

Submission - Land and Biodiversity at a time of climate change.

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Introduction

The Benalla and District Environment Group (BDEG) appreciates being given the opportunity to comment on the formation of this important document. BDEG is a local group that has a large membership of people concerned about the environment. We are committed to contributing to the issues associated with climate change so that our biodiversity and the ecological processes that support it can be conserved and given the opportunity to flourish.

There needs to be a holistic approach to tackling climate change and the associated risks to biodiversity conservation, including dealing with sustainable agriculture. A document that does not refer to, integrate or somehow include how production areas are to contribute to biodiversity conservation, confront the challenges of climate change and meet the requirements of sustainable farming will neither be useful or result in outcomes that tackle climate change. The biggest challenges for biodiversity conservation are in production landscapes where the greatest threats to the widest range of biodiversity occur. To state that production areas (agricultural, forestry, fisheries etc) will be looked at in another document does not accept the relevance of managing all land and water in an integrated fashion for its affect on biodiversity values and the potential to assist in tackling the issues of climate change. A suggestion would be to have an overarching document that looks at the issue of climate change and threats to biodiversity and production and then have papers that address these two issues separately, if this is found to be necessary in the overarching document.

For example, it is impossible, at least initially, to try and identify the issues associated with climate change purely from the perspective of biodiversity conservation alone, as is recognised by the White Paper reference to economics and social issues. There is no greater evidence now than climate change itself that threatens our civilization and indeed a large proportion of all biota on Earth. We must accept and determine appropriate scales for both population growth and economic development. We have done this for water use in the Murray Darling Basin and we need to emulate this with land and people. This would be a sensible and reasonable recognition that resources are finite.

For far too long the fallacy of economic value being produced from capital and labour has led us away from reality. In a smaller and more crowded world this fallacy is laid bare. It is imperative that this nineteenth century notion is corrected and replaced with authentic values if we are not to simply repeat the past.

Biodiversity conservation should no longer be classified as a luxury: that is, addressed when all other social and economic issues have been accounted for. We must dispel the myth that economics is the basis of our well-being. Without a healthy functioning ecological system embracing biological diversity, we have nothing. Economics cannot reproduce it.

The market system should allow farmers to adapt with new enterprises, activities or either changing land use. This may include the need to provide stewardship incentives to landowners to change land use practices, particularly in marginal land. Irrigation is also currently unsustainable and great changes need to be made based on scientific principles with the emphasis changing from an economic model to an ecological one.

Conscious management through building/enhancing resilience into existing native vegetation/habitat needs to occur over large scales, to construct biolinks at the State, Regional, Landscape and local levels. These biolinks may be able to contain agricultural activity, but the efficacy of the links should be continually monitored to ensure active adaptive management.

The green paper needs to

1. Ensure that the document endorses the general view that in addressing climate change it is critical that the resilience of native ecosystems is enhanced so that natural systems can continue to play their role in ecosystem services.
2. Protection and enhancement of existing remnants should be a priority
3. Focus on reducing carbon emissions as a priority and then offsetting through carbon sequestration programs
4. Have specific targets that address climate change issues, and include funding arrangements that will allow for the delivery of those targets.
5. Be strategic in delivering the best outcomes for biodiversity conservation with knowledge of risks associated with climate change.
6. Consider a range of scales in determining priorities for land use change, eg biolinks at the State level, catchment, region, landscape and local levels.
7. Address the issue of continued land clearing through the current inadequate 'Net Gain' approach, which continues to allow for clearing, particularly of scattered paddock trees, and where native vegetation listed under acts such as the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act and Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act can be cleared because of exemptions. A tightening of native vegetation clearing controls, greater policing of these controls, and enforcement of offset conditions must occur.

2. What Impacts will climate change have on these values?

General issues:

We do not know all the effects of climate change on ecosystems because we have a limited understanding of the interactions and feedback loops, and therefore how changes will affect the functioning of ecosystems. However, this should not impede our commitment to tackling the issues and ensure that active adaptive management is part of our strategy. There is sufficient evidence that climate change is affecting

natural systems, and many species are likely to reach extinction as they cannot evolve and adapt to the rapid change in conditions. We have also seen how this affects our wellbeing and economic future, as more money is spent on understanding and trying to ameliorate the effects of climate change. In addition, the health of the environment is integral with our economic wellbeing and economics and the environment should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, or as competing interests.

Roles and responsibilities of individuals, community and government and how can we maximize the effectiveness of our joint effort?

General comments

There is an urgent need to recognise and promote/inculcate the value that ecological systems and processes underlie our social and economic well-being and security. Ecosystem services provided by healthy environments should be fundamental in ensuring that biodiversity conservation is given the highest priority for funding by governments. Funding should be based on scientific, expert advice on what is really required to address climate change, and it should not result in a document and actions that are not properly funded, providing only lip service to addressing climate change.

There are too many documents that have not been implemented within government organisations. Many existing documents provide 'answers' for what needs to occur to conserve biodiversity (eg Victorias Biodiversity, LC, ECC and VEAC documents, threatened species recovery plans, etc) but no funding has been provided, nor staffing levels adequate, to implement the required actions. We need to stop reinventing the wheel and actually implement the programs.

3. Other threats and opportunities

Opportunities for change include defining bio-links over large areas of the state, carbon trading, social equity through stewardship programs and economic opportunities to landowners that manage land for conservation purposes. The incentives should be sufficient enough to ensure large scale and permanent land-use change, for example, the application of Conservation Covenants or land purchase for conservation outcomes. Exceptional circumstances payments or drought assistance payments without land use change should be ceased as this is not sustainable and is inequitable.

Incentives for land use change away from agricultural activities should include an expanded BushTender system allowing a market-based approach. However, this should be monitored for effectiveness and used in conjunction with other incentives schemes where high priority areas are targeted (eg biodiversity action planning). There should be a strategic approach to where incentives are paid that results in real land use change, not just keeping existing remnants but also building on those remnants over large scales, that results in large remnants and biolinks being achieved.

Biolinks should be formally recognised in law with the application of these geographic areas in Local Government Planning Schemes with biodiversity conservation as the primary objective. Environmental Guidelines, that minimise ecological footprints, should be attached to these areas to minimise risks with future development or urban encroachment.

Employment opportunities could include revegetation for carbon sequestration, pest plant and animal management (especially in our reserves and parks), commercial kangaroo management and harvesting, and timber production for local long-term uses and biomass energy production.

Greater resources need to be made available for effective and sustained ecological management of our conservation reserves.

Opportunities for the creation of further conservation reserves should be explored and capitalised on.

Within the context of a drier climate, fire, both agency-created through 'fuel reduction' or 'ecological burning', as well as wildfire, is a threat to the integrity of our biodiversity and its ability to recover. Wildfires have become much more intense and widespread. The whole public perception and agency attitude and actions towards fire needs to be addressed. A more ecologically sensitive approach to fuel reduction must be adopted, that is truly based on protection of assets, rather than burning thousands of hectares purely for reporting purposes. Ecological burning should only be carried out when intensive monitoring has been undertaken and results depict that using fire as a management tool will contribute to enhanced biodiversity outcomes. It is unacceptable to keep burning an exorbitant number of hectares of land purely for public appeasement. Education and awareness programs can be adopted to address this, rather than the current extreme, degrading and expensive agency reaction of large-scale burning.

4. How well are current institutional arrangements working and how could they be improved to deliver sustainable land, water and biodiversity outcomes?

Ensure that agencies can work together, guided by the same principles. This must include as a priority FOR ALL AGENCIES the issues associated with climate change. (eg if CMAs set priorities and strategic direction for biodiversity conservation with respect to climate change then that direction needs to be a priority for water authorities, DSE, Parks Victoria, DPI, CSIRO, Local Government and any other land management agencies. There is a need for a much better coordinated approach to land use management so that for all agencies are working towards the same goals.

Local Government is currently under-resourced and staff lack expertise and experience in dealing with biodiversity issues. Planning permit conditions for native vegetation removal are not being implemented and the enforcement of this from LG does not happen. 'Net Gain' is merely a concept, unless realistic resources are allocated to LG to police vegetation clearing – legal and illegal. Strategic Planning with LG barely exists. There is potential for vast improvements here with appropriate

planning scheme overlays that depict land capability, including areas for conservation or 'biolinks'.

There needs to be a long-term approach to implementing required actions associated with biodiversity conservation. The funding cycle revolving around (typically) three year electoral terms are not long enough. No long term monitoring, best-practice preparation and techniques for landscape restoration, or application of continuous improvement from any learnings can be carried out with such short time frames. Further, the inability for government agencies to provide long-term, consistent incentives, results in landowners feeling disillusioned with the process. Many of these landowners are in high priority areas and the lack of incentives to ensure that remnants are protected and enhanced is unacceptable.

