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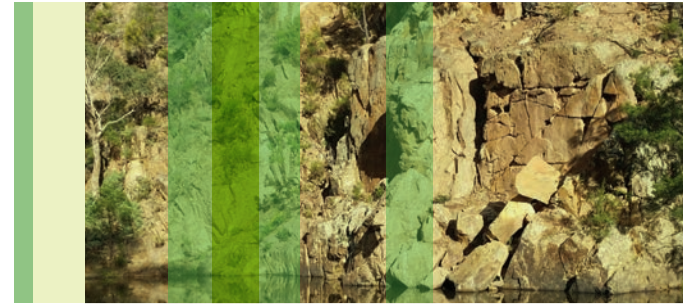
Central West Investigation Final Report

Summary

In March 2017 the Victorian government asked the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (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.

VEAC was requested to make recommendations for the balanced use and appropriate management arrangements to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural values.

VEAC has carried out a careful investigation of natural and cultural values, recreational activities and resource uses on public land in central west Victoria. It considered local and Aboriginal knowledge, scientific information and people's views expressed in thousands of submissions and face-to-face conversations. VEAC sought to balance the many competing demands on these forests in the face of increasing pressures on our natural environment.



Values and uses of public land in the investigation area

More than half of Victoria's land has been cleared – the most of any Australian state – and many of our native species rely on the public land that remains. The forests of central west Victoria include the tail end of the Great Dividing Range and support a relatively large proportion of Victoria's plants and animals, including 380 rare or threatened species.

For many of these species, resources such as food and breeding sites in the right kind of habitat are already in short supply. Dry conditions and hotter weather over recent decades put extra stress on habitats, individuals and populations.

The impacts of climate change on water production and bushfire risk are also being felt. The Wombat and Mount Cole–Pyrenees ranges contain the headwaters of several of western Victoria's major rivers, including the Wimmera, Loddon, Campaspe, Coliban, Maribyrnong, Moorabool and Werribee–Lerderderg rivers.

Over many tens of thousands of years of occupation, Aboriginal people have developed profound connections with their Country in central west Victoria. 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.

Recreation in natural environments – and associated tourism – is now the major use of public land in the investigation area. Residents and visitors enjoy a wide range of recreational activities here. Levels of use are expected to continue to increase, especially as the populations of Melbourne and regional cities and towns grow.

Timber harvesting has been declining over recent decades. However the demand for domestic firewood from public forests is high and apparently increasing. Many local residents collect firewood because they want an affordable source of fuel for domestic heating and cooking.

There is some gold exploration but little mining activity on public land within the investigation area. Recent geological modelling suggests that there may be undetected gold deposits at depth under parts of the investigation area.

The extinction crisis

An expert report released in May 2019 warns of a global decline in nature (biodiversity) – and it's happening faster than ever seen before in human history. There are alarming rates of extinctions and habitat loss or degradation in Victoria as well as other parts of Australia.

The investigation area's large tracts of inland wetter forest provide the only habitat in western Victoria for some species. For example the Wombat range is the westernmost location in which greater gliders are found. Other species occur nowhere else in the world; for example the Mount Cole grevillea, Pyrenees gum and Wombat bossiaea (a bush pea).

The drier box-ironbark forests in the northern parts of the investigation area are also crucial for the survival of many species. For example the swift parrot and a threatened community of birds rely on these areas when resources such as nectar are abundant every few years.

Another example is the brush-tailed phascogale – a small relative of the Tasmanian devil – which hunts for insects and spiders across a very large home range. This means that only small populations can exist in quite large areas of forest habitat. Tree hollows provide the safest dens for breeding in.

All of these species are known to have become much rarer in recent decades and some are down to very small numbers in the remaining patches of suitable habitat.



Developing the final recommendations

Balancing all these values and uses is a challenge. VEAC heard from many people that they want things to stay the same, and we understand that change is not always welcomed.

On the other hand, most people do not want to see our native species pushed closer to extinction. There was a passionately held and widely agreed view that many parts of these forests have been overused – especially through logging – and now need to be managed carefully to restore them to good condition for future generations.

VEAC made significant changes to the recommendations after the second round of consultation, to address community feedback where possible and take into account new information.

VEAC's final recommendations aim to protect areas of high natural and cultural value, and restore the health of these forests so they are more resilient to the impacts of climate change, increasing population pressures and habitat deterioration.

Four new or expanded national parks and two new conservation parks will be managed primarily for conservation although most recreational activities will continue to be allowed.

Six new or expanded regional parks allow a wider range of recreational activity, and some will also provide for domestic firewood collection for ten years. Smaller nature reserves and bushland reserves conserve significant patches of habitat and provide connectivity across the landscape, linking the larger blocks of forest for birds and other mobile species. See map overleaf.



Photo: Steve Smith, DELWP

Major recommendations for public land use

The Mount Cole–Pyrenees block covers 165,788 hectares, of which 54,760 hectares or 33 per cent is public land.

A2 Pyrenees National Park

Large new national park of 15,126 hectares including 4443 hectares of existing nature reserve.

C1 Pyrenees Regional Park

New 2016 hectare regional park incorporating areas of most intensive recreation.

G1 Pyrenees State Forest

Retention of 3099 hectares of existing state forest for timber harvesting, domestic firewood and additional recreational uses.

A1 Mount Buangor National Park

Additions to existing 2498 hectare Mount Buangor State Park to create new national park of 5282 hectares.

D2 Ben Nevis Nature Reserve

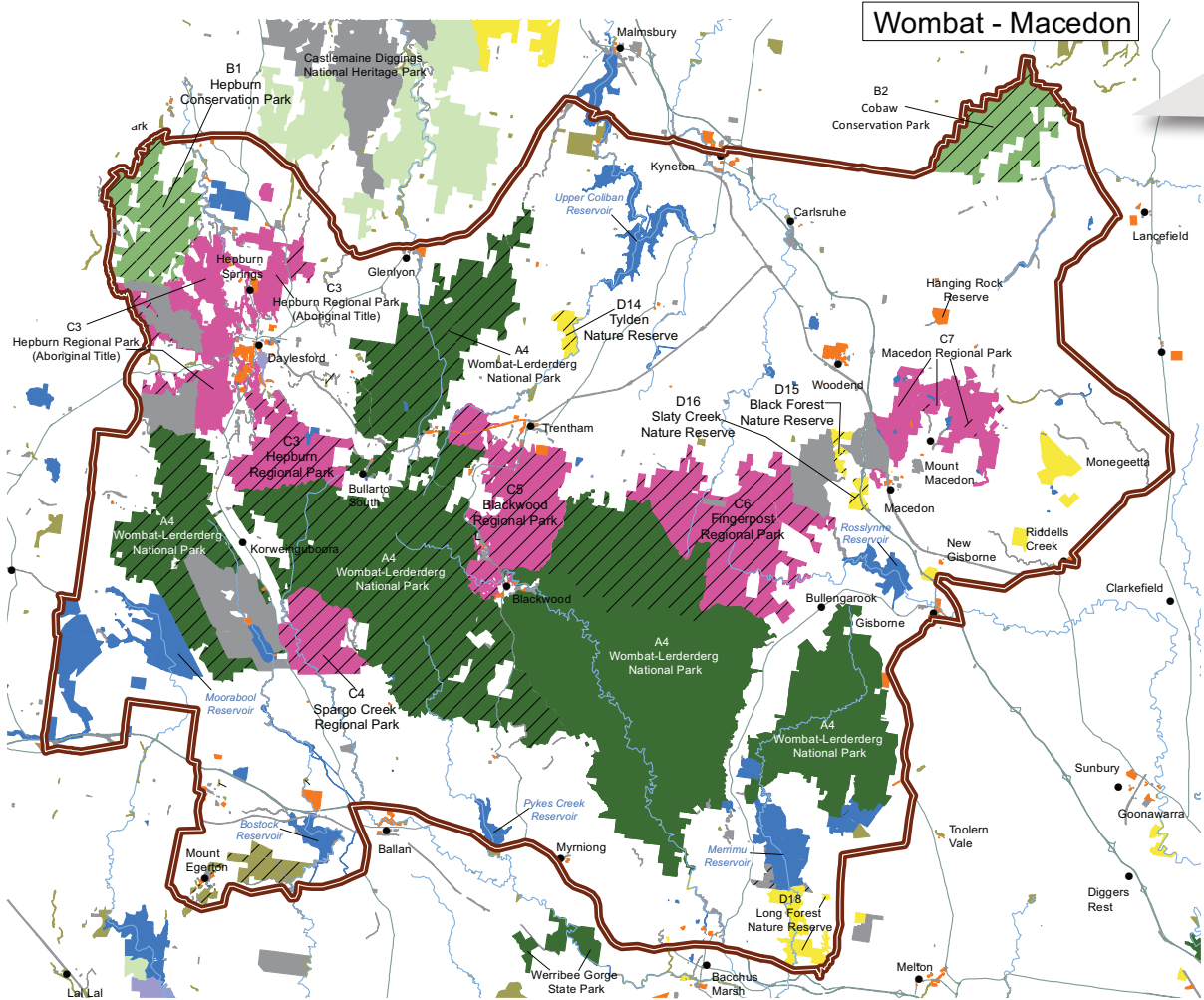
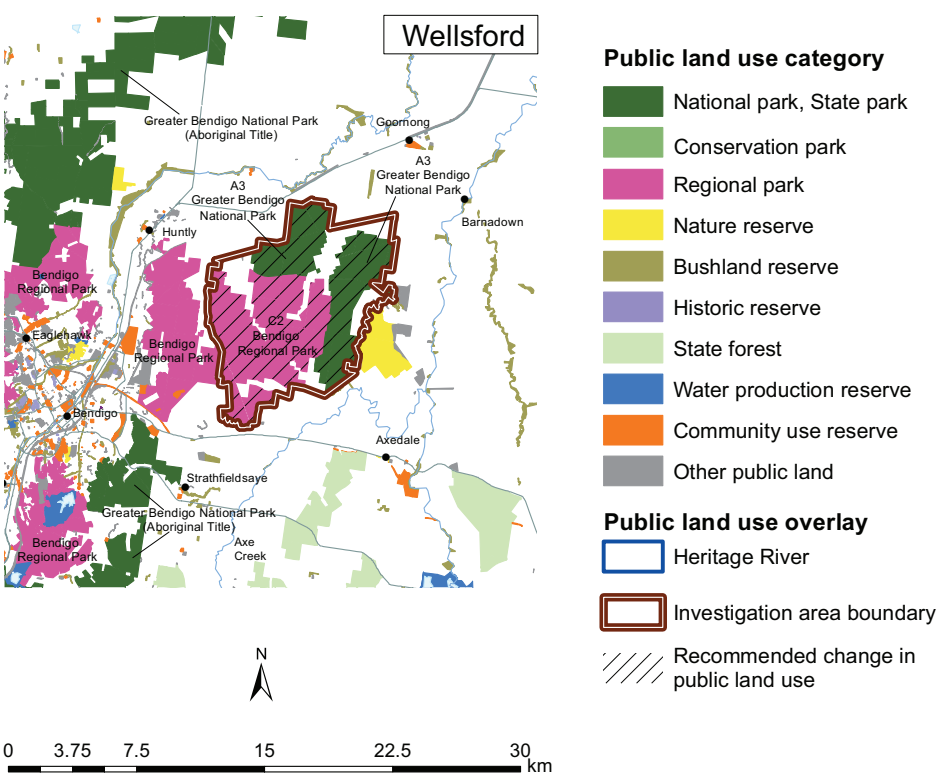
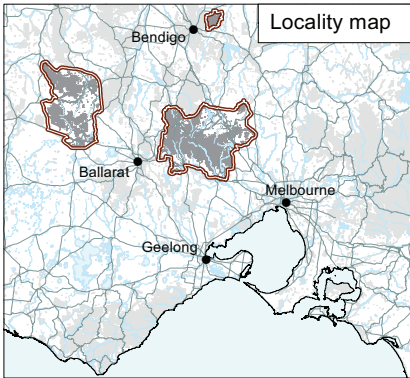
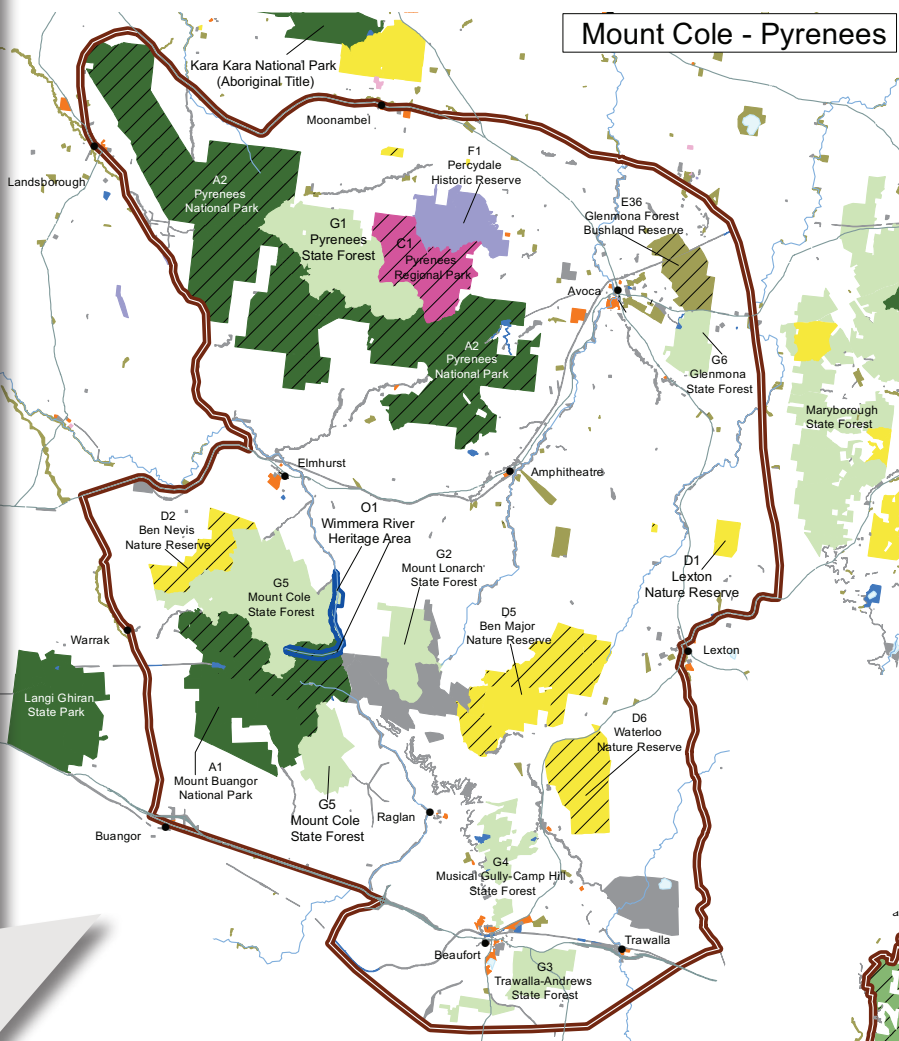
New nature reserve of 1088 hectares on the rocky flanks and peaks of the Mount Cole range.

G5 Mount Cole State Forest

Retention of 5037 hectares of existing state forest including some of the most productive forests for timber harvesting in this region.

O1 Wimmera River Heritage Area

Addition of 276 hectares to the existing Wimmera River Heritage Area (outside the investigation area) to protect cultural and ecological values of the Wimmera River's headwaters.



The Wellsford block is 9262 hectares in total, of which 7344 hectares or about 79 per cent is public land.

A3 Greater Bendigo National Park (addition)
Protection of 3152 hectares of important habitat for many threatened species and the few remaining large trees in this block.

C2 Bendigo Regional Park (addition)
3949 hectares incorporates the areas of the Wellsford forest most intensively used for recreation. Some domestic firewood collection would be allowed over a ten year phase-out period.

The Wombat–Macedon block covers 228,765 hectares, of which about 99,115 hectares or 43 per cent is public land.

A4 Wombat–Lerderderg National Park
Large new national park of 49,553 hectares (including the existing Lerderderg State Park) to protect water catchments and headwaters, and high value habitat for rare and threatened species.

A suite of new and expanded regional parks around the national park to provide for additional recreational uses. Domestic firewood collection would be allowed in the new regional parks over a ten year phase-out period.

- C3 Hepburn Regional Park**
Additions of 2947 hectares mostly in a popular area for recreation
- C4 Spargo Creek Regional Park**
New regional park of 1693 hectares
- C5 Blackwood Regional Park**
New regional park of 3707 hectares close to townships
- C6 Fingerpost Regional Park**
New regional park of 5442 hectares in a popular recreational area
- C7 Macedon Regional Park**
Additions of 153 hectares to the existing regional park and removal of 177 hectares to create the new Black Forest and Slaty Creek nature reserves.

B1 Hepburn Conservation Park
New park of 2714 hectares containing high natural values and important habitat for rare and threatened species.

B2 Cobaw Conservation Park
New park protecting 2532 hectares important for landscape connectivity and habitat for many rare and threatened species.

Labels for recommended public land units include the recommendation codes (A1, A2, B1 etc.) used in the final report.

Overview of allowed activities in different categories of public land in the Central West Investigation area

The information in this table applies generally to public land in the Central West Investigation area. Some specific conditions apply to certain parks and reserves. For more detail, see the final report or the fact sheets for the Mount Cole–Pyrenees, Wellsford and Wombat–Macedon blocks available on VEAC’s website.

Activity	National park (incl current state park)	Conservation park	Regional park	Nature reserve	Bushland reserve	State forest
Apiculture ¹	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bushwalking	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Camping ²	✓	✓	✓	○ ³	○ ³	✓
Nature observation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Four-wheel driving ⁴	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trail bike riding ⁵	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bicycle riding (including mountain biking) ⁶	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Horse riding ⁷	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Car rallies	○ ⁸	○ ⁸	✓	○ ⁸	✓	✓
Prospecting	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Dogs	○ ⁹	○ ⁹	✓	✗	✓	✓
Domestic firewood collection	✗ ¹⁰	✗	○ ¹⁰	✗	✗ ¹⁰	✓
Recreational hunting ¹¹	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Timber harvesting	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓

- Notes:
1. At licensed sites.
2. In designated areas where provided and in other areas as specified through management planning.
3. May not be provided in smaller reserves, where there is high day visitor use or where there are ample camping opportunities on adjacent land.
4. In registered vehicles on formed roads that are open to the public and on other formed roads and tracks as specified through management planning; off road driving is illegal on public land.
5. By licensed riders on registered vehicles on formed roads that are open to the public and on other formed roads and tracks as specified through management planning; off road riding is illegal on public land.
- ✓ Allowed ○ Allowed with conditions (see notes) ✗ Not allowed
6. On formed roads that are open to the public and on other roads, tracks and trails as specified through management planning.
7. On specified formed roads that are open to the public and on other roads and tracks as specified through management planning.
8. Competitive sections of car rallies generally not allowed in national parks, conservation parks and nature reserves; transport sections through these areas allowed subject to events policy and procedures.
9. May be allowed in visitor areas or along a limited number of tracks as specified through management planning.
10. Some current domestic firewood coupes will be allowed to be completed and a phase-out over ten years in some regional parks and additions to regional parks is recommended.
11. Recreational hunting for pest animals will be allowed on other public land if part of an authorised control program at the discretion of the land manager.

What is management planning?

Planning for an individual park enables the land manager to consider its special characteristics and patterns of use. Often, fine-scale planning is required to separate uses such as cycling and mountain biking, horse riding and walking from conflicting with each other. Areas of a park where dispersed camping can

take place will also be determined through management planning. Decisions about the most appropriate areas for such activities are made after consultation with the local community and relevant land user groups. Land managers then communicate these arrangements through park plans, parknotes and signage on site.

Why are some activities not allowed in national parks?

National parks are a key part of Victoria’s protected area (or conservation reserve) system and are managed mainly for protection of the natural environment and nature-based recreation. Protected areas in Victoria and around Australia use an international definition that requires them to be managed mainly to conserve nature and associated values (such as water catchments) and cultural values.

Activities that extract natural resources – such as recreational prospecting, firewood collection and hunting – are not usually allowed. Other activities (such as those involving exotic animals) that may disturb the

environment, wildlife or other recreational users are often allowed under conditions that reduce potential impacts. For example, horse riding may occur on specified formed roads and tracks in some parks, and dogs on leads may be allowed in restricted parts of some national parks.

Many activities such as four wheel driving, trail bike riding, mountain biking, horse riding and camping can take place in national parks as well as in conservation parks, regional parks and state forests. The rules for four wheel driving and trail bike riding are the same across parks, forests and other public land.

How are Aboriginal cultural values addressed?

The recommendations largely support Traditional Owners’ aspirations for park or reserve categories that protect the cultural and natural values of Country, while ensuring that everyone has access to public land to enjoy low-impact recreational activities. Some groups emphasised the cultural importance of rivers and requested that headwaters be protected.

Traditional Owners want to be respected and resourced to undertake joint planning and management activities on Country. VEAC recommended that adequate resources be allocated – to Traditional Owners and other land managers – for implementation of the recommendations, and that government collaborates with relevant groups regarding the naming of recommended new parks and reserves.

How will nature be protected?

The ecosystems of the central Victorian uplands, goldfields and plains are poorly protected. The creation of a ‘comprehensive, adequate and representative’ system of protected areas (in line with international and national targets) is a major factor that VEAC had to consider.

VEAC’s recommendations were designed to protect areas with high natural values including the headwaters of western Victoria’s major rivers and habitat for many rare and threatened species – in the expectation that climate change will put the natural environment under additional pressure over coming years.

Which recreational activities are affected by the recommendations?

Most of the activities that people enjoy in the outdoors can continue in national parks and conservation parks; for example bushwalking, camping, four wheel driving, trail bike and bicycle riding, and horse riding.

VEAC listened to community feedback about retaining access for a wider range of recreational activities in many areas, and made some changes.

For example in the Wombat–Macedon block, an extra 3583 hectares has been recommended for regional parks in key recreational or residential areas. In the Pyrenees range, 3099 hectares has been recommended as state forest where all activities are allowed, in addition to the 2016 hectare regional park. There are corresponding reductions in the extent of the adjacent national parks. In the Wellsford block the draft recommendation for the nature reserve is replaced by a recommended addition to the existing Greater Bendigo National Park in response to a range of issues raised by the community.

Hunting and prospecting are most affected by the overall reduction in state forest within the investigation area. However, the recommended removal of the game sanctuary at Mount Cole would enable recreational deer hunting to occur in the remaining state forest. The popular walking trails are included in the recommended national park where firearms would be prohibited.



Why is a forest restoration study recommended?

In response to community demand for better management to improve the condition of regrowth forests in the investigation area, VEAC has recommended that an independent research study be carried out to determine the most effective restoration treatments. The primary objectives would be to restore ecological health in regrowth forests, which would include providing high-quality habitat for the many plants and animals that rely on these forests and have been affected by alterations in forest condition.

Where can domestic firewood be collected?

VEAC considered the increasing demand for domestic firewood from the forests of the investigation area in the light of broader factors such as energy pricing, emerging technologies and domestic and commercial firewood access statewide.

VEAC's final recommendations provide for continuing access for domestic firewood in state forests and, for the next ten years, in some recommended regional parks where this would improve ecological condition, targeted to local communities most reliant on the resource.

Central West Investigation publications

The final report contains recommendations for policy and implementation, public land use categories and individual areas within the three blocks.

A suite of supplementary documents has been published along with the final report. They include a summary of consultation carried out during the investigation, fact sheets on each block and on key issues, reports from the Aboriginal community engagement project, a socio-economic analysis and the list of submitters.

For further information or to obtain copies of any of the investigation's publications go to www.veac.vic.gov.au or contact VEAC on the email address or phone numbers below.

Next steps

The Central West Investigation is now complete. VEAC's report containing final recommendations was submitted to the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change in June 2019. The final report and supplementary documents are available on VEAC's website.

Following the release of the report, the government has until early 2020 to respond to the final recommendations.

VEAC thanks the thousands of people who participated in this investigation by providing information, making submissions, attending drop-in sessions and meetings, and organising field trips.

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

VEAC was established in 2001 under the *Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Act 2001*. It provides the State Government of Victoria with independent advice on protection and management of the environment and natural resources of public land.

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