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Victorian Environmental Assessment Council
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Response to the Statewide Assessment of Public Land Discussion Paper and Draft Proposals Paper, Aug. 2016

The Wellsford Forest Conservation Alliance (WFCA) is pleased to have the opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper and Draft Proposals Paper. The WFCA notes the policy context informing the investigation including the Biodiversity Plan, the Victorian Water Plan, the review of native vegetation clearing regulations and the review of Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act. Review and development of these new plans may ultimately effect reclassification of public land and so it is with caution that we provide in principle support for the recommendation that a simplified and consolidated system of public land categories is adopted and that the categories proposed are aligned with the various Acts associated with reserving land. The WFCA supports Options 3 and 4 of the report where a comprehensive review with clear alignment to legislation is needed. However, in this response we comment on Recommendations 11 and 13 of the Draft Proposal Paper and note that there is no legislated purpose(s) for State forests. Importantly, the WFCA suggests that VEAC take the opportunity to influence change in the level of protection in some areas. In particular, we agree with the Paper's recommendation concerning the Central Victorian Uplands cluster with its inclusion of the adjoining Bioregions specifically the Goldfields Bioregion.

Background

The Wellsford Forest Conservation Alliance (WFCA) formed in 2014 to campaign for better protection for the Wellsford State Forest, home to 'The Big Trees' – the only nine remaining pre-European (400+years old) Red Ironbark's on public land in Bendigo. The forest is a significant bio-link that connects with the Heathcote forests to the east, south, and the Whipstick and Kamarooka forests to the north and west. There has been a greatly increased appreciation of the benefits to the community of Bendigo's National Park in the decade since this Park was created and of the ecological values of

important areas of forest which were excluded then - specifically, the Wellsford State Forest. This is an issue of increased social significance to the citizens and council of the City of Greater Bendigo. The WFCFA agree that consolidating existing categories may provide the opportunity to review and improve public land management which is sorely needed in areas such as the Wellsford State Forest. A stocktake of natural, social and economic values would be welcomed.

Environmental values

We note in the Discussion Paper that an effective approach to EVC is to conduct a detailed assessment incorporating the full range of public land values, socio-economic considerations and community views. Fifteen years have elapsed since the publication of the ECC report (Box-Ironbark Forests and Woodlands Investigation: Final Report 2001) and the WFCFA recommends a review of the Wellsford State Forest's status. An improvement in the conservation status of the forest will protect the remaining flora and fauna and prevent further habitat deterioration brought about by wood harvesting. An improvement in conservation status of the Wellsford is essential as the potentially destructive effects of climate change on the natural environment within the fragmented landscape of the Goldfields Region will be very difficult to manage, especially if combined with the disruptive effect of wood harvesting. Essentially, if we are to have a chance at retaining the flora and fauna that has survived the last two hundred years, wood harvesting in the fragile habitats such as the Wellsford must stop.

Research has contributed to the knowledge of the importance of protecting biodiversity and we note that the aim of Protecting Victoria's Environment-Biodiversity 2036 and the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act is to stop the decline. In this context, and noting 'permitted activities' (in Appendix 9) we think that State forests, which are said to be 'managed' under the *Forest Act 1958* and *Land Act 1958*, are exceptionally vulnerable. We recommend that the Wellsford State Forest, which is part of the Goldfields, be considered within the Central Victorian Uplands (cluster) that has been identified as an under-represented EVC (recommendation 11 of the Draft Proposal Paper). There is also an argument that the site of the Big Trees becomes a reference point. The Wellsford State Forest is not only home to the Big Trees but provides important habitat for threatened flora and fauna. For example, a vegetation assessment commissioned by the VNPA identified that, 'the forest contains two distinct grassy woodlands EVC's: low rise grassy woodlands which is considered vulnerable within the Goldfields bioregion, and Plains grassy Woodlands endangered within the Goldfields bioregion' (Better Protection for Special Places: Victorian National Parks Association Small Parks Project).

(cont.)

Economic values

Forests remain an economic asset to communities. We agree that a review of values, uses and appropriate land category for State forests is needed because land use has changed. Commercial harvesting for sawlogs and firewood needs review (recommendation 13 of the Draft Proposal paper). It has been argued elsewhere that native forests are worth more unlogged in terms of carbon credits and clean green economies. We suggest that the economic value of the industries such as the pollination industry and tourism along with the need for carbon sequestration all drive concerns about poorly managed forests such as the Wellsford, particularly now when there are private wood harvesting industries which reduce the need for the removal of native forest on public land.

Human health and wellbeing

We draw attention to the evidence that connection with nature contributes to human health and wellbeing and agree with the comments in the Discussion Paper that ‘many people value simply knowing that natural places exist whether they choose to experience them directly or not’. The Wellsford State Forest is close to a rapidly growing inland city and access to public land, nature and space will be critically important to the health and wellbeing of its citizens. Research shows that involvement in conservation and nature-based activities not only benefits the ecosystems in which we live, but also enhances community cohesion and improves individual mental health and wellbeing. We also know that the biggest threat to the health of the public this century is climate change. Heat deaths are rising and cities world-wide are planning to reduce the impact of city heat sinks by planting trees. The protection of existing forests makes environmental, social, psychological and economic sense. A business- as- usual approach does not.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glenda Verrinder". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Glenda Verrinder

On behalf of the Wellsford Forest Conservation Alliance