



Grassy Plains Network

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Minimising Airport Rail Link impacts to grasslands, and improving outcomes

26 October 2021

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Image: Mathews Hill Grassland, looking towards Airport Rai l Link

Who we are

The Grassy Plains Network is an independent organisation representing 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.

Many of our members are acknowledged experts in the management and restoration of grassy ecosystems. Many have led long-term efforts to preserve grasslands across the Victorian Volcanic Plain. Some have been critical to establishment of the native seed industry, others to the development of best-practice monitoring methods for grasslands. We have members who have been working for decades with community to raise awareness of the importance of grassland conservation. Collectively, we have worked at every level of government, across all of Melbourne's north and west, in Landcare, CMAs and in dozens of community and environmental organisations.

Critically endangered

The grasslands around Melbourne are some of the best remaining examples of one of Australia's most endangered ecosystems. Less than 2% remain of the almost endless sea of grass that swept from the Yarra, across Melbourne's West and all the way to South Australia – flower-rich meadows bursting with life that are now, sadly, on the brink of extinction. Urbanisation continues to be a major threat to the little that remains.

Grasslands and rail have a long association

Rail lines are one of the last places of refuge for these grasslands, along with stony rises, land too rocky to plough, pioneer cemeteries and travelling stock routes. Rail lines have a history of frequent burning for biomass removal, which was combined with infrequent or absent grazing and a lack of fertiliser use and has led to the survival of high-quality patches of grassland. Many of the best grasslands in Melbourne are on or adjacent to existing rail land.

Airport Rail Link protections for existing grasslands

The Grassy Plains Network notes that, from the material currently available through the EPBC referral 2021/9040, the management plans Rail Projects Victoria intend to put in place to create no-go zones, appear to be of high standard. We hope the delivery of these will effectively minimise construction impacts and protect critical remnant grassland patches.

Local offsets for local conservation benefits

We understand that some impacts to grassland and threatened species are inevitable, and that these will be offset.

Most importantly, we urge Rail projects Victoria to consider a very targeted and local application of those offsets.

In particular, we would like to see the Airport Rail Link project contribute to the protection of Solomon Heights Grasslands. These Natural Temperate Grasslands of the Victorian Volcanic Plain run adjacent to Airport Rail Link west from the Maribyrnong River crossing. They include critically endangered Spiny Rice-flower, Growling Grass Frog, Striped Legless Lizard and Golden Sun Moth populations. The grasslands are currently in private ownership, but Brimbank Council and other key stakeholders are currently engaged in a process that we are hopeful will bring about a substantial conservation reserve on the land adjacent to the Airport Rail Link.

Contributing to the resolution of this process would make an excellent environmental legacy outcome for the Airport Rail Link project. It would show Rail Projects Victoria to be supporting the local ecosystems fundamental to the identity of the West.

New bridge over the Maribyrnong

The railway land on the west side of the Maribyrnong where the new bridge will be built has significant environmental values. The grasslands of Solomon Heights are immediately adjacent. Importantly, too, the weedy land with less native vegetation also has significant habitat value. We encourage rail Projects Victoria to keep bridge construction impacts to a minimum on the west side of the Maribyrnong.

Revegetation of the rail corridor

The revegetation of the rail corridor is an excellent opportunity for Rail Projects Victoria to strengthen the environmental values of the project, to support the biodiversity of the remnant grassland, and to maintain the rail corridor's function as a linear green link across a highly urbanised landscape.

Noise walls

We note that noise walls are being considered for human amenity. We wish to stress the importance of noise mitigation to fauna. A substantial body of evidence attests to the fact that noise levels can significantly impact the communications of a wide range of fauna, leading to reduced effectiveness of mating calls, warning calls and disrupting populations. Rail Projects Victoria should consider the use of noise walls adjacent to species-rich natural features such as Solomon Heights Grasslands.

Light pollution

Considerable impacts to fauna, including amphibians, insects and bats, can be caused by light pollution. These impacts have been exacerbated by a move to LED lighting, which tends to be strong in frequencies at the ultraviolet end of the spectrum. We ask that all rail lighting wherever possible be fauna-friendly and help to contribute to darker skies over our important environmental assets.

Ongoing discussions

The Grassy Plains Network looks forward to ongoing and constructive discussions with Rail Projects Victoria.