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Subject Submission on preparation of Land and Biodiversity White Paper

I have attached our submission on the development of a White Paper on Land and Biodiversity

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BIODIVERSITY IN BASS VALLEY



submission.doc

Land and Biodiversity submission

One of the most effective ways to improve biodiversity conservation and encourage more sustainable land use will be to fund key state-wide programs effectively rather than rely on NHT funding for individual projects.

An example is an organisation like Trust for Nature. It is required to seek operational funding through the CMA's which have widely different skills, capabilities and levels of understanding. Some are up to speed with the concept of landscape scale programs and recognise the ecological benefits, whilst some can't get beyond individual local projects and pour funds into them to the detriment of broad programs which have real biodiversity values. A targetted approach with genuine partnerships would be far more effective than this 'scatter gun' attitude to the management of land and biodiversity.

The dual values of ecological benefits and improving water quality can be achieved by finding ways to close catchments for water – eg Candowie Reservoir used by Westernport Water in South Gippsland. There has been no systematic plan for revegetating creek lines and gullies to a standard which improves or increases water flow into the reservoir. Inappropriate land management practices alongside the reservoir, such as the aerial application of fertiliser, herbicide and pesticide use on crops have a potential for serious impact on biodiversity in the immediate area as well as water quality and community health. A combination of strategic land purchases plus incentives for permanent land protection works on sensitive run-off sites would be beneficial.

Ways must be found to recognise the biodiversity values and the eco services provided to the community by maintaining remnant vegetation on private land. Currently the full cost of these services is often borne by the landholder. Greater encouragement needs to be given to landholders who permanently protect native vegetation on their land (ie by covenant on the title).

Management agreements are largely a waste of time as they have no lasting ecological value. Once a property owner changes his or her mind, or the property is sold, those agreements are often ignored, fences pulled down and revegetation work (usually paid for with public money) destroyed. A system needs to be devised recognising the net benefit to the community of permanent protection of the dwindling native vegetation resource. This fundamental issue needs to be addressed if biodiversity conservation is to be achieved. The protection of native vegetation on private land is a cost-effective way to increase the reserve system.

The rating system must be changed to reflect the value of native vegetation retention. Many Councils, including La Trobe City, imposes a general rate rather than a farm rate on land which is not regarded as agriculturally productive. This means that any landowner who permanently protects native vegetation is penalised for this action. Such imposts are not only short-sighted, they are unfair and run counter to any suggestion that retaining native vegetation is regarded as important.

Net Gain. The concept of Net Gain is a tremendous idea, but unfortunately it has not been working in practice. In many parts of this state, particularly Bass Coast Shire, it has not been possible to achieve 'No Net Loss'. 'Net Gain' of biodiversity values is further away than ever. It is not helped by the introduction of 'Offsets' based on allowing the destruction of native vegetation as long as an equivalent EVC is 'protected'.

The mechanism for that 'protection' is questionable unless it is permanent in the form of a covenant. The mechanism is even more dubious in cases when habitat hectare scores are evaluated by individuals with few skills. As it currently operates, the system allows destruction of native vegetation as long as the developer hands over cash for some project which does nothing for long term biodiversity outcomes.

Even the rate-rebate scheme offered by Bass Coast Shire Council is ineffective in delivering environmental benefits. The scheme was devised without input from relevant community organisations or environmental practitioners. As a rural rate scheme designed to reduce the farm rate it is excellent. But its title, '*Land Management and Biodiversity Incentive Scheme*' suggests something more. The reality is that it has little or no biodiversity value, offering the same rebate to everyone. There is no audit process to see what actually happens on ground.

As a result it works as a disincentive to undertake works which could have ecological benefits because farmers see their neighbours getting a rebate as a matter of course even when they have managed their land without regard to environmental impacts.

The poor management of roadside vegetation is also a significant issue in Bass Coast because in parts of the Shire, roadside remnants are all that's left.

Major sand extraction proposals in the Grantville area of South Gippsland have already seen the removal of significant stands of native vegetation, and more is about to happen. As well as the destruction of recognised wildlife corridors, biolinks and habitat for a wide range of species, there are also likely to be severe effects on water quality in the Bass River and into the Corinella aquifer. Westernport Water has begun to utilise the Corinella aquifer as a source of potable water for the region, but future recharge is threatened by the scale of sand extraction proposals.

The reputation of the Landcare movement has been tarnished in recent years with the move to large 'networks'. These seem to have been developed more as a mechanism to attract greater volumes of money to employ people rather than increase on-ground works. This has created a fundamental change in group dynamics from being community driven to being driven by a staffing agenda. The loser is biodiversity as there is little effective oversight of expenditure, particularly where corporate sponsorship dollars slosh around with NHT and NLP funding.

Given the huge taxpayer involvement with Landcare there needs to be greater accountability. There is little return on investment because of the lack of understanding of landscape-scale projects. For example, rather than allowing the destruction of native vegetation in the Grantville/Lang Lang area, there would be far greater ecological benefits in creating biolinks between those vegetated areas and generating linkages right up into the Strzelecki Ranges. There is still an opportunity to re-create those vegetated biolinks from the Bunyip area, through Lang Lang, The Gurdies and Grantville (including important coastal vegetation) right up to the proposed reserve areas of the Cores and Links in the Strzeleckis, the Morwell National Park and beyond. But that opportunity is likely to be lost within three or four years. Isolated colonies of various species such as Feathertail and Sugar Gliders, Mountain Brushtail Possums, Potaroos and Bandicoots face local extinction – as do various bird species such as Powerful Owls and Barking Owls.

Climate change and fire. It will be helpful for the conservation of biodiversity in this State for a scientific assessment to be carried out of the effectiveness of fuel reduction burns on limiting the spread and intensity of wildfires.

There has been little rigour to verify claims that fuel reduction burns are an effective fire management tool. Evidence needs to be produced demonstrating whether or not prescribed burns are beneficial in mitigating risk to the community. Sufficient data is now available to determine whether there is any discernable difference in fire behaviour in areas subjected to fuel reduction burns compared with those that had not been burned in recent years.

There is a highly vocal and critical lobby which demands that the Department of Sustainability and Environment dedicate more staff and funding to conduct large scale burns every year – but it is questionable whether that will decrease the incidence of wildfires. It seems unlikely, given the behaviour of fire and the expectation of increasingly hazardous summer weather conditions, that more frequent fuel reduction burns will make Victoria safer.

In hot, dry conditions such as those encountered this year it has been suggested by some farmers and CFA personnel that reduction burns had little value in containing the wildfires. Firefighters acknowledged that areas which had been burned in recent years burned just as quickly as those which had not.

There were cases of flames 10 metres high roaring across bare paddocks where there was seemingly no fuel load whatsoever. The evidence suggests it is the combination of heat, dryness of the air and soil and the strength of winds which are the determining factors in wildfire intensity and progress. It makes little or no difference whether fire breaks are constructed 10 metres, 20 metres or even 100 metres wide. In the right (or wrong) conditions the fire will jump any break. The constructed breaks may provide some kind of relatively safe haven for firefighters but with wind as the main driver

they do little to halt fire progress. Embers create spot fires a kilometre or more ahead of the firefront. There are long term implications for biodiversity by the creating and maintenance of significant cleared areas as firebreaks within regions which are essential habitat for wildlife. The fragmentation of vegetation has already resulted in significant species loss. Some practitioners involved in Natural Resource Management felt that these problems were gradually being addressed by spending public funds on revegetation projects and talk of protecting the little remnant vegetation which remains in this State, but regular burns and the creation of temporary and permanent fire breaks compound the problems of habitat loss generated by development pressures. It can be argued that Fuel Reduction Burns actually worsen the fire hazard by drying out the vegetation, making it potentially more fire prone. In this way regular burns can generate an even bigger fuel load, creating further risk of wildfire along with the clamour for more fuel reduction burns.

It has become clear that with constant burning over the years, the character of vegetation can be changed from wet to dry. The burns reduce the build up of mulch and shrub layers that are the first step towards the development of moist microclimates. They also affect the soil's ability to hold moisture and may change the soil profile.

Given Australia's current potable water supply difficulties, fuel reduction burns have implications for water run-off yields, potential for siltation and other water quality issues.

One of the major contributors to the health of our catchments is potentially the implementation of regional catchment strategies. In the Port Phillip region, the role of the CMA is rather different from other areas because of the waterway management responsibilities of Melbourne Water. It could improve the effectiveness of the organisation if it had a greater planning focus. One of the criticisms by Council planning officers in Port Phillip/Western Port is that the Regional Catchment Strategy is too broad to be a useful planning tool. Perhaps in the next round of RCS planning we need a brief overarching strategy plus detailed regional strategies for each catchment, addressing concerns identified in local areas. This would greatly assist Councils in focussing on catchment and land management issues which are important to them and which would improve regional implementation of the strategy.

To increase the effectiveness of the CMA in the Metropolitan region, it may make sense to amalgamate Port Phillip & Westernport CMA with the Growth Areas Authority to give some consistency to the planning and strategic issues in the catchments.

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