

Victorian Government Response to Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Remnant Native Vegetation Investigation Final Report



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MINISTER'S FOREWORD

I am pleased to present the Victorian Government's response to the Remnant Native Vegetation Investigation Final Report from the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC).

Council has an important role in providing independent advice to Government on issues related to public land. VEAC has undertaken a thorough investigation, which drew upon scientific and community knowledge of remnant native vegetation on public land.

These remnants are increasingly important for biodiversity conservation and ecological connectivity, particularly in the context of fragmented landscapes and threats such as climate variability.

The community and landholders across Victoria are undertaking valuable work to improve the conservation values of some of these areas of remnant native vegetation whether on small reserves, riparian public land or on the public private land boundary. The Government will continue to support them in this work and ensure that coordinated approaches between public land managers and other relevant agencies achieve the best outcomes across local, regional and state-wide levels.

The Victorian Government is committed to action to achieve ecological connectivity and integrated biodiversity. There are currently many policies and programs that are working towards these aims and the Government will continue to ensure that the most efficient and effective approaches are used. The outcomes of this important investigation by VEAC, and the recommendations of its report, will continue to be a valuable guide for the Victorian Government in these efforts.

THE HON RYAN SMITH MP

Minister for Environment and Climate Change

The Remnant Native Vegetation Final Report by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council was publicly released on 7 April 2011. In accordance with the *Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001*, (S25(1)) this Victorian Government Response addresses each of the recommendations made in the report.

Integrated delivery of biodiversity actions

Recommendation 1

Government support the integrated on-ground delivery of biodiversity actions by progressively establishing – in general accordance with the guidelines on page 39– an ongoing program across fragmented landscapes in Victoria, at three levels:

- a) local programs for all suitable landscapes with a nominated coordinator from an appropriate agency to enhance existing programs, drive planning and implementation, focusing on mapping and realising opportunities to improve ecological connectivity**
- b) regional administrative support, prioritisation of local programs building on existing expertise and initiatives, and support for a stakeholder steering committee**
- c) state-wide coordination of program establishment, regional prioritisation, reporting and monitoring.**

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government recognises the importance of ecological connectivity and an integrated approach to the implementation of biodiversity actions at a local, regional and state-wide level in order to achieve this.

The Government has local, regional and state-wide programs for biodiversity actions in place, including administrative support through the Department of Sustainability and Environment. As part of this approach, biodiversity actions are being integrated with environmental and landscape health and carbon biosequestration.

The establishment of any additional programs and associated administrative and coordination support requires further consideration in recognition of these existing programs, strategic priorities and management needs. Links with the Regional Growth Planning Process and catchment management planning will be considered.

Incentives for biodiversity actions on private land and the public land-private land interface

Recommendation 2

Government continue to support and expand existing programs to encourage and assist private landholders to contribute to landscape connectivity and biodiversity enhancement on private land and adjacent public land.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government recognises the valuable contribution of private landholders, and we will continue to support them to ensure the delivery of public good outcomes through the establishment of priorities and investment decisions. State level priorities and coordinated investment processes will assist in achieving the most efficient and effective support for landscape connectivity and biodiversity enhancement. To inform this process, the Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) are preparing new Regional Catchment Strategies in 2012. Each CMA will be required to prepare and maintain regional biodiversity plans. Links with Regional Growth Plans and Regional Town Development Plans will also be considered.

The Government will continue to require DSE and other statutory bodies responsible for public land management to address landscape connectivity and biodiversity enhancement.

Recommendation 3

Government conduct an assessment of the wide range of potential mechanisms and incentives for private landholders to contribute to connectivity and biodiversity enhancement with a view to augmenting the range of mechanisms and incentives currently available.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

Government continually assesses the mechanisms and incentives for private landholders to contribute to connectivity and biodiversity enhancement. Decisions will be made on mechanisms and incentives used at the program and initiative level.

The Government will continue to require DSE and other statutory bodies responsible for public land management to address landscape connectivity and biodiversity enhancement.

Where appropriate, Government programs and initiatives will be coordinated with catchment management and local government processes to identify complementary land management opportunities.

Road and rail reserves

Recommendation 4

A comprehensive inventory of road reserves in use and used and unused rail reserves across the state be developed, populated with survey data collected according to the schedule in table 4.1 on page 45 and recording:

- a) location (GIS polygons mapped)**
- b) extent and ecological vegetation class (EVC) of native vegetation**
- c) other known biodiversity values such as presence of threatened species**
- d) site condition, landscape context, and likely trends in and threats to these**
- e) current and proposed management responsibilities and arrangements and maintained in an up-to-date spatially explicit database accessible to interested organisations and community groups.**

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government acknowledges the importance of up-to-date information to support management of remnant native vegetation and biodiversity, including on road and rail reserves. Much of the data recommended for collection already exists and can be integrated with existing databases.

Additional information within the scope of this recommendation will be collected as it is required for specific management purposes. Information outside existing databases is subject to availability of additional funding and will be considered in the light of other priorities and projects under way. Organisations and interest groups will be provided with access to information in accordance with government policy on information provision.

Recommendation 5

A system be developed to identify and map significant native vegetation values on road reserves in use and used and unused rail reserves, and appropriate management objectives and guidelines be developed for categories including:

- a) significant native vegetation within such reserves**
- b) reserves with little or no native vegetation but relevant to ecological connectivity (e.g. for revegetation or maintaining the condition of nearby native vegetation)**
- c) other native vegetation on road and rail reserves**

and that, using the data collected for the inventory recommended above, all appropriate rail and used road reserves across Victoria be managed accordingly.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

Much of this data currently exists or its collection and collation is being undertaken through various programs across Government. Information outside existing databases needs to be considered in the light of other priorities and projects under way and management needs.

The Government will ensure that conservation objectives are compatible with protection of road and rail corridors for their intended use and are balanced with other management objectives and to ensure public good outcomes are met. Considerations to be taken into account include preservation of road and rail corridors for their intended use, road and rail safety, fire prevention, settlement development and productivity from private land.

Recommendation 6

Managers, contractors and on-ground workers are made aware of their responsibilities and appropriate work protocols whilst working around native vegetation, and that mandatory formal education and training be incorporated into all accredited training courses.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

All persons, including managers, contractors and on-ground workers are required to comply with all relevant laws that apply to native vegetation. The Government continually assesses the need and appropriate mechanisms to improve awareness of these legal obligations.

Recommendation 7

A state-wide advisory committee comprising relevant government agency, public authority, local government, scientific and community representation be established to oversee the establishment and maintenance of the inventory of road reserves in use and used and unused rail reserves, the identification of significant native vegetation values for the management of road and rail reserves, the accredited training of managers, contractors and on-ground workers, and other relevant matters; and that consideration be given to establishing and operating the advisory committee within the scope of Victorian Local Sustainability Accord or its successor.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

Whilst the government accepts the need for a coordinated approach, this can be achieved under the current governance framework. The proposed role and function of a state-wide advisory committee and its potential value will be considered in relation to the existing framework.

Governance arrangements will need to ensure that the establishment and maintenance of road reserves are able to address and resolve competing management goals and the delivery of public good outcomes.

Recommendation 8

Government develop a policy to facilitate and guide the adoption of biodiversity conservation and ecological connectivity as management objectives for appropriate unused road reserves, with options for maintaining potential for future access where required.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government recognises the contribution that unused road reserves make to biodiversity conservation and ecological connectivity. Achieving long term biodiversity outcomes requires a landscape approach. Landscape planning may identify the need for the management of unused roads to be altered. On these occasions any amendments will need to be negotiated with affected licence holders and relevant stakeholders including private stakeholders. Links with the Regional Growth Planning Process and catchment management planning will be considered.

Riparian public land

Recommendation 9

That within ten years, at least 75 percent of public stream frontages abutting private land be managed, under grazing licence or other arrangements, primarily for biodiversity and water quality by undertaking:

a) fencing to control stock grazing, where appropriate;

b) revegetation and habitat restoration of cleared frontages;

and through measures such as incentives including those for reviewing Crown land licences and converting to conservation licence.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government supports landholders managing public stream frontages under licence, primarily for improved river health, biodiversity and water quality outcomes that provide benefits for rural Victorians. Re-vegetated streamsides can also ameliorate damage from extreme weather events such as flooding.

There are several initiatives across government addressing this recommendation which include activities such as fencing, provision of off-stream stock watering, revegetation and vegetation improvement and weed management. These facilitate improved management of priority stream frontages by creating a system that is manageable and not burdensome for licencees as this may lead to perverse outcomes such as incentives for farmers to forfeit their crown land licenses in preference to incurring the costs for managing the land for biodiversity and water quality outcomes.

Fencing of high value water frontages will proceed on a voluntary basis in partnership with adjoining land owners. The timing of implementation of this recommendation will be dependent on the demand for and uptake of existing programs. There is potential to build on the existing program of reviewing licences and conversion to riparian management licences.

Small public land reserves

Recommendation 10

Within five years, a program be completed to identify and reduce impediments to local-scale cooperative actions between public land managers and willing community members, and to establish a simple system to facilitate the uptake by organisations and individuals of stewardship agreements over small public land reserves, incorporating:

- a) a small number of standard agreement templates**
- b) voluntary and payment-based agreements, including conservation licences**
- c) a range of public land categories (mostly bushland areas and other categories of lesser conservation status, and mostly less than ten hectares in size)**
- d) resolution of potential legal liability issues**
- e) clarification of the public land use status of small public land blocks subject to stewardship agreements**
- f) training programs for organisations and individuals entering into stewardship agreements**
- g) procedures for monitoring and reporting uptake and efficacy of stewardship agreements, and**
- h) a framework for prioritising locations and tenures of small public land reserves for stewardship agreements.**

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government recognises the value of cooperative actions between public land managers and the community to improve conservation values of small public reserves. Determining the preferred approach to facilitate local-scale co-operative actions will need to be considered in light of other government priorities and projects.

Recommendation 11

Government provide adequate additional resources for stewardship agreements.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

Resources for management, including stewardship agreements are allocated based on investment frameworks designed to deliver outcomes. Where stewardship agreements are the most efficient option for achieving the outcome, Government investment will occur.

Protected area system

Recommendation 12

Government initiate investigations of public land use in the following bioregions (in descending order of priority) to, amongst other things, assess them against the need to provide for the creation and preservation of a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of protected areas:

- a) Wimmera (south), Dundas Tablelands and Glenelg Plain**
- b) Gippsland Plain and Strzelecki Ranges**
- c) Central Victorian Uplands**

The Government does not support this recommendation.

The Government acknowledges the importance of a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system in achieving conservation outcomes and the need to ensure protected areas and other public land is sustainably managed.

The Government will give consideration to existing programs, strategic priorities and management needs in determining future investigations of public land use.

Knowledge, information and awareness

Recommendation 13

A project be established to:

- a) identify and map the current extent, condition and landscape context of remnant native vegetation in fragmented landscapes where:
 - (i) sites are at most risk of significant decline, and**
 - (ii) prioritise measures to prevent or mitigate biodiversity loss in sites in (i), where appropriate,****
- b) initiate ongoing state-wide monitoring and reporting on trends in extent, site condition and landscape context, and**
- c) continue to refine and update state-wide native vegetation modelling with particular attention to improving extent and site condition modelling of grassy native vegetation.**

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government is updating a number of key data sets, including state-wide extent and condition and land cover. Any further work will be undertaken in accordance with the needs and priorities for management, and wherever possible, integrate the findings of this investigation into catchment management planning.

Recommendation 14

Government continue to encourage new approaches and research such as NaturePrint and Landscape Logic to address new and emerging information needs, particularly the quantification of the improvements in conserving remnant native vegetation.

The Government supports this recommendation.

The Government will continue to encourage new approaches and research to address new and emerging information needs.

Recommendation 15

State-wide mapping of wetland vegetation, site condition, EVCs and natural values be undertaken incorporating the effects of changes to water regimes and the ephemeral or dynamic nature of many wetlands.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government recognises the value of up-to-date information for managing remnant native vegetation, noting that some of this work is currently being undertaken. Any further work will be undertaken in accordance with needs and priorities for management.

Recommendation 16

Government support measures to increase awareness, appreciation, education and interpretation of remnant native vegetation and ecological connectivity across Victoria.

The Government supports this recommendation.

The Government recognises that awareness raising programs like Landcare are particularly important for long term protection and enhancement of conservation values.

Recommendation 17

Communication of information arising from the implementation of these recommendations and any new or ongoing government work pertinent to remnant native vegetation be greatly expanded and streamlined, including:

- a) presentation of a single well-publicised internet location of all relevant Victorian current and new data, analysis, interpretation, policy, and programs**
- b) a program to alert stakeholders as new information becomes available.**

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government recognises effective and efficient provision of information and data to communities and stakeholders is important to assist them in their work on conservation and environment programs. Information will continue to be communicated to communities and stakeholders consistent with government policy on information provision.

Implementation and ongoing public land management

Recommendation 18

State and local governments work collaboratively with relevant industries, stakeholder groups and communities to implement the approved recommendations.

The Government supports this recommendation.

The Government recognises the value of a collaborative approach with industries, stakeholder groups and communities. Government will continue to work collaboratively with these groups, taking into account that the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders need to be clarified.

Recommendation 19

Government allocates adequate financial and staff resources for implementation of these recommendations and to ensure that the objectives of the recommendations are achieved.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

The Government will ensure that appropriate actions are taken to implement the recommendations to the extent that each has been accepted, as required under the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001.

Recommendation 20

Government allocates additional resources to address current and future public land needs across fragmented landscapes, with priority given to maintenance or improvement of site condition and landscape connectivity, pest plant and animal control, and an on-ground management presence.

The Government supports this recommendation in principle.

A landscape approach will be taken, focussed on opportunities to improve ecological connectivity and improve site condition. Investment decisions will continue to be based on strategic priorities and management needs.

