



Environment and Planning Committee
Legislative Council

Inquiry: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Hearing Date: 10 August 2021

Questions taken on notice

Directed to: **Mr Webb, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning**

1. Mr HAYES (Page no. 4)

Question asked.

Could anyone outline to me what the legislative barriers are to allowing traditional owners to manage their own projects on public land?

Response:

Victoria's existing fire management legislation is primarily focussed on:

- restricting activities that could result in damaging fires starting and spreading, and
- enabling state agencies to conduct prevention and suppression works.

Current legislation, including public land management legislation, is not designed to enable activities such as cultural fire. As a result, it does not always provide a culturally appropriate or enabling environment for Traditional Owner aspirations regarding fire management on public land.

The Victorian Government recognises Traditional Owners' deep connection with, knowledge of, and rights in respect of the lands and waters of Victoria. We are committed to partnering with Traditional Owners in land management and will work closely with Traditional Owners to reinvigorate cultural fire, enabling Traditional Owners to heal Country and fulfill their rights and obligations to care for Country.

As part of the 2021-22 state budget, \$22.5 million of funding was committed to support Traditional Owners to implement the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy. This includes supporting the establishment of an Aboriginal led – Cultural Fire Leadership group, which will provide a forum for Traditional Owners to address the legislative and operational barriers restricting the use of cultural fire and land management practices.

To support this, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is reviewing relevant legislation, policy and procedures to identify barriers to cultural fire practices.



This is consistent with the recommendations of the Victorian Auditor General and the Inspector General Emergency Management. In response to these recommendations, DELWP has committed to a range of actions, including

- DELWP will continue to work with Traditional Owners to implement the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy (IGEM 2.1)
- DELWP will review and report on procedural, policy, and legislative barriers to cultural fire practice (VAGO 6.5)
- DELWP will establish Traditional Owner led leadership and governance arrangements to lead the implementation of cultural fire practices (VAGO 6.7)

Enabling Aboriginal self-determination is also a key driver and priority for DELWP's broader approach to public land reform.



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Directed to: **Mr Todd, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning**

1. Dr RATNAM (Page no. 8)

Question asked.

Do you know how many of the listed species are being worked on in Victoria with those kinds of different [conservation] approaches? Do you have that quantum? *Can you include any additional information on the Southern Ark programs?*

Response:

At least 50% of the nearly 2000 species listed on the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act Threatened List are receiving benefit from currently implemented conservation actions across Victoria. These include actions which have occurred in the financial year 2019/2020, including landscape threat management actions as well as species-specific actions.

However, this only considers actions that have associated spatial activity data and so there are likely additional actions for threatened species, for which spatial data is unavailable.

Benefit was calculated as the percentage Change in Suitable Habitat (%CSH) received by each individual species from currently implemented conservation actions.

Change in Suitable Habitat is the increase in likelihood that a species will still be found at a location in 50 years if given sustained management, compared to no management. The measure is used to quantify the benefit of management actions in *Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2037*.



Southern Ark

The Southern Ark project aims to reduce the number of foxes and support the recovery of all native animal populations across 1 million hectares of East Gippsland. The project assists the recovery of many species including the Long-footed and Long-nosed Potoroo, the Southern Brown Bandicoot and the Southern Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby. The Southern Ark project covers state forest, national parks and private land across the entire eastern wedge of Victoria, from the Snowy River valley to Cape Howe.

An example of a species that benefits from the program is the Long-footed Potoroo that was known from a core population between Orbost and Cann River in the mid-1990s prior to Southern Ark and has grown in both area of occupancy and in size of population since then. This population expansion benefited the species in the aftermath of the 2019-20 wildfires, as the population was larger and more dispersed. As fox densities were lower before the fires, there was also less risk to the species post-fire where foxes have a competitive advantage with Potoroos being more exposed with less forest habitat structure to hide or shelter in for protection. Aerial and ground control of foxes (and a range of introduced animals) post the 2019-20 bushfires has further supported recovery of the species.

DELWP's Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research (ARI) is completing an analysis using Foxnet, that is showing predator threat has declined due to the Southern Ark fox control. The results are expected to be released later in 2021. In addition, ARI is completing a specific analysis of the response of Long-footed Potoroos to predator control and their persistence after the 2019-20 fires.

Southern Ark is part of a suite of landscape-scale threat management programs on public land across Victoria that also includes Glenelg Ark and Grampians Ark; Glenelg Eden, Otways Eden and Central Highlands Eden; and Mallee Bounceback projects.

Together these projects deliver over 2.3 million hectares of predator, herbivore and weed control per annum, which supports the conservation and recovery of many threatened plants and animals in these areas.

2. Dr CUMMING (Page no. 14)

Question asked.

Can you provide a copy of the 2019-2020 progress report on the acquisition of properties for the western plains grassland reserve, which is not yet publicly available online?

Response:

We cannot currently provide a copy of the 2019-2020 progress report on the acquisition of properties for the western plains grassland reserve.



In 2019-20, \$17.84 million was spent on acquiring 209 hectares in the Western Grasslands Reserve. This accounted for 78 per cent of expenditure in 2019-20 under the Melbourne Strategic Assessment program.

In response to the VAGO recommendations, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning will be launching a new website on 30 September 2021 that will include more accessible, plain English reporting on the Melbourne Strategic Assessment program. This will include data for 2019-20.



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Directed to: **Ms Jackson, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning**

1. Mrs McARTHUR (Page no. 15)

Question asked.

What would be your position on the transmission line cutting a swathe through this biolink, where the trees have to be cut back to about 3 metres in height?

Response:

The Minister for Planning has determined that an Environment Effects Statement (EES) will be required for the Western Victoria Transmission Project (WVTNP). The purpose of the EES process is to assess the potential environmental impacts of a proposed project. This will include the impact on vegetation, bushfire risk, impacts on public health, and impacts on future land use. The EES process can also consider feasible alternative designs that could deliver an environmental benefit. Importantly, the EES process ensures that the public and local communities have opportunities to provide feedback on the project.

While on 30 June 2021 Mondo (the commercial arm of AusNet Services) announced its proposed single overhead corridor for WVTNP, this corridor is not finalised and will ultimately be subject to the Minister for Planning's assessment through the ESS process.

I encourage people to continue to engage with the consultation process for the ESS and to also provide their feedback to Mondo.

Mondo is proposing 500 kilovolt towers in the project section you have enquired about. AusNet's Living and working with the WVTNP summary guidelines gives the following guidance on vegetation on 500kV line easements:

- mature tree and shrub growth of 5 metres (m) in height is permitted;
- for vegetation between 5m to 8.6m in height an AusNet Services safety assessment is required; and
- Maximum height cannot exceed 8.6m.



- Planting trees and shrubs should be scattered or clumped with no more than 10% density of cover over the easement area.

2. Mrs McARTHUR (Page no. 16)

Question asked.

Why do you not encourage, let alone actually inhibit, roadside grazing in many areas in rural Victoria, which is a major way of preventing fire and alleviates the need for the burning that you talk about?

Response:

Either local government or Regional Roads Victoria (RRV) are the relevant land managers and responsible authorities for managing roadside vegetation and approving roadside grazing permit applications.

DELWP is not opposed to roadside grazing in areas of low or no biodiversity value. Less than 0.1% of native grasslands remain on the Victorian Volcanic Plain in south-west Victoria, with the most significant remnants mainly occurring on roadsides. Grazing can cause significant degradation and permanent loss of native grasslands through direct impacts to plant species, soil disturbance, the addition of nutrients and weed invasion.

Where biodiversity values occur on roadsides, including remnant native grasslands protected under the Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, DELWP works closely with local councils and RRV, to provide biodiversity information and outline potential requirements under with these Acts, so the responsible authority can make informed decisions on grazing permit applications.