Major and Waterloo nature reserves; the proposed Glenmona Forest Bushland Reserve; and the proposed Mount Buangor and Pyrenees national parks. Detailed information was provided on natural and cultural values and popular areas for recreational activities including hang gliding, bushwalking, camping and horse riding in the Mount Cole and Pyrenees forests. In addition:

- the Wimmera River (Barringi Gadyin) is very important culturally to Traditional Owner groups and its headwaters on public land need to be protected
- access should be maintained for recreational uses such as four wheel driving, hunting, trail bike riding, horse riding, car rallies, prospecting and hang gliding/paragliding
- support for revocation of the Mount Cole sanctuary and allowing recreational deer hunting
- concerns around safety of other bush users if the game sanctuary at Mount Cole is revoked
- concerns about conflicts between recreational users, especially the impact of active recreation on passive recreation opportunities and damage to the environment
- concerns around reduced opportunities for recreational uses
- local mills estimated reductions in log quota/sawlog input of 25% and 35%
- there may be economic impacts on local tourism businesses as a result of the recommendations – some positive and some negative
- smaller remnant areas of public land are important and valuable, and need to be preserved and protected
- issues surrounding public land management in the area such as the need for improved pest plant and animal control and fire management for safety and ecological health
- the role of the area in the context of climate change, such as the Mount Cole and Mount Buangor elevated plateau as a refuge area for some species
- the need to protect what is left of Victoria's native vegetation when much of it in the area has been cleared already
- the importance of public land in the investigation area as habitat for some species at the western limit of their range
- clarification sought regarding implications of recommendations on existing public land licences and leases
- support for the continued provision of domestic firewood in the block due to limited availability or affordability of mains gas for cooking and heating in some of the surrounding towns
- Armillaria root rot disease is a problem and clear felling may be the solution
- the proposed bushland reserve at Glenmona Forest Bushland Reserve is a popular duck hunting and camping site and should remain open for these activities

...Wellsford block

The Wellsford block was specifically mentioned in approximately 730 submissions, of which 618 were pro forma 'Submission B'. Some points made about the Wellsford block have been covered in previous sections. There were specific statements about support for or opposition to some or all of the draft recommendations for public land in the Wellsford block, including the proposed Wellsford Nature Reserve and addition to the Bendigo Regional Park. Detailed information was provided on natural and cultural values and popular areas for recreational activities including horse riding and dog sledding events in the Wellsford forest. In addition:

- all of Wellsford forest should be a national park
- the proposed nature reserve should be a national park
- protect threatened species at Wellsford forest
- improve habitat for biodiversity including threatened species (details about some species, populations, large old trees and habitats provided)
- Djandak Wi cultural burning, as demonstrated in Greater Bendigo National Park, is needed in this area
- do not stop domestic firewood collection at Wellsford forest
- domestic firewood cutting should not continue because it threatens natural values
- Traditional Owners do not want domestic firewood collection to continue
- Bendigo's population growth will negatively impact Wellsford forest
- no changes to Wellsford forest, keep it as state forest
- more clarity on permitted uses in the proposed nature reserve
- horses do not harm the forest and should be permitted across Wellsford forest
- the annual dog sledding competition would no longer be able to continue in the proposed nature reserve and may not be able to find an alternative site
- mountain bikes and trail bikes are causing damage and creating illegal tracks
- property values will drop if the recommendations go ahead



...Wombat–Macedon block

The Wombat–Macedon block or parts of it were specifically mentioned in approximately 2,000 submissions, of which 919 were pro forma 'Submission A' and 618 were pro forma 'Submission B'. Some points made about the Wombat–Macedon block have been covered in previous sections. There were specific statements about support for or opposition to some or all of the draft recommendations for public land in the Wombat–Macedon block, including the proposed Wombat-Lerderderg National Park; the Wombat, Hepburn and Macedon regional parks; Cobaw and Hepburn conservation parks; Tylden and Long Forest nature reserves; and Bungal Bushland Reserve. Detailed information was provided on natural and cultural values and popular areas for recreational activities including mountain bike riding, bushwalking and horse riding in the Wombat forest and Cobaw range. In addition:

- the Wombat forest contains the headwaters of many rivers which need to be protected for water production and biodiversity
- the river headwaters are also very important to Aboriginal culture
- important to protect other catchments including Deep Creek and Jacksons Creek
- degraded locked-up forests (the legacy of intensive logging in the Wombat-Macedon block) require ecological management to restore them to good condition
- improve habitat for biodiversity including threatened species (details about some species, populations and habitats provided)
- maintain climate change refuges
- Wombat forest is a significant carbon sink which is needed to help reach zero-net emissions targets
- do not allow intensive logging in the Wombat forest
- the increasing population will generate increased demand for timber products
- replace pine plantations with community-based forestry to plant trees for high value sawn timber production
- allow commercial firewood harvesting to continue (currently produces approximately 3,000 cubic metres per year)
- allow woodchop log harvesting to continue in a specific coupe
- allow domestic firewood collection to continue
- more thought needed on how firewood is allocated and distributed so that it remains a sustainable resource
- phase out domestic firewood harvesting
- restrict trail bike riding, four wheel driving and hunting in the Wombat-Macedon block due to impacts on the environment and other recreation users
- trail bike riding and four wheel driving promote the spread of weeds and fungal diseases in headwater areas
- minimise conflicting uses by identifying appropriate areas within each park
- Aboriginal cultural burning should be increasingly promoted and resourced
- Taungurung people want camping to continue in Cobaw Conservation Park so that Aboriginal Traditional Owners and the public can enjoy Country
- interpretive signage should provide information on culturally significant sites
- allow dispersed camping in the Wombat forest, especially in areas that can be reached by established tracks
- allow campers to harvest dry/aged fallen timber for use at campsites

- rapid increases in some activities are occurring with population growth (e.g. mountain bike riding)
- fuel reduction burning is not well managed e.g. out of control burns in Cobaw forest
- identify fire research sites in Wombat forest and explicitly provide for the research to continue
- queries from Crown land licensees in Wombat State Forest about implications for their licences
- extend proposed Wombat Regional Park around townships near or surrounded by the proposed national park
- a smaller national park around the Lerderderg makes sense and could always be expanded in the future
- an enlarged Wombat Regional Park could have additional restrictions to help protect vulnerable areas and wildlife (rather than creating a national park)
- Hanging Rock and Mount Macedon should be national parks to protect natural values while catering for large numbers of visitors



5. Final report

VEAC will take the input it received from all consultation activities into account in formulating its final recommendations for public land in the Central West Investigation area.

Council thanks the more than 3,000 people who engaged with the investigation and made the effort to provide VEAC with information, opinions and ideas on public land in the investigation area.

The final report – including the final recommendations – will be provided to the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change in June 2019 and published on VEAC's website within seven days.

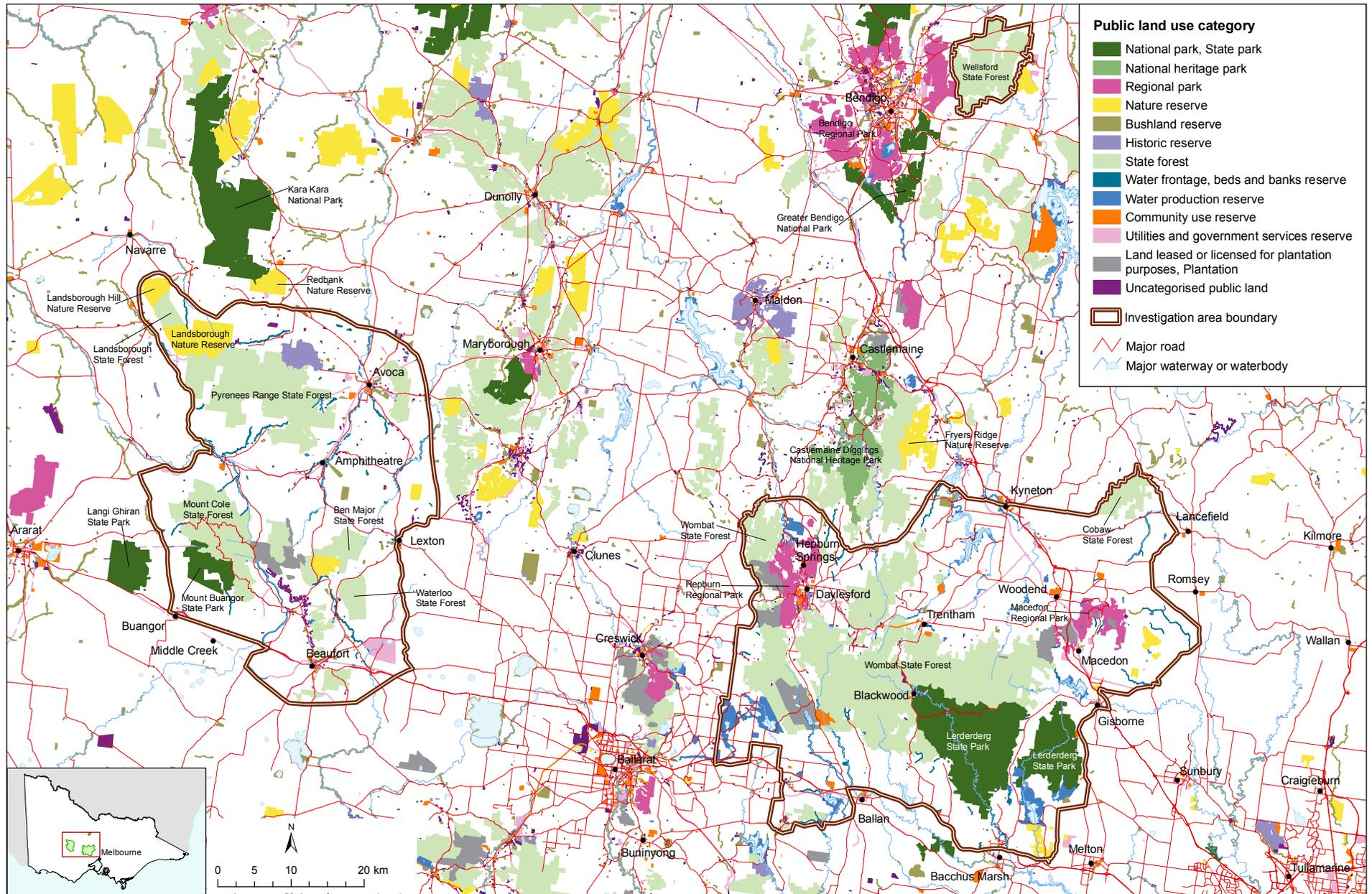
Notice of the publication of the final report will be issued via VEAC's website, Facebook page and email bulletin to the mailing list for the investigation.



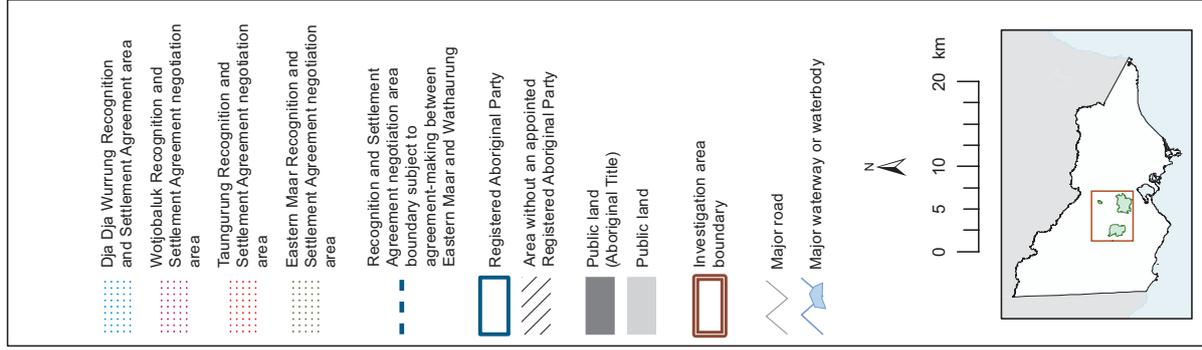
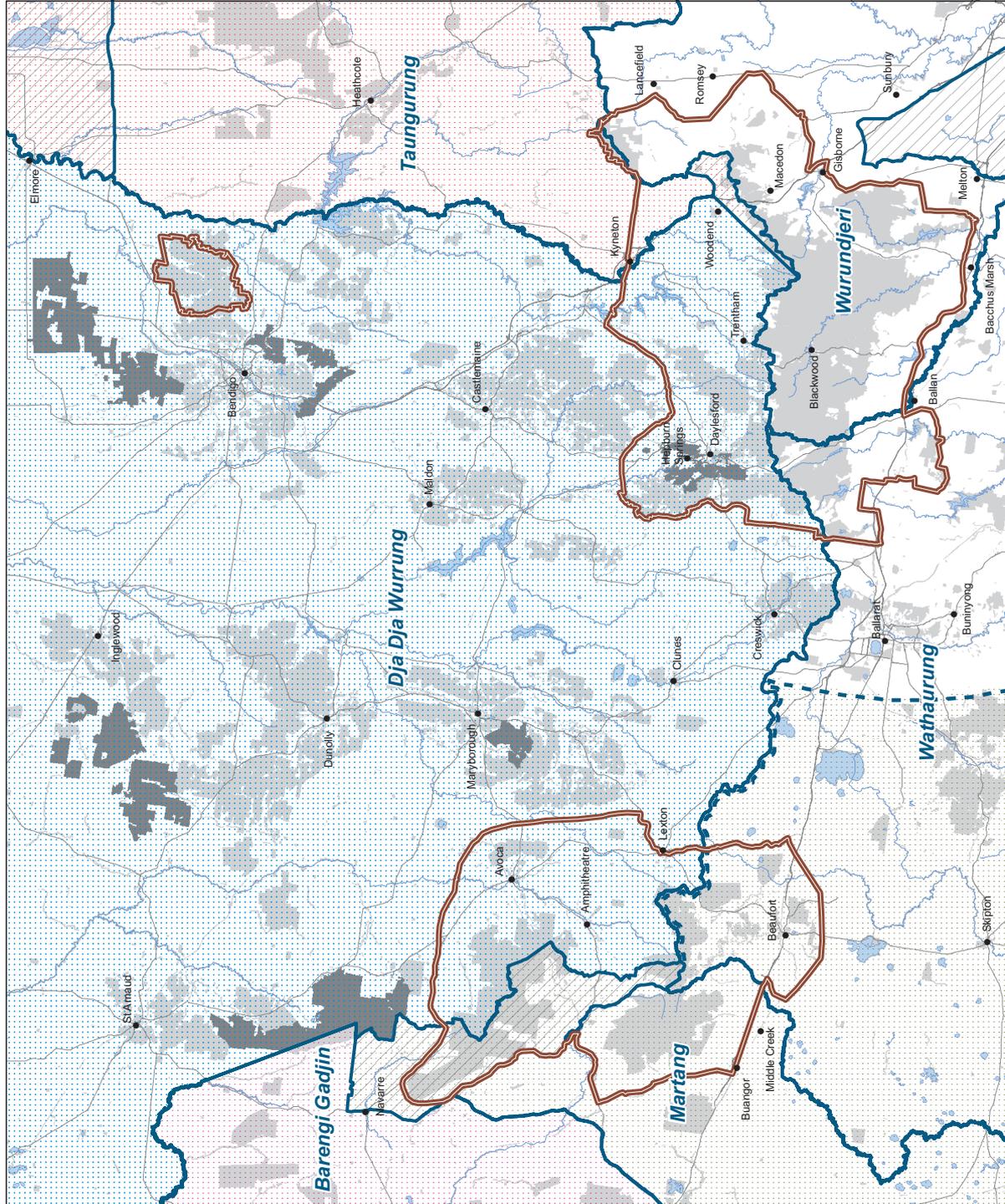
Appendix: Maps

1. Central West Investigation area – current public land
2. Traditional Owner Recognition and Settlement Agreement and negotiation areas
3. Draft recommendations for Mount Cole–Pyrenees block
4. Draft recommendations for Wellsford block
5. Draft recommendations for Wombat–Macedon block

Central West Investigation area - current public land



Recognition and Settlement Agreement and negotiation areas



RECOMMENDED

A2 Pyrenees National Park

Large new national park covering 16,076 hectares. Includes the existing Landsborough Hill Nature Reserve and Landsborough Nature Reserve.

RECOMMENDED

C1 Pyrenees Regional Park

New 4160 hectare regional park recommended over northern slopes of Pyrenees Range incorporating areas of most intensive recreation.

RECOMMENDED

E36 Glenmona Forest Bushland Reserve

New bushland reserve of 984 hectares incorporating two large old tree sites and significant native vegetation.

RECOMMENDED

D2 Ben Nevis Nature Reserve

Rocky northern flanks and peaks of the Mount Cole range recommended as new nature reserve of 1088 hectares.

RECOMMENDED

D5 Ben Major Nature Reserve

Additions of Chute and Ben Major state forests (2409 hectares) to Ben Major Nature Reserve.

RECOMMENDED

D6 Waterloo Nature Reserve

New nature reserve of 1695 hectares recommended over the small steep range containing important natural values.

RECOMMENDED

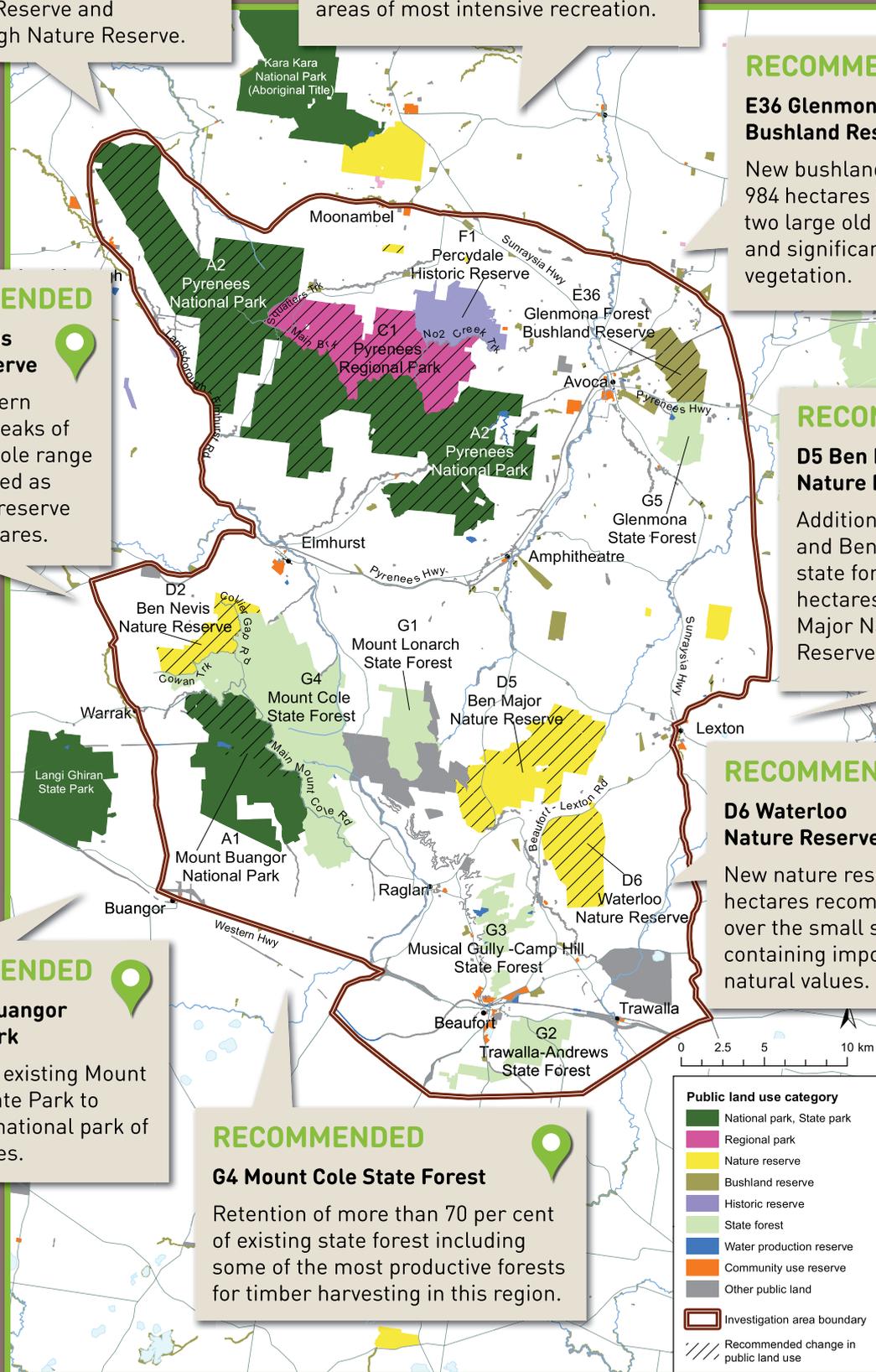
A1 Mount Buangor National Park

Additions to existing Mount Buangor State Park to create new national park of 3904 hectares.

RECOMMENDED

G4 Mount Cole State Forest

Retention of more than 70 per cent of existing state forest including some of the most productive forests for timber harvesting in this region.



Public land use category	
	National park, State park
	Regional park
	Nature reserve
	Bushland reserve
	Historic reserve
	State forest
	Water production reserve
	Community use reserve
	Other public land
	Investigation area boundary
	Recommended change in public land use

RECOMMENDED

D8 Wellsford Nature Reserve

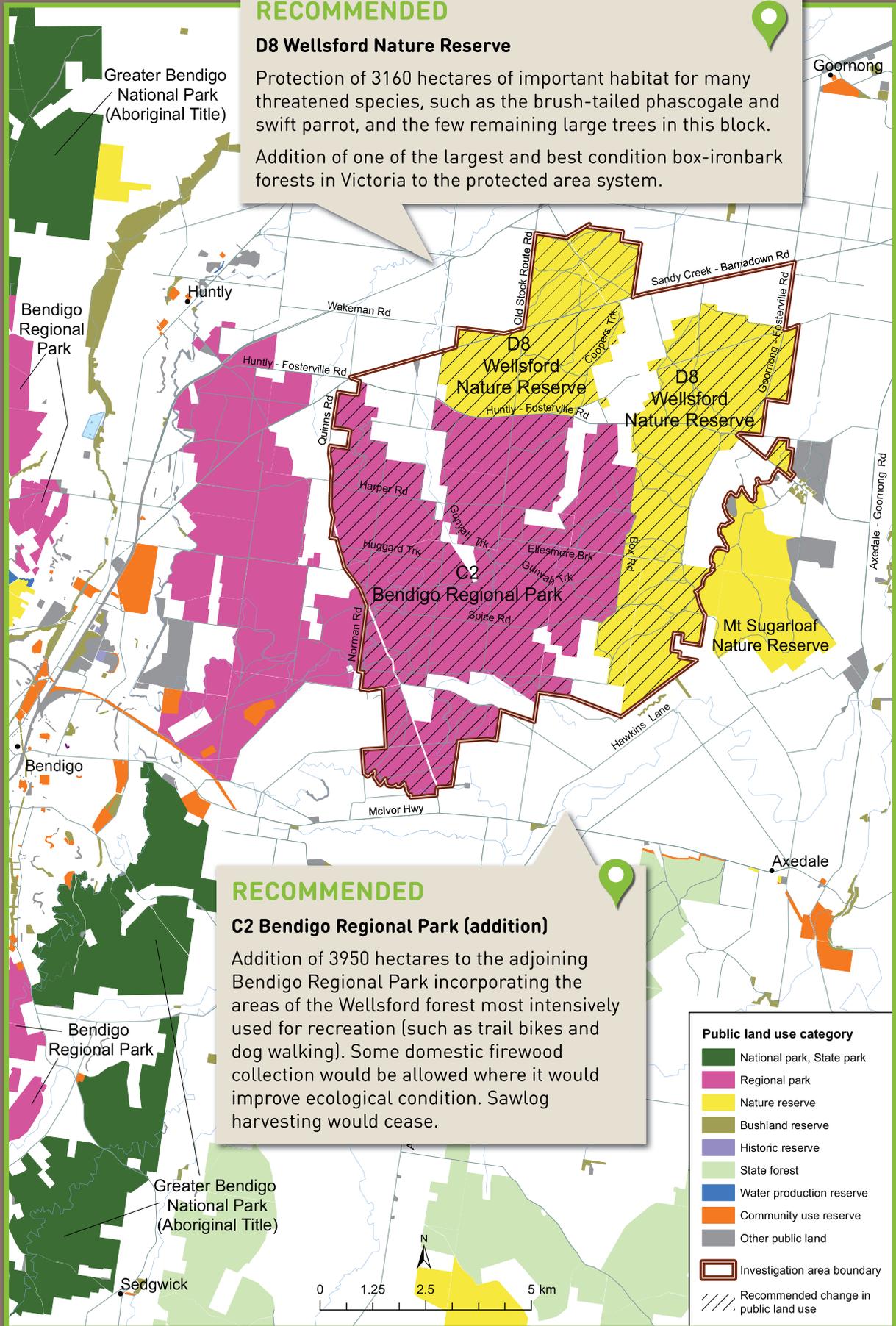
Protection of 3160 hectares of important habitat for many threatened species, such as the brush-tailed phascogale and swift parrot, and the few remaining large trees in this block.

Addition of one of the largest and best condition box-ironbark forests in Victoria to the protected area system.

RECOMMENDED

C2 Bendigo Regional Park (addition)

Addition of 3950 hectares to the adjoining Bendigo Regional Park incorporating the areas of the Wellsford forest most intensively used for recreation (such as trail bikes and dog walking). Some domestic firewood collection would be allowed where it would improve ecological condition. Sawlog harvesting would cease.



DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDED

B1 Hepburn Conservation Park

New park protecting 2714 hectares containing high natural values and important habitat for threatened species such as the brush-tailed phascogale.

RECOMMENDED

C3 Hepburn Regional Park

Additions of 740 hectares to the existing park.

RECOMMENDED

A3 Wombat-Lerderberg National Park

Large new national park (includes the existing Lerderberg State Park) covering 52,853 hectares. Protection of water catchments and headwaters, and high value habitat for threatened species such as Wombat bossiaea, square-tailed kite, powerful owl and greater glider.

RECOMMENDED

C4 Wombat Regional Park

New regional park (in two parts) covering a total of 9149 hectares in the areas of most intensive recreational use and around towns. Domestic firewood collection recommended to continue.

RECOMMENDED

B2 Cobaw Conservation Park

New park protecting 2532 hectares important for landscape connectivity and habitat for many woodland birds and threatened species.

RECOMMENDED

C5 Macedon Regional Park

Additions of 153 hectares to the existing regional park. Area of 177 hectares to be included in proposed new Black Forest Nature Reserve.

