



Grassy Plains Network

Policy proposals to strengthen grassland conservation

About the Grassy Plains Network

The Grassy Plains Network represents land management professionals, academics, ecologists and community concerned about the ongoing decline of grassy ecosystems across Melbourne and its surrounds. We advocate for improved grassland protection and management.

An urgent need

Across the west and north of Melbourne, there is an urgent need for greater efforts to protect critically endangered grasslands. Once reaching from the Yarra River to the South Australian border, our grasslands are almost extinct. What remains is under huge pressure from urban development, poor management, ignorance, and lack of funding and vital infrastructure.

The vast Western Grassland Reserves, just outside the Urban Growth Boundary, should be the showpiece of the State Government's grassland conservation. Instead, they are foundering from mismanagement and the intransigence of land-bankers, and are in imminent danger of being overrun by weeds. In places such as Brimbank and Hobsons Bay, large high-quality remnants, as well as smaller 'jewels in the crown', require immediate action to save vitally important biodiversity.

Melbourne's grasslands harbour threatened species, connect people to nature in rich and unique ways, are deep with local identity, and are passionately supported by many in the community. The following policies, have been developed by our experts to provide a path forward for urban grassland conservation.

Summary of policies

The Melbourne Strategic Assessment

Advancement Package: This initiative covers land purchase, management, research, traditional owner engagement and restoration, to halt the decline of the Western Grassland Reserves and help them become a world class nature reserve.

Melbourne Emergency Grassland Purchase

Fund: Facilitates the strategic acquisition of key grasslands.

Urban Grassland Assessment: 'Know where we stand' research that informs future management and guides spending and effort to where they will have most effect.

Offsets Inquiry: This cornerstone of native vegetation policy may cause more harm than good.

The Landholder Conservation Incentive:

Helps private landholders help nature.

Local Extinction Avoidance Program (LEAP):

Helps local councils protect their patch.

Creating a Grasslands Trust Task Force:

Steps towards cross-tenure resourcing and management for greater efficiency.

Recalcitrant Landholder Legislation: Obliges the maintenance of land quality, to stop the rot.

Regional City Biodiversity Assessment Program: Resources for the regions for sustainable growth.

Roadside Biodiversity Program: Protecting some of the finest of our grasslands and supporting the CFA.

Background

The grasslands in and around Melbourne include some of the most outstanding examples of the critically endangered, pre-European landscape of the Victorian Volcanic Plain. These are rich with biodiversity, home to marvels such as the unique Plains Wanderer and the Striped Legless Lizard, rare orchids, ancient stone circles and the vast horizons of this our land of sweeping plains.

The effects of colonial invasion

Now, the Native Temperate Grasslands of the Victorian Volcanic Plain are almost extinct. Before colonial invasion, they spread from the Yarra River to the South Australian border. Less than 2% remains and they are classified as Critically Endangered. Of the 615 grassland flora species across Victoria, 60 are on the Fauna and Flora Guarantee Act Threatened Species List.

Australia rode on the sheep's back – but those sheep crushed our grasslands under hoof. Our 'land of sweeping plains' lost the glorious meadows of daisies and lilies that pioneers marveled at. The magnificently fragrant Sunshine Diuris orchid that was so common it was used for wedding bouquets is now reduced to a handful of individuals.

The application of superphosphate, cropping, urban expansion, and the loss or traditional management all added to the damage. Many of our best patches of grassland are now limited to the rural roadsides, pioneer cemeteries, rocky outcrops and railways lines.

Grassland fauna has been decimated by foxes, cats, wild dogs and hunting. Bandicoots, bettongs, potoroos, quolls, the remarkable Plains Wanderer – are all almost entirely absent from our landscapes.

Remnant grasslands are, sadly, often isolated, fragmented patches that are degraded, with few species, and under pressure from weeds.

The Western Grassland Reserves

The Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) was expanded in 2009 to release land for housing. Mapping and modelling showed two large patches of remnant grassland just outside the new UGB. The Melbourne Strategic Assessment offset the loss of environmental values across the new growth areas by establishing the Western Grassland Reserves. In 2010, 15,000 ha of land had a Public Acquisition Overlay placed over it, all the land was to be acquired by 2020, and land acquisition and management funded by a levy on development.

The 36 BCS Conservation Areas

As part of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment, the 2013 Biodiversity Conservation Strategy (BCS) identified 36 areas of the highest conservation

significance within the new growth areas for protection. Some of these BCS Conservation Areas are grasslands, others grassy woodland, some protect specific species such as the Growling Grass Frog or the Southern Brown Bandicoot. The acquisition and management of these conservation areas is funded by the same levy that funds the Western Grassland Reserves.

Failure to protect grasslands

In 2020 the Victorian Auditor General's Office released a damning report *Protecting critically endangered grasslands*, highlighting failure of governance, cost overruns, and that only 10% of the land for the Western Grassland Reserves had been purchased by its 2020 target date. Private landholders who had not had their land purchased were walking away from their responsibilities to control weeds, leading to massive weed invasion and ongoing significant loss of biodiversity.

In response, the Victorian Government passed the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (Environment Mitigation Levy) Act 2020. Now greater resources are available for land purchase and management. But that increased funding will not be enough.

The 2021 Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline recommended additional funding for the immediate purchase of all the Western Grassland Reserves and BCS Conservation Areas, as well as initiatives for better grassland management, land tax exemptions, weed control programs, community engagement initiatives, Traditional Owner support, and the enforcement of Environmental Significance Overlays. The recent Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations also recommended bringing forward purchase of the Western Grassland Reserves.

There are also large, high-quality grasslands in middle-ring Melbourne, areas like Brimbank and Hobsons Bay, that require urgent funding for their purchase and ongoing protection.

Social importance

Grasslands have important social values. With good management, and curation of experience, they can provide unique, rich and wild nature experiences. This is especially true in Melbourne's West, where they are seen as an integral part of the local identity and have the passionate support of many in the community.

The grasslands of the West need funding to ensure they can best provide the community with the experience of nature, health and wellbeing outcomes, urban resilience, and other ecosystem services, to an area of Melbourne that is traditionally under-resourced when it comes to quality public open space.

The policies in detail

The Melbourne Strategic Assessment Advancement Package

The Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) Advancement Package is intended to ensure the Western Grassland Reserves (WGR) reach their full potential and provide an enduring legacy for the people and biodiversity of Melbourne's north and west. It also supports the 36 Biodiversity Conservation Strategy (BCS) conservation areas set up in conjunction with the 2009 expansion of the Urban Growth Boundary.

The funding shortfalls from 2009 onwards that led to the critical 2020 Victorian Auditor General's Office report *Protecting critically endangered grasslands* have been significantly rectified through the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (Environment Mitigation Levy) Act 2020.

Nevertheless, serious gaps remain, and urgent action is required to minimise the harm caused by a decade of failure of governance. Some of the highest quality land parcels – both in the WGR and the BCS conservation areas – are yet to be purchased, and it is impossible to enforce private landholders to undertake the management needed to halt the ongoing decline in biodiversity. As a consequence, increased land purchase is essential, as is an increase in landholder assistance programs.

In addition, ancillary programs have to be put in place to strengthen community engagement, best practice research, drive restoration efforts, and develop the vision for these places of outstanding natural values.

The full Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) Advancement Package would include a range of programs, which could be funded individually.

Land Acquisition Program: \$250M

The faster land can be acquired, the greater are the cost savings to the State. Land prices are increasing rapidly. In addition, the rapid spread of weeds on private land means the considerable costs associated with weed control are increasing annually. The land acquisition program would:

- Allow the immediate acquisition of the most strategically significant parcels in the Western Grassland Reserves and the 36 Biodiversity Conservation Strategy conservation areas
- Underpin through purchase the necessary rapid progress in establishing the 1200 ha Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands, little of which has yet been acquired.

Interim management program: \$10M per year over 10 years

This program will reduce long-term costs by slowing the spread of weeds. It will:

- Fund further landholder assistance programs, to be delivered by partner organisations such as local LGAs.

Research program: \$10M

Critical gaps remain in our understanding of how to best manage these complex ecosystems, in particular how degraded systems can be restored. We also lack solid research on the best means to deliver community engagement outcomes across diverse communities. This program will:

- Provide a pool of research funds targeted to ensuring best practice management and community engagement practices.

Education and community engagement program: \$2M

Education creates long-term outcomes that support our natural values. This program will:

- Establish a funding stream (\$0.5M) for the development of educational materials for schools for inclusion in curricula
- Set-up a community engagement fund to allow development of materials and actions to increase engagement with the WGR and BCS areas (\$0.5M per year over 3 years).

Traditional Owner support program: \$2M

More than ever, encouraging Traditional Owner management of their cultural lands is essential, helping reconciliation and returning traditional management practices to Country. This will:

- Enable Traditional Owners and Registered Aboriginal Parties to strengthen cultural practices across grasslands.
- Involve and support local indigenous organisations active in the restoration of land within the borders of the Western Grassland Reserves. The support program would be linked to seed collection and production, as well as direct restoration and management works.

Seeds for Grassland restoration program: \$25M over 10 years

Because of long-term mismanagement and biodiversity losses, the grasslands of the WGR and BCS conservation areas require a long-term restoration program to be put in place. This will require substantial additional infrastructure for the large-scale production of native seed, which is currently inadequate in Victoria. This program will:

- Set specific restoration targets
- Provide infrastructure on government land (e.g. the Western Treatment Plant, Western Grassland Reserves) for large scale seed farming to restore grasslands
- Identify suitable native vegetation on private land and partner with those land holders to harvest their seed
- Seek to involve indigenous organisations in the program.

Melbourne Emergency Grassland Purchase Fund

Funds are urgently required in order to purchase a number of large grasslands within middle Melbourne that are in immediate danger of development (e.g. Solomon Heights Grassland in Brimbank, or Merton Street Grassland in Hobsons Bay). These are good-quality grasslands, rich with Kangaroo Grass, harbouring critically endangered species, and are declining in biodiversity value because of lack of appropriate management. They would make valuable additions to the State's parks estate, capable of providing rich nature experiences for many of the residents and workers across Melbourne's north and west. The size of the parcels, and in some cases the complexities of the sites, have made it difficult for the relevant LGAs to purchase the land themselves. The Melbourne Emergency Grassland Purchase Fund would:

- Identify key grassland sites across Melbourne (not within the Melbourne Strategic Assessment area)
- Authorise and fund DELWP to actively liaise with all relevant stakeholders to facilitate the best outcomes for these vital urban biodiversity assets
- Cost: \$200M over 5 years.

Urban Grassland Assessment

To protect and enhance our grasslands we need to know where they are and what condition they are in. Only then can we set measurable targets, track progress, meet legislative requirements, ensure private landholders are acting appropriately, reduce conflict over land use, and refine management approaches. The Urban Grassland Assessment would:

- Build an inventory of grasslands across all jurisdictions and tenures in Victoria
- Collate existing data on individual grassland quality
- Identify gaps in knowledge, and create a priority list of actions required to fill those knowledge gaps
- Provide a publicly accessible knowledge base
- Identify mechanisms for public input and ongoing database expansion and management
- Cost \$0.35M over two years, being mainly for one full-time position plus administration costs, reporting to VEAC, plus an additional \$0.1M for ongoing database management for 5 years.

Offsets Inquiry

Offsetting is a key component of Victoria's native vegetation management legislation and strategy. A number of national examples have recently highlighted the lack of oversight that can accompany offset programs. A state-wide audit is required to ensure that best practice is being met, including:

- Appropriate definitions of offsetting targets
- Consideration of the impacts of climate change on notions of 'security'
- Management of offsets being undertaken in line with agreements
- Examination of DELWP's decision making processes that determine what offsets are required, including the transparency and reporting of those processes
- Establishing the value of a publicly accessible, transparent database that clearly shows what land areas are offsets and the conditions of the offsets.

This Inquiry would be best conducted as a three-year investigation by the Victorian Auditor General's Office, possible cost \$1M.

The Landholder Conservation Incentive

Currently there are few incentives for landholders to actively manage their land for conservation purposes. Lands that are well managed for biodiversity create state-wide benefits for everyone, including a wide range of ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, increased water infiltration, improved water quality, health and wellbeing outcomes, reduction in pest species and safe harbour for endangered species. In the case of land that is earmarked to become part of the Western Grasslands Reserves, better weed management prior to purchase will greatly reduce future management (restoration) costs. Similar to the way farmers receive land tax exemptions for providing an essential service, the Landholder Conservation Incentive would:

- Provide land tax exemptions for, and fund LGAs to provide rate rebates to, Victorian land holders who can demonstrate that they are actively achieving improved biodiversity outcomes through specific conservation activities
- Rebate fees incurred in the process of covenanting land for conservation purposes, and the annual reporting associated with that covenanting
- Provide additional funds to CMAs and Landcare groups to support environmental works on private land
- Cost \$1M to establish.

Local Extinction Avoidance Program (LEAP)

This five-year program aims to minimise the chance of individual species going locally extinct across the Melbourne region. The risks of local extinction for endangered or threatened species is surprisingly high. Within each LGA, many endangered species are found only in a single reserve. For instance, in the City of Hume, the Magenta Storksbill (*Pelargonium rodneyanum*) is only found at Evans Street Wildflower Grassland. Indeed, that grassland is the single known location for 19 species within the City of Hume. LEAP would:

- Fund local councils to establish up-to-date species lists via on-ground surveys of the reserved land within their region
- Establish propagation and translocation programs to ensure genetic diversity is maintained across populations of endangered species
- Establish back-up populations of locally endangered species across multiple reserves within the local region
- Be funded with \$20M across 31 LGAs over 10 years.

Creating a Grasslands Trust Task Force

Melbourne's grasslands are in a bad way and their management is attracting negative sentiment. A Grasslands Trust Task Force would investigate options for a new approach to Melbourne-wide grassland management. Grasslands that are vital for urban biodiversity are dotted across Melbourne's north and west and complement the Western Grasslands Reserves that are being created to protect one of Australia's most endangered ecosystems. These urban grasslands are owned and managed by a mix of LGAs, State and Federal authorities such as VicRoads, Development Victoria and ARTC, as well as water and other utilities, and by private owners. Their management is complex and context-dependent, and the existing quality of management is highly variable, from complete neglect through to highly targeted and species-specific working crews. A Grasslands Trust would support existing land managers, coordinate resources, communicate across stakeholder groups, ensure best practice, help turn mismanaged eyesores into places for fulfilling nature experiences, and provide a guiding vision for the defining ecology of Melbourne's north and West. The Grasslands Trust Task Force would:

- Be funded \$0.3M per year for a two-year period
- Consist of a Steering Committee representative of the range of stakeholders involved, as well as 1.5 full-time staff
- Investigate alternative national and international models for natural resource governance
- Through research and stakeholder consultation, develop a position paper identifying pathways to establishing an effective and representative Grasslands Trust, with clear options for structure and the potential scope of the Grassland Trust's remit
- Aim through an iterative process to establish a broad consensus across key stakeholders for the next steps in establishing the Grasslands Trust.

Recalcitrant Landholder Legislation and Enforcement Support Fund

New legislation is required to allow authorities to enforce minimum standards of management for conservation on grasslands held by absentee landholders. These landholders often willfully let biomass build up and weeds spread, leading to valuable biodiversity being smothered, reduction of habitat quality, increased fire risk, and the displacement of fauna. Such landholders are, in effect, clearing native vegetation. Enforcement actions would be considered a necessary measure only after incentives have failed. The Recalcitrant Landholder Legislation would:

- Define minimum standards of care across a range of contexts and ecosystems
- Be resourced through an allocation of \$0.5M
- Provide Victorian support for the enforcement of the Federal Catchment and Land Protection (CALP) Act.

Regional City Biodiversity Assessment Program

Cities such as Geelong and Ballarat are rapidly urbanising, with growth impacting areas of significant biodiversity. Smaller cities often lack the resources to adequately plan for biodiversity conservation in these circumstances, and to regulate growth accordingly. The Regional City Biodiversity Assessment Program would:

- Be a five year program, funded \$1M per year
- Build local skills to effectively manage urban growth
- Provide grant monies to undertake regional biodiversity assessments
- Facilitate environmental stakeholder groups to liaise with city strategic planners to identify long term strategies for biodiversity connectivity, retention of existing values, and restoration.

Roadside Biodiversity Program

Rural roadsides hold some of the finest grasslands remaining in Victoria. This is because historically they have been regularly burnt to control biomass and to act as firebreaks to protect rural townships. Increased pressures on the CFA, such as regulatory burdens, as well as increased risk-aversion, have led to a decline in this vital form of grassland management.

Biodiversity loss is also caused when local councils ignore serious roadside weeds or spread weeds along roadsides through ill-timed and unhygienic slashing, and when they turn a blind eye to landholders ploughing fire breaks through significant grasslands on roadsides outside property boundaries.

The Roadside Biodiversity Program would:

- Authorise and fund DELWP to encourage better management of roadsides and enforce improvements to avoid significant losses of biodiversity
- Implement an information sharing program to educate authorities, the CFA and landholders of best-practice roadside management
- Fund surveys to establish base-lines for existing roadside biodiversity
- Provide funds and resources to support local organisations to best deliver an ecologically advisable roadside burning program
- Streamline regulatory processes around environmental burns
- Set-up mechanisms whereby external contractors can burn roadsides and reserves, and to support landholders to engage burn contractors
- Provide funds for appropriate follow-up work post-burn to ensure the best biodiversity outcomes for these critically endangered remnants, including monitoring
- Report on outcomes in years 4, 7 and 10 of the ten-year program
- Cost over \$50M over 10 years.

For further information

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