

JOINT STATEMENT

3 April 2012

Save Our Precious Wildlife Habitats!

A joint statement on Victorian Native Vegetation Rules

Strong controls on the clearing of native vegetation are critical to the health of our natural heritage, ecosystems and the survival of threatened species. They also bring many other benefits to the community.

As community-based groups, representing thousands of Victorians, we are deeply concerned about the State Government's proposed review of the Native Vegetation Management Framework.

We want to see it strengthened, not weakened, leading to a 'net gain' in native habitat.

Numerous independent scientific reports to government, including the Victorian Catchment Condition Report (2007)¹, Victorian State of the Environment Report (2008)², and most recently the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Native Vegetation Investigation (2011)³ have all identified loss of native vegetation as the key contributing factor for ongoing decline in the health of our natural environment. They have all reinforced the need to retain, protect and enhance native vegetation.

In spite of all the existing good policies and hard work by the community, environment groups, Landcare and landholders, the health of the natural environment continues to decline in Victoria. We are now widely recognised as the most ecologically stressed state in Australia.⁴

The statistics are stark:

- More than half of Victoria's original native bushland has been cleared, including 80% of the native vegetation originally found on private land.
- A third of Victoria's major streams and stream-bank bushlands are in poor or very poor condition.
- Two-thirds of our wetlands have been either lost or degraded, and nearly half our major estuaries have been significantly modified.
- The highest number of threatened species in any one region in Australia occurs in northwest Victoria.⁵
- 44% of Victoria's native plants and 30% of our native animals are extinct or threatened with extinction.⁶
- Approximately 1600ha of woody vegetation and 3000ha of rare grassy native vegetation continue to be lost annually.⁷

Overall, retaining remnant native vegetation is cheaper and more effective than revegetation alone. Native vegetation also provides a wide range of environmental services such as clean air, fresh water, pollination, flood regulation, soil retention and carbon sequestration. These benefits are worth many millions of dollars to the community annually, and need to be thoroughly assessed both ecologically and economically before balanced decisions can be made on changes to regulation.

In Victoria, vegetation clearing on private land is largely controlled through Native Vegetation regulations in the Planning and Environment Act (1987) and the Native Vegetation Management Framework. This critical regulatory framework complements and supports the hard work of landholders and community groups restoring and nurturing native vegetation on their own patch.

Many of the signatory groups are involved in restoration and protection activities to address clearing practices of the past, and we do not want the regulatory "rug" pulled from under us.



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To this end we support the following four key elements in any revised framework:

- 1) Net gain policy – that there should be “a reversal, across the entire landscape, of the long-term decline in the extent and quality of native vegetation, leading to a net gain”.
- 2) A three-step approach to assessing native vegetation – that is, “avoid clearing, minimise clearing, offset clearing”, with an emphasis on avoiding.
- 3) Like for like – offsets are to be as close as possible in vegetation type to the lost vegetation, or an even more threatened vegetation type, and should only be an option of last resort.
- 4) A robust, sophisticated and transparent vegetation quality assessment methodology undertaken by a qualified assessor to a high standard.

We request that any review of the Native Vegetation Management Framework should:

1. Be undertaken in an open and transparent manner and involve extensive consultation with all sections of the community, including conservation and Landcare groups.
2. Be informed by the best available ecological science and policy approaches, including an assessment of the economic value of vegetation and the services it provides, not just the apparent regulatory cost.
3. Aim to improve the key elements of the existing framework, including net gain, the three-step approach (especially “avoid”), like for like for offsets, and robust assessment methods that must be underpinned by strengthened monitoring and research to support adaptive management towards net gain.
4. Improve the monitoring, transparency and accounting of vegetation offsets.
5. Include no further exemptions for clearing.
6. Contain stronger incentives and education for landholders.
7. Be informed by an overarching state policy for the recovery of the health of our natural environment.
8. Be supported by a commitment from government for better funding and support for improved implementation.

References

1. Victorian Catchment Management Council (2007) Catchment Condition Report, Victorian Government.
2. Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability (2008) State of the Environment Report, State of Victoria.
3. Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (2011), Remnant Native Vegetation Investigation: Final Report, March 2011.
4. Australian Terrestrial Biodiversity Assessment 2002 National Land and Water Resources Audit.
5. Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (2011), Remnant Native Vegetation Investigation: Final Report, March 2011.
6. CSIRO, 2004, Environmental Sustainability Issues Analysis for Victoria.
7. Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (2010), Remnant Native Vegetation Investigation: Discussion Paper, June 2010.,



Phillip Island
Conservation Society



Croydon
Conservation
Society



Friends of Inverleigh
Fauna and Flora Reserve



Friends of Warrandyte
State Park