

NATURE ON MELBOURNE'S DOORSTEP UNDER THREAT – OVERVIEW

This is a response to the Victorian Government's Growth Corridor Plans, fast-tracked Precinct Structure Plans and Logical Inclusions – Melbourne Growth Areas.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

Melbourne's growth threatens grasslands and threatened species

The planned area of Melbourne has increased by over 40,000 hectares over the last few years. The new growth zones now have the capacity to provide enough land for 30-50 years of new housing and urban development. This growth is all running smack into the last remaining parts of one of the most endangered habitat types in the country, as well as a raft of threatened species listed under national environmental laws.

New approach to national environmental laws

National environmental laws are supposed to protect plants and animals of national environmental significance, but the most endangered habitat type in the country, the grasslands of Victoria's Volcanic Plains and the creatures that inhabit them, are coming off second-best to urban sprawl in a new Federal – State 'streamlined' approach to environmental planning called a Strategic Assessment.

In a February 2010 media release, Federal and State environment ministers heralded the Melbourne Strategic Assessment as "...a new era in Commonwealth-State collaboration on planning and environmental management". But over two years later it still hasn't delivered environmental security, and with further extensions to the growth areas announced by the Baillieu government, the wheels are falling off.

Green Tape Agenda

In 2010, then Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett went on to spruik the process: "This is a great step forward for the Australian and Victorian governments to work together with this modern, flexible and sensible approach to planning, which allows national environmental issues to be considered early on

in the state planning process and cuts red tape".

The cutting of 'red tape' (or 'green tape') appears to be code for riding roughshod over the environment. Now the Gillard Government has agreed with the State Government at COAG to expand this approach further and hand back even the final approval to the states.

> See www.vnpa.org.au/page/publications/media-releases/world-environment-daze-on-national-green-laws

Back-to-front planning

The property development industry has been given approval for up to 50 years' worth of urban sprawl, possibly more. Two years on, the Baillieu government has proceeded with releasing even more land through its 'logical inclusions' process. In doing this the State government has thumbed its nose at the agreed process, which should involve seeking approval from the federal environment minister and developing regional conservation strategies before this new land is released or detailed precinct planning begins. This back to front planning undermines the integrity of the whole approval process.

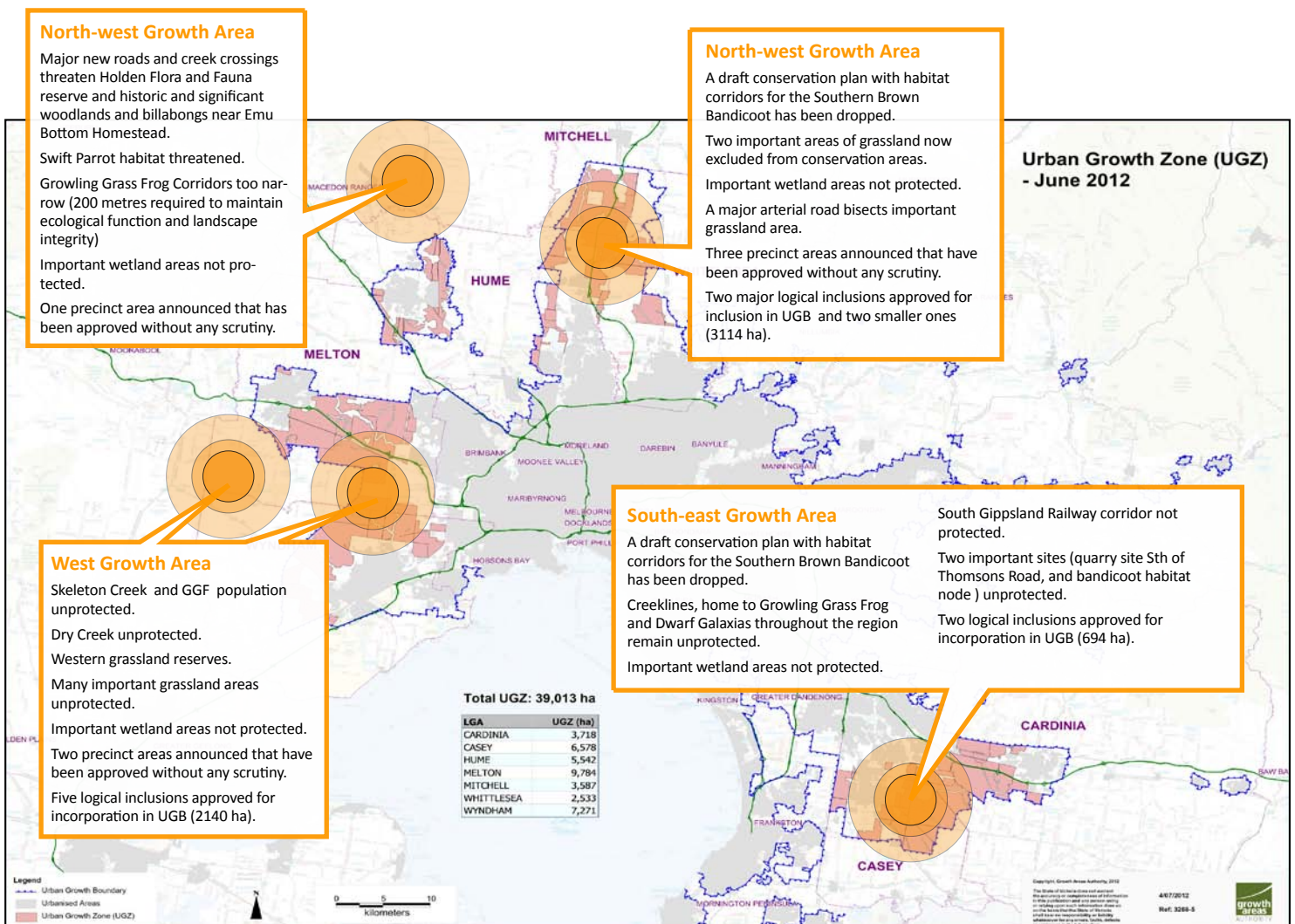
Promised grassland reserves yet to be delivered

Large grassland reserves have been promised for the west of Melbourne, and are proposed to be purchased through payments from developers for clearing. This is akin to an ecological version of a 'ponzi' scheme, with money that developers pay in order to be allowed to clear land being held by the State government for the future purchase of reserves which many feel do not have the same conservation values as what was lost. The Commonwealth has now moved to expand this offset scheme to urban development as far as Geelong.

The 15,000 ha of grassland reserves are marked on maps, but do not yet exist. A further 1200 ha of grassy woodland reserves needed to offset more clearing is proposed for northern suburbs but is yet to be identified.

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The large grassland reserves are likely to be important in the long term, if they can be delivered. There is \$180 million in the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) capital budget for expenditure on purchase of the reserves, of which \$20 million was forecast to be spent at the end of the last financial year, yet still no land has been purchased for the reserves.

Special habitat areas still need protection

Environment groups have pushed for some of the smaller, but very significant, conservation areas within the urban growth areas to be retained. Under the agreement with the Commonwealth, all grassland areas of less than 150 hectares can be cleared, though there was agreement that some might be kept. Likewise there are supposed to be specific strategies for nationally

threatened species such as the Growing Grass Frog, Golden Sun Moth and Southern Brown Bandicoot.

> See http://vnpa.org.au/page/nature-conservation/take-action/another-baillieu-backflip-_-this-time-on-the-bandicoot

Threatened species need good planning

While draft strategies were released for some threatened species in late 2011, the final strategies have not been released or forwarded to the Commonwealth for approval. These strategies are significant. For example, Growing Grass Frogs need buffers of around 200 metres along waterways to ensure they have the space to live, yet in some areas such as the proposed Donnybrook Town Centre in the north, this has been reduced to as little as 50 metres. For more information see VNPA submission on the sub regional species strategies.

> See <http://vnpa.org.au/page/publications/submissions>

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In the case of the wild population of Southern Brown Bandicoots that persists in the outer south-east around Cranbourne, the draft conservation plans proposed the development of habitat corridors. This plan has now been dropped and a whole new strategy is being developed.

> See <http://vnpa.org.au/page/publications/media-releases/anger-at-urban-growth-plans-scrapping-of-bandicoot-habitat-corridors>

More Information

Now is the time to get the planning right, for both people and nature. Find out more about the issues by looking at the 'Nature on Melbourne's doorstep under threat' series of briefing papers on each of the growth areas:

Western Growth Area

<http://vnpa.org.au/admin/library/attachments/PDFs/Issues%20papers/ip-melburbangrowth-west.pdf>

Northern Growth Areas

<http://vnpa.org.au/admin/library/attachments/PDFs/Issues%20papers/ip-melburbangrowth-north.pdf>

North West (Sunbury) Growth Area

<http://vnpa.org.au/admin/library/attachments/PDFs/Issues%20papers/ip-melburbangrowth-nwest.pdf>

South East Growth Area

<http://vnpa.org.au/admin/library/attachments/PDFs/Issues%20papers/ip-melburbangrowth-seast.pdf>

ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

Back-to-front planning

The Melbourne Strategic Assessment Program Report, part of the Agreement entered into by the State and Federal Governments, outlines that a federally approved Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Subregional Species Strategies will guide Growth Area Plans and subsequent Precinct Structure Plans for Melbourne's expanded Urban Growth Boundary.

The launch of the Growth Area Plans, including some specific precincts, by the State Planning Minister (on June 12, 2012) without Federal approval of the BCS and SRSS is in breach of the agreement with the Federal Government. It has also raised an expectation that development will occur and that environmental processes will hold it up, creating an unnecessary confrontation between governments.

• **We ask Australian Environment Minister Tony Burke to intervene to:**

- Demand that Victorian Government immediately release of the current version of the conservation and biodiversity and regional species strategies for consultation.
- Initiate an independent expert scientific review of whole programs.
- Appoint an independent environmental monitor based in Victoria.

Lack of security for offsets

The Federal Government endorsed nine prescriptions or conditions for species and habitats listed under national environmental laws (Matters of National Environmental Significance such as EPBC-listed species and communities) that were to guide the level of protection for these unique and threatened plants and animals. It is required that the offsets for areas that provide habitat be secured prior to clearing. There is currently no assurance that these offsets have been secured.

These offsets include 15,000 ha of Grassland Reserves, 1200 ha of Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserves and offsets for particular species. Offsets will potentially be required for the newly nationally listed habitat type Seasonal Herbaceous Wetlands Community. Furthermore, we are now seeing areas within the offset areas being wilfully degraded.

- **We ask the State Government to:**
 - Publicly commit to establishing the grassland reserves, and to release a detailed implementation plan to secure the reserves.
- **We ask that the Federal Government:**
 - Ensure that adequate and complete offset arrangements are in place prior to the approval of the BCS and SRSS.

New endangered habitat listed

The Seasonal Herbaceous Wetlands (Freshwater) of the Temperate Lowland Plains ecological community was listed as Critically Endangered under national environmental laws (EPBC Act (1999) in March 2012. This habitat type occurs in the growth areas and has not yet been assessed.

- **We request that the State and Federal Governments ensure that this community is adequately assessed and then protected through the Strategic Assessment process, including within Precinct Areas that are governed by the Agreement. Adequate assessment can only be assured through survey in late spring. Adequate protection should include conservation**

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Victoria's native grasslands once stretched from Melbourne to Portland, but scientists now believe as little as 1% remains. Threatened species such as the Southern Brown Bandicoot need habitat corridors to survive Melbourne's growing expansion. Photos: IT'S A WILDLIFE

measures for the catchment areas for each wetland.

Where's the vision? No landscape planning for conservation areas

The Program report is the main guiding document agreed between the State and Commonwealth, and commits to the following outcome: Establish a network of smaller permanently protected areas within and outside the growth areas to enhance connectivity and protect native grasslands, grassy woodlands, wetlands, and threatened species and migratory species associated with these habitat types, and to achieve specified protection targets.

With the exception of the sub-regional plans for the three fauna species (Growling Grass Frog, Golden Sun Moth and Southern Brown Bandicoot) there has been no evidence of comprehensive consideration of the habitat requirements of national and state listed fauna, either separately or (more importantly) together. This approach is especially damning for the Northern Growth Area, where the entire Merri Creek catchment area will be dominated by an urban/industrial environment with only the creeks providing habitat links. The latest growth plans released appear to further remove conservation areas that were previously identified for protection

Conservation areas inadequate and disappearing

Many areas highlighted as being important for protection via the Strategic Assessment still remain unprotected. Furthermore, within each of the growth corridors there are important areas formerly identified for biodiversity conservation that now appear to be classified for development under the Growth Corridor Plans. These are documented in more detail within our summary documents for each of the growth corridors (North, South-east, West and North-west).

- **We request that the Federal Government not approve the proposed conservation strategies until the conservation areas identified in the drafts are reinstated, and we urge the Federal Government to ensure the areas suggested in these summary documents are added as areas for biodiversity conservation.**

Logical inclusions

Eleven new areas of land have now been recommended for inclusion in the urban growth boundary by the State Planning Minister as a result of the 'Logical Inclusions' review process.

- **We request that the State and Federal Governments ensure that additions to growth areas (logical inclusions) are subject to better and more thorough processes for the assessment and protection of threatened species.**