

9 December 2018

Victorian Environment Assessment Council
Level 15, 8 Nicholson Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Sir / Madam

I wish to advise that I am against the reclassification of forests; in particular the Central West Investigation area but also the other areas that are being investigated.

My husband and I sold up in Melbourne and moved to Bendigo just this year so that we could enjoy living in a rural environment. As you know Bendigo is surrounded by forest and is a wonderful city built on gold mining which is still ongoing today.

I am a recreational prospector and have been for the past 5 years. My passion is to metal detect for gold and having retired just last week, am finally free to spend our golden years enjoying everything that nature provides. The thing we love more than anything else is to be able to enjoy the peace of the bush, walk around with our metal detectors. We want to be able to camp in our own camping areas, not squeezed into designated areas with a bunch of other people we don't know.

In my time as a recreational prospector I believe I have supported many, many restaurants, motels and other small businesses in our weekend visits to the goldfields of Bendigo and surrounding areas. If the access had been limited this would never have happened and we would never have moved here.

Changing the status of the forests around Bendigo is not going to have any benefits for anyone or the forest itself. Some of my observations about the current state of the forest:

- It is a dumping ground for rubbish left behind or dumped deliberately by ignorant people too lazy to take it to the local tip etc. There are always people like this and changing the forest status is not going to alleviate that problem. Parks Victoria and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) do not have a budget to remove it so it stays and spreads and gets worse. I (and all my prospector friends) remove rubbish if we can and if we can't then report it. My time wandering through the bush has, if anything, had positive impacts. I take rubbish home with me EVERY visit. If it wasn't for recreational prospectors, the bush would remain a dumping ground. Every week there is more and more, and there does not seem to be any plan to overcome this.
- If we are not allowed to walk through the bush, then this won't happen. It is my experience though, that due to funding constraints, DELWP and the EPA don't action reports. We have it on good authority that a report of suspected dumped asbestos took six months with repeated follow ups before any action was taken.

- Many of the roads through the forest are in a terrible state. The budgets for road maintenance are almost non-existent. How does Parks Victoria expect people to be able to access any facilities if they can't get there? Access for the CFA in the event of a fire would also be difficult.
- There is evidence of damage done by feral animals. Changing the status to National or Regional Park will allow these pests to multiply and destroy the land and adjoining private properties.
- Forest floor fuel loads in the parks are at a dangerous level and to date there has only been two fuel reduction burns near Bendigo this season that I am aware of; one in Maiden Gully and the other near Woodvale. This is not nearly enough and because of the proximity of forest to the urban areas it is reasonable to be worried that there could be a similar disaster as happened on Black Saturday.

I have some serious concerns about how the investigation is being carried out. VEAC claims to be independent and unbiased, however the Council is stacked with members and past members (including office bearers) of organisations like the National Parks Association. The community reference group is small in number and does not represent all stakeholders.

The draft recommendations state that VEAC listened to a variety of opinions by many stakeholders, so I ask, if that is the case then why don't the recommendations reflect the opinions of all the forest users? It almost seems that the recommendations were decided upon right from the beginning and VEAC are just going through the motions!

One of the major flaws in the draft proposals paper is the lack of any economic impact studies. How can recommendations be made without this information? Claims have been made that eco-tourism will replace lost industries have no basis in fact for our region because the main reason visitors come to these forests is for gold prospecting. There is plenty of evidence of businesses closing after the establishment of National Parks due to tourism downturn. One recent example is the closure of the Eldorado Caravan Park after the formation of the Chiltern Mt Pilot National Park. When the Greater Bendigo National Park was created there was a promise of huge visitor numbers and many more jobs. There is no evidence of this happening.

To summarise:

- Visitors don't come to Bendigo because there is a national or regional park located here. They come to see the city, the art gallery the gold mine, the Chinese museum.
- The only visitors who are interested in our forests are recreational prospectors, other recreational users and travellers just want to use the free camping areas. Gold is still one of the major tourism drawcards for Bendigo today.
- Restricting the use of the forest will have a detrimental effect on the businesses that rely on gold tourism. All the small towns around the investigation area rely heavily on gold tourism to keep going and changing the status of the forests will turn them into ghost towns.
- Parks Victoria and DELWP do not have the budget and resources to look after the forest now and changing the status is only going to make the situation worse.
- The area will be overrun by feral animals and plants.

- The area will become a huge fire hazard.
- The local community will lose enjoyment. They won't be able to bring their dogs, collect firewood, shoot rabbits and foxes and do all the things that have contributed to community health and well-being.

The urgent needs that should be addressed are: -

- roads should be maintained;
- rubbish removed and working out ways to identify the dumpers;
- pest eradication
- fire prevention

I believe the best outcome is to leave the status of the forests in the Central West Investigation area as they are now but provide more resources so that they can be managed properly.

Yours sincerely

Sharyn Phillips