

9<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Frances Cincotta

Dear VEAC Council members,

RE: Central West Investigation – draft proposals paper.

I would like to make a submission concerning the future of our local native forests. I live in central Victoria where I own and run an indigenous plant nursery, and as a volunteer I lead monthly community walks in local bushland areas and am President of Newstead Landcare group. So both in my work and my leisure time I am involved in nature conservation and appreciation.

Your investigation has been very thorough and I am delighted with the draft recommendations for most of the public land under consideration to be upgraded to higher conservation status than it has presently, especially the extra almost 50,000 ha to be accorded the highest conservation status possible, National Park and State Park, and that the government commit to funding these new or expanded reserves appropriately. I would also like to see Mt Cole and Mt Lonarch upgraded from State Forest to National Park so that they too are protected from commercial logging and mining, and to help protect the future of the threatened species: Mountain Brush-tail Possum, Ben Major Grevillea and Mt Cole Grevillea.

Two things I do not agree with however are the activities of firewood collection and apiary on public land. As I argued in my submission to the ECC re the Box-Ironbark Forests and Woodlands investigation 18 or so years ago I believe that introduced honey bees have no place in our public forests because the bees extract nectar and pollen that is rightly food for the native birds, invertebrates and small mammals that have always lived there.

There is plenty of cleared private land for bee keepers to grow the plant species that the bees need to use to make honey, for graziers to graze their herds, and for people to grow trees that can be harvested for wood. It is time these industries moved out of public forests altogether.

Just because these extractive activities have been allowed in public forests in the past is not a good enough reason to allow them to continue. If the government allows timber, firewood, nectar and pollen to be taken from a patch of public forest it not only decreases the biodiversity values of that patch it also means that consumers are not paying the full and true costs of production of wood and honey, and this disadvantages more ethical producers.

DELWP's domestic firewood collection policy is unfathomable and unfair. On page 61 of your report it says '16 cubic metres may be collected per household each financial year, yet it is estimated that a typical household uses less than 6 cubic metres per year'. Why allow nearly 3x more than needed for each household, and for free?! As a seed collector I am expected to pay for a Forest Operators License and to pay royalties to DELWP for the seed I collect to use in my nursery *just to enable habitat restoration in my local area*, yet DELWP allow other people to go in with no license at all to cut up and take away wood for free and in doing so they wreck a lot of the understorey species and create many new tracks and disturbance which allows more weeds to enter and take hold! This policy seems to encourage exploitation of a public resource and no oversight encourages illegal activity. To say that 'local communities rely on free firewood' is no argument. Of course if people can get things for free they will do that rather than pay. If people are not allowed to take wood for free they will find other ways to warm themselves such as buying solar panels for their roofs and air conditioners and insulating their homes better. Lots of other beings truly "rely" on wood – fungi, invertebrates, slime moulds. Wood has an ecological function as well as being useful for humans!

I'm very concerned about the numbers of hectares of our public forests that are still pre-emptively burned each year despite the 5 percent annual target supposedly being dropped for a more risk-based approach. I note the case study of the Ben Major Grevillea declining with increased fire frequency combined with climate change on page 20 of your report, but that concern doesn't seem to come into any of your recommendations. Whether it is Aboriginal people or white people performing the burns I would like to see more evidence-based approach to use of fire as a management tool, i.e. stated objectives before the burn, both in terms of ecological outcomes required as well as fuel reduction objectives and thorough ecological assessment before and afterwards so that it can be judged whether fire is in fact an effective tool. For me if more area is put into parks, but then substantial areas are deliberately burnt each year, that defeats conservation principles.

On page 31 the draft paper describes how grazing by domestic stock takes place on public land under licences administered by DELWP. "In the investigation area some 1660 hectares of unused government road (often indistinguishable from the adjoining private freehold land) is held under 912 licences used largely for primary production, mostly grazing". Rather than the state government being in the business of farming, could you recommend that crown land that is currently cleared and grazed be sold to fund the purchase of high conservation value land abutting existing public forests?

In summary I hope your final report to State Government in March 2019 has an even higher regard for conservation values than your excellent draft, with large parks in all 3 areas studied: Wombat, Mt-Cole-Pyrenees and Wellsford, and with no exemptions for apiarists and firewood collectors. Our public forests have been valued for their free provision of goods for over 2 centuries, but now it is time we appreciate their intrinsic values – the remarkable flora, fungi and fauna and

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