

A new approach to biodiversity in Melbourne's growth areas

Time-stamping native vegetation data

What is the Time-stamping project?

The Time-stamping project captures and “time stamps” native vegetation information in Melbourne’s new urban growth areas.

This data is to be used to calculate native vegetation offset liabilities for future development proposals within areas identified as suitable for urban development, and to prepare Native Vegetation Precinct Plans for these areas.

What is a native vegetation offset?

Under Victorian and Commonwealth law, native vegetation clearing associated with a change of land-use or development must generally be compensated for by providing a native vegetation offset.

A native vegetation offset is any works, or other actions to make reparation for the loss of native vegetation arising from the removal or destruction of native vegetation somewhere else. Offsets must be permanent and on-going.

The requirement to offset the removal of native vegetation in Victoria has been in place since 1989. *Victoria's Native Vegetation: A Framework for Action* (DNRE 2002) describes the Victorian Government's policy in respect of native vegetation offsets.

How does the Time-stamping approach work?

Under the time-stamping approach, if land in Melbourne’s new urban growth areas is subdivided and developed in the future, offsets for the removal of native vegetation will be calculated using the 2011 “time-stamped” maps of native vegetation regardless of the extent and condition of the vegetation on the land at the time it is developed.

This approach will simplify the current system and increase certainty for land owners, planners and developers regarding native vegetation offset obligations in the future.

Changes to the Victoria Planning Provisions and affected planning schemes are proposed to be made in the near future to give effect to this.

Why is this being done?

The Time-stamping project is part of a coordinated approach between the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), the Growth Areas Authority (GAA), the Department of Transport (DoT) and the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) to streamline development in Melbourne’s urban growth areas and implements a Victorian Government commitment as part of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment.

The Melbourne Strategic Assessment is designed to meet the requirements of the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, and is a one-off strategic approach to Commonwealth approvals enabling the expansion of Melbourne’s urban growth areas, that will reduce red tape, increase planning certainty, reduce costs for developers and benefit the environment.

For more information you can search for “Strategic Assessment” on the DSE website www.dse.vic.gov.au.

Where will the Time-stamping native vegetation data apply?

The Time-stamping native vegetation data will apply to land added to the Melbourne growth areas as part of planning scheme amendment VC68 which came into effect on 6 August 2010. It will also apply in 28 precincts within the pre-2010 urban growth boundary (UGB) covered by the Melbourne Strategic Assessment

How can I view the Time-stamping native vegetation data?

You can view the time stamping native vegetation maps on the Time-stamping project page on the DSE website www.dse.vic.gov.au (search for “time stamping”).

The data will also be viewable as a layer in DSE’s Biodiversity Interactive Map, available on the DSE website. Information on how to access this data is available on the Time-stamping project web page.

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Does the time-stamping data cover everything that may require offsets?

Not necessarily. The time-stamping data only accounts for the native vegetation component of offsets for developed areas.

There may be additional offsetting requirements due to the presence of threatened species or scattered trees, which are not included in the time stamped data. For more information on these offsetting requirements please refer to the DSE fact sheet *A new approach to biodiversity in Melbourne's growth areas: Offset requirements*.

Where does the mapped information come from?

The Time-stamping project brings together native vegetation assessments of Melbourne's growth areas conducted since 2008 by the GAA, DoT and DSE in consultation with DPCD.

Many properties in the growth areas have been surveyed by consultants under contract to the GAA (for Precinct Structure Planning) or DoT (for the Regional Rail Link project). DSE's Time-stamping project completed the mapping across Melbourne's growth areas by consulting directly with landowners of properties that had not been surveyed under the GAA or DoT projects.

All native vegetation field assessments used for the Time-stamping dataset have been undertaken according to published native vegetation assessment methodology and DSE has undertaken quality assurance on the data collected.

In cases where field assessments have not been undertaken DSE has consulted directly with landowners, who were given an opportunity to review and revise DSE's understanding of the native vegetation on their properties.

The data from this consultation has been combined with all available field data to complete the final definitive "time-stamped" native vegetation data set for Melbourne's new urban growth areas.

How were landowners consulted?

Landowners whose properties had not received native vegetation surveys by the GAA or DoT in 2008-10 were provided with native vegetation maps, which represented DSE's understanding of the native vegetation on their properties. These maps relied on estimated information on native vegetation type, extent and condition in areas where no surveys had been undertaken.

Where landowners identified inaccuracies in the maps they were invited to make a submission to DSE and were able to receive a free site assessment by an independent consulting firm to review the data.

DSE also accepted data that landowners had provided where assessments were undertaken by consultants certified to the same standards applied to all other surveys for the project.

Where landowners who had not received surveys did not make a submission or did not provide acceptable alternative data to DSE the estimated data is used in the Time-stamping data set.

What is estimated data? Why is this data included in the Time-stamping data set?

Estimated data included modelling of native vegetation based on remote sensed data, on-ground observations and rapid vegetation assessments undertaken from property boundaries between 2009 and 2011 by DSE.

It is well-accepted that DSE can make use of modelled data where detailed property surveys are unavailable. The modelled data provides a highly reliable estimate of the extent and condition of native vegetation on sites that have not received formal on-ground surveys. As such it has been included in the time-stamping dataset in cases where landowners have not received on-ground assessments.

I'm a landowner but I never received the DSE consultation information. Am I still able to make a submission?

Yes, in exceptional circumstances.

If you can provide DSE with reasonable evidence to demonstrate you did not receive the original DSE information package from October 2010 it may be possible for DSE to accept a submission to revise the time-stamping data.

If you believe you can provide such evidence please contact DSE Customer Service Centre on 136 186 for more information on how to proceed.

Will the Time-stamping data set be revised or updated in the future?

Once the 2011 Time-stamping dataset becomes incorporated in the planning system it will be fixed and will not change.

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My property is within the new growth areas but not currently zoned Urban Growth Zone (UGZ). If my land is re-zoned UGZ does Time-stamping apply?

If your land has been surveyed as part of the mapping of Melbourne's growth areas by the GAA, DoT or DSE then this data is already in the Time-stamping dataset and will apply.

If your land has not been surveyed then the DSE estimated data as it appears in the time-stamping dataset will apply for your property unless you can provide evidence this data was incorrect as at 30 June 2011. Such evidence may include data from formal field assessments conducted by DSE-certified consultants, or other verifiable and quality-assured information sources.

My property is within the pre-2010 Urban Growth Boundary. Does the Time-stamping map apply?

Yes, if your property is in one of the 28 precincts covered by the Melbourne Strategic Assessment. These areas are covered by the Commonwealth approvals for development in Melbourne's urban growth areas and are subject to the same conditions as the new growth areas.

How does offsetting work in Melbourne's new growth areas?

The offsetting approach for Melbourne's growth areas is part of the implementation of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment. In general, offsets for clearing in Melbourne's growth area must be sourced from the Western Grassland Reserves or other areas protected under the Strategic Assessment.

For more information please refer to the DSE fact sheet *A new approach to biodiversity in Melbourne's growth areas: Offset requirements*.

How is my offset liability calculated?

Offsets requirements for the removal of native vegetation are calculated using the "habitat hectares" approach outlined in *Victoria's Native Vegetation: A Framework for Action* (DNRE 2002).

The quantity of offset credits required to clear an area of native vegetation (measured in "habitat hectares") depends on the size of the area and the type, condition and conservation significance of the vegetation. The formula used is:

Offset requirement (habitat hectares)
= [Patch area (Ha) x Habitat Score /100]
x EVC Conservation Significance multiplier

For more information on habitat hectares calculations for determining offset liabilities please refer to the fact sheet *A new approach to biodiversity in Melbourne's growth areas: Offset requirements*.

How can I purchase offsets?

Offsets will be available for purchase through DSE's BushBroker scheme. For more information including current rates please refer to the BushBroker pages on the DSE web site.

Why are some farmed areas mapped as native vegetation?

In the time-stamped dataset, areas with at least 25% native cover at the time they were mapped are considered native vegetation, irrespective of how the land may have been managed in the past. This could include areas that have previously been ploughed or cropped, but have since regenerated as native vegetation. This approach has been applied consistently for all mapping used in the time-stamped data set.

Will I have to pay for offsets even if there is no native vegetation on the property when it is cleared or developed?

Yes, if the 2011 "time-stamped" maps of native vegetation indicate native vegetation on a property then offsets will be required regardless of the extent and condition of vegetation on the property at the time it is developed.

How is this fair?

The requirement to offset the removal of native vegetation in Victoria has been in place since 1989, and would apply to Melbourne's growth areas even if the time stamping approach was not adopted

The time-stamping approach greatly simplifies the current offsetting system and increases certainty for land owners, planners and developers regarding native vegetation offset obligations in the future. This approach also reduces costs for landowners wishing to develop, by eliminating the need for further surveys and by streamlining the approval process to significantly reduce the time required to obtain approvals.

The mapping and offsetting approach applies consistently across Melbourne's growth areas, with all landowners being treated in the same manner.

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Can I continue to farm in areas mapped as native vegetation in the Time-stamped data?

Yes. In general you may continue to manage your land in the same manner as you have over recent years, including grazing, ploughing and cropping.

However, if at some time in the future you wish change the way you manage your land (e.g. subdivide or develop your land) this will trigger the requirement to provide a native vegetation offset for areas to be cleared.

Is it illegal to remove native vegetation?

In Victoria, a permit under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* is generally required from your local council to remove native vegetation, including native grasslands.

Grasslands and some other endangered vegetation types are also protected under the *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

A failure to obtain necessary permits can incur heavy penalties.

What is meant by native (indigenous) vegetation?

Native indigenous vegetation refers to plants that occur naturally in a specific area. This is the type of vegetation expected to have occurred in the area prior to European settlement, including trees, shrubs, herbs and grasses.

What is meant by native vegetation Habitat Score?

The Habitat Score is a standard measure used by DSE to estimate of the quality of an area of vegetation. The Habitat Score for an area of native vegetation is the sum of the *site condition* and *landscape context* scores.

Vegetation site condition is a measure of the 'naturalness' or 'intactness' of a patch of vegetation assessed against a defined benchmark for that vegetation type. A higher vegetation site condition score means the site is closer to its natural state.

Landscape context considers how well the patch of vegetation can cope with natural fluctuations and disturbances events, such as old trees dying, bushfires and floods. It is measured by how big the area of vegetation is that the site is within; and links to, and amount of, neighbouring patches of vegetation

What are Ecological Vegetation Classes?

Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) are vegetation types, defined by the types of species and environmental characteristics that occur together. Approximately 300 EVCs have been described for Victoria.

What is a Native Vegetation Precinct Plan?

A Native Vegetation Precinct Plan (NVPP) removes the need for individual planning permits by identifying the vegetation to be retained, vegetation to be removed and offset requirements at a precinct level. The NVPP forms part of a Precinct Structure Plan and ultimately becomes incorporated into the local planning scheme.

Where can I find out more about native vegetation?

Native vegetation information is available on the DSE website www.dse.vic.gov.au/nativevegetation and search under any of the above key words.

Further Information

More information is available at the DSE website www.dse.vic.gov.au/urbangrowthareas

If you have a question about the Time-stamping project you can call the DSE Customer Service Centre on 136 186 Monday to Friday from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm.

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For more information contact the DSE Customer Service Centre 136 186

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