

# URGENT NEED TO PROTECT THE GRASSY EUCALYPT WOODLAND RESERVE

The Grassy Eucalypt Woodland is made up of majestic Red River Gums that are the environmental hallmark of our municipality. Unfortunately, its existence is under threat due to some farming practices and urban development. As part of extending the Urban Growth Boundary, in 2009 the Victorian State Government made a commitment to the Federal Government to secure 1200ha of Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve by 2020. No land within this reserve has been secured and urgent action is required.

## We are seeking:

1. State Government action to fulfil commitments made under the Melbourne Strategic Assessment to secure 1200ha of Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve for conservation
2. Confirmation from Federal Government to hold the State accountable to the 2009 commitment.
3. State Government commitment to a funding plan that secures the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve by 2031.



## GRASSY EUCALYPT WOODLAND - WHAT IS IT?

The Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain is made up of open woodland of huge and majestic Red River Gums, many of which are hundreds of years old. The woodlands are home to a variety of wildlife including woodland birds and possums<sup>2</sup> as well as threatened species such as the Golden Sun Moth, Striped Legless Lizard and threatened flora.<sup>3</sup>

The woodlands are endemic to Victoria and used to be widespread across the Victorian Volcanic Plain, but have undergone severe decline and are now mostly reduced to small and degraded fragments. Less than five per cent of the original woodland remains, although it is likely that areas in good condition constitute less than one per cent.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, some land management practices associated with farming and agriculture, as well as urban development, have contributed to the significant destruction, degradation and fragmentation of the woodlands.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT LAWS PROTECT IT?

The Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain is listed nationally as a Critically Endangered ecological community under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) (EPBC Act)<sup>6</sup> because its long-term survival is under threat.<sup>7</sup> Listing as a nationally threatened ecological community means that actions that have, will or likely to have a significant adverse impact on the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland need to be referred to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and may require approval under the EPBC Act.<sup>8</sup>

In 2009 the Victorian Government entered into an agreement with the Commonwealth Government under the EPBC Act to undertake a strategic assessment of (among other things) the extension of the urban growth boundary (referred to as the "Melbourne Strategic Assessment").<sup>9</sup> The Commonwealth Government approved the extension of the urban growth boundary, subject to conditions aimed at ensuring that development occurs in a way that protects areas of environmental significance. This includes securing 1200ha of Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve.<sup>10</sup>



## WHAT IS THE STATE GOVERNMENT REQUIRED TO DO?

Under the Melbourne Strategic Assessment, the State Government made a commitment (among others) to secure a large Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve of at least 1200ha, situated south west of Whittlesea, outside of the urban growth boundary. A detailed investigation including community consultation is to inform a reservation and acquisition schedule that will be provided to the relevant Department. There was a commitment to fully secure the reserve, including acquisition, by 2020.<sup>11</sup> To achieve this, the State Government has committed to undertaking (among other things) the following:

- (a) To apply appropriate planning provisions to the land depending on the circumstances (may include a Rural Conservation Zone, an Environmental Significance Overlay or another statutory mechanism) to be determined by the State Minister for Planning.<sup>12</sup>
- (b) To secure the land through voluntary negotiation with landowners, including through voluntary purchase by the Crown and reservation under the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978* (Vic) or on-title management agreements under section 69 of the *Conservation Forests and Land Act 1987* (Vic).<sup>13</sup>

- (c) Preparation of management plans for each parcel of land once they are secured for conservation purposes and ensuring planning provisions for implementation and funding are in place.<sup>14</sup>

## WHAT HAS BEEN DONE SO FAR?

- (a) Environmental Significance Overlays are in place for the entire 1200 hectares and the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve investigation area has been broadly identified.
- (b) No land within the 1200ha Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve has been secured and there are no land management agreements in place.<sup>15</sup>

## REPORT BY THE VICTORIAN AUDITOR GENERAL

A VAGO report in June 2020 found that “DELWP had not met its commitments to deliver the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve by 2020” and that “delays in acquiring land, and continuing threats of degradation, pose significant risks to the ecological values of native vegetation within the reserves. The delays in acquiring these reserves also mean they will likely require a significantly greater investment to restore and retain these ecological values than if they had been purchased within the intended 10-year timeframe.”

In April 2021 DELWP prepared a draft strategy for Establishing a Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Protected Area in response to the VAGO report.

This strategy forms the overarching framework to guide the establishment of Grassy Eucalypt Woodland. The Strategy sets how land for the reserve will be acquired and the funding

strategy for delivering this commitment’. The Strategy outlines that funds to deliver the GEW Protected Area are collected as land is subdivided for development. The rate of implementation occurs and levies are paid. d Area.

## WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE NOW?

The commitment to secure the 1200 ha Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve by 2020 has not been achieved. In order to progress this goal, the following actions need to be urgently taken:

1. Developing a 10-year funding plan to secure the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve by 2031.
2. Invest \$20m in the 2022-23 State Budget to secure the first land holdings.

Council shares VAGO’s concerns about a funding model which prolongs the protection of the Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands and urges the Sta.

Council requests that the recommendation in the final strategy that “land be funded by levies collected as development in the area occurs” be altered to “establish a trust fund for immediate preservation to take place because:

Landowners willingness to participate in a scheme that encumbers their land and restricts the potential future uses to conservation are rare and protection of such a significant area should not be reliant on this. Even negotiations with willing landowners can take years while costs and land prices continue to rise.

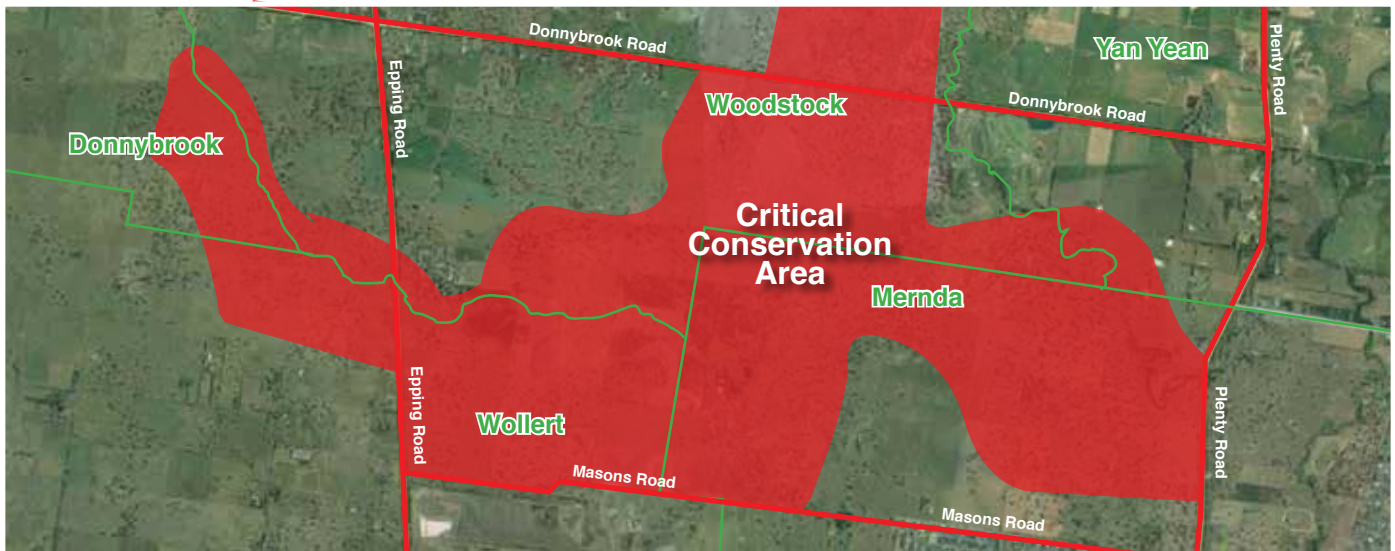
As the sale of land to the Crown is voluntary, there is also concerns that DELWP cannot determine the amount of land to

be protected in any particular time period and cannot prioritise significant land to be funded over less desirable land.

Council strongly urges the government to make \$20 million available in the 2022-23 State Budget to commence protection of these endangered ecological areas. Similar investments need to be made available every year thereafter until the land is secured. The State will recoup funds once development of the land occurs.

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF NO ACTION IS TAKEN

There are various processes and potential consequences flowing from the State’s non-compliance with agreements made with the Commonwealth as part of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment.<sup>16</sup> What we are immediately concerned about is the potential continued loss of our majestic woodlands. We only have five percent of the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland remaining in Victoria, and less than one per cent in good condition.<sup>17</sup> The protection of this land is urgent. Much of the area identified as the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve investigation area has a long history of stock grazing and other land management practices that are often incompatible with native vegetation management. Continued delays in securing sites supporting Grassy Eucalypt Woodland may result in significant loss and/or further degradation of this valued and critically endangered environmental community. Inaction could see us lose our last, significant parcels of beautiful big Red Gum trees and associated native grasses and habitats – which are the environmental hallmarks of our municipality.



- <sup>1</sup> *Melbourne Strategic Assessment: progress report: 2016-17*, Victoria State Government, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning p.34; *Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable Communities, Program Report*, Victorian State Government, Department of Planning and Community Development, December 2009, pp 51-54; *Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable Communities, Strategic Impact Assessment Report, For the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, Victorian State Government, Department of Sustainability and Environment, October 2009, p. 130; *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Melbourne's Growth Corridors*, Victorian State Government Department of Environment and Primary Industries 2013, p.93.
- <sup>2</sup> Threatened Species Scientific Committee (2009). *Commonwealth Listing Advice on Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain*. Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. Available from: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities/pubs/46-listing-advice.pdf>. In effect under the EPBC Act from 25-Jun-2009. p.4.
- <sup>3</sup> *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Melbourne's Growth Corridors*, Victorian State Government Department of Environment and Primary Industries 2013, p.93; *Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable Communities, Strategic Impact Assessment Report, for the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, Victorian State Government, Department of Sustainability and Environment, October 2009, see pages 68, 70, 74, 76, 78, 82.
- <sup>4</sup> *Nationally Threatened Ecological Communities of the Victorian Volcanic Plain: Natural Temperate Grasslands and Grassy Eucalypt Woodland, A guide to the identification, assessment and management of nationally threatened ecological communities under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, Australian Government, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, pp. 6, 13.
- <sup>5</sup> Threatened Species Scientific Committee (2009). *Commonwealth Listing Advice on Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain*. Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. Available from: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities/pubs/46-listing-advice.pdf>. In effect under the EPBC Act from 25-Jun-2009, pp 13-14; *Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable Communities, Strategic Impact Assessment Report, For the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, Victorian State Government, Department of Sustainability and Environment, October 2009, p.148.
- <sup>6</sup> Species Profile and Threats Database, Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain: <http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicshowcommunity.pl?id=46>.
- <sup>7</sup> *Nationally Threatened Ecological Communities of the Victorian Volcanic Plain: Natural Temperate Grasslands and Grassy Eucalypt Woodland, A guide to the identification, assessment and management of nationally threatened ecological communities under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, Australian Government, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, p. 5.
- <sup>8</sup> EPBC Act-Frequently Asked questions, Australian Government, Department of Environment: <https://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/factsheet-epbc-act-frequently-asked-questions>.
- <sup>9</sup> *Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable Communities, Strategic Impact Assessment Report, for the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, Victorian State Government, Department of Sustainability and Environment, October 2009, p. 1; *Introduction to Melbourne Strategic Assessment*, Victorian State Government, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning: <https://www.msa.vic.gov.au/introduction>.
- <sup>10</sup> *Introduction to Melbourne Strategic Assessment*, Victoria State Government, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning: <https://www.msa.vic.gov.au/introduction>.
- <sup>11</sup> *Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable Communities, Strategic Impact Assessment Report, For the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, Victorian State Government, Department of Sustainability and Environment, October 2009, p. 130.
- <sup>12</sup> *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Melbourne's Growth Corridors*, Victorian State Government Department of Environment and Primary Industries 2013, p.93.
- <sup>13</sup> *Melbourne Strategic Assessment: progress report: 2016-17*, Victoria State Government, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning p.34.
- <sup>14</sup> *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Melbourne's Growth Corridors*, Victorian State Government Department of Environment and Primary Industries 2013, p.93.
- <sup>15</sup> *Melbourne Strategic Assessment: progress report: 2016-17*, Victoria State Government, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning p.35.
- <sup>16</sup> *Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable Communities, Program Report*, Victorian State Government, Department of Planning and Community Development, December 2009, pp 85-86.
- <sup>17</sup> *Nationally Threatened Ecological Communities of the Victorian Volcanic Plain: Natural Temperate Grasslands and Grassy Eucalypt Woodland, A guide to the identification, assessment and management of nationally threatened ecological communities under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, Australian Government, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, pp. 6, 13.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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