

'PROTECTED' ANCIENT GRASSLANDS DESTROYED BY ILLEGAL DUMPING

A supposedly protected swathe of Victoria's last remaining old-growth grasslands has been destroyed following illegal dumping, with conservationists warning it's just the latest example of systemic government failure to protect rare grasslands.

Thousands of tonnes of potentially contaminated fill was dumped on the 40 hectare Truganina grasslands, which had been assessed as one of 36 biodiversity hotspots mandated for protection as part of the joint federal and state government 2010 initiative, the Melbourne Strategic Assessment.

"This was truly ancient grassland - it had survived millennia without ever being ploughed or grazed and in the dump of a trunk it is gone forever," said Adrian Marshall, facilitator at the Grassy Plains Network.

"These areas can be home to endangered species, such as the Golden Sun Moth, the Striped Legless Lizard, the Growling Grass Frog and the Spiny Rice-flower, and a possible home has been utterly devastated.

"What is most galling is that this land was recognised for its rarity and fragility and the system intended to protect it utterly failed."

Conservation Area 9 had been set aside as part of a joint federal and state plan to release land for development in the new urban growth corridors on Melbourne's outskirts while claiming to ensure the protection of irreplaceable biodiversity.

The illegal dumping occurred between December 2021 and January 2022, but the devastation was only discovered in April by a member of the conservationist group the Grassy Plains Network. The City of Melton, the Department of Land, Water, Environment and Planning (DELWP), the EPA and Federal authorities are currently investigating.

Victorian National Parks Association and the Grassy Plains Network have now written to Federal Minister for Environment and Water, Tanya Plibersek, and the Victorian Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, Lily D'Ambrosio warning that both governments are systemically failing to deliver on the protection of critically endangered grasslands.

"This is extinction happening under both the federal and state governments' watch.

"Promises of future preservation mean nothing if there aren't proper protections in place - this is not a set and forget project, if we want our ancient grasslands we must act now. It is clear that the Melbourne Strategic Assessment and the protection of grasslands has failed."

Conservation and community groups are calling for immediate action by State and Federal Governments to:

- Assess the current state of the Conservation Area 9 and identify opportunities for rehabilitation and restoration
- Identify and secure an alternative site of the same size and ecological value in the metro area
- Ensure all 35 other conservation areas have the appropriate legal protections and are being properly managed
- Require that the Federal Government undertake an urgent independent ecological audit of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment to ensure its approvals are being properly implemented.

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