

The Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio
Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Action, and Solar Homes
Level 16, 8 Nicholson Street, East Melbourne, VIC 3000

28 June 2022

Dear Minister D'Ambrosio,

Re: Illegal destruction of Conservation Area 9

The VNPA and the Grassy Plains Network wish to raise a deeply concerning act in Truganina that has irreparably removed native grassland, critical habitat for endangered wildlife and much needed green space for the local community. This act also highlights the poor handling of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment program and the need to urgently acquire these high conservation value sites sooner rather than later.

Conservation Area 9 in Truganina has been illegally destroyed by the dumping of soil over the native vegetation and habitat by the landowner of the site. This site was committed to becoming a reserve as one of the 36 biodiversity hotspots mandated by the State Government's *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Melbourne's Growth Corridors* as part of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA).

Conservation Area 9 was a precious old-growth grassland remnant of Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain. The site was one of the very few places in Victoria that remained almost completely untouched by grazing, unploughed, a Kangaroo Grass dominated grassland, one of the rarest of the rare. And it was higher quality than almost any part of the proposed Western Grassland Reserves.

The destruction of Conservation Area 9 at 643–707 Mt Atkinson Road Truganina took place between December 2021 – January 2022 according to aerial imagery, but only came to the notice of authorities in April 2022. Thousands of tonnes of fill have been dumped across the site, burying the native vegetation, with rock-crushing having also been undertaken.

Many, if not most, of the 36 future Conservation Areas currently in private hands have no protections in place, such as Environmental Significance Overlays and Public Acquisition Overlays, leaving these sites that the Victorian State Government committed to protecting open to damage, neglect and the outright vandalism seen at Conservation Area 9. There are also no management agreements in place with the landholders, which is seeing the biodiversity values that these sites had a decade ago at the start of the MSA being degraded every day that they aren't being managed.

Conservation Area 9 had none of the usual protections in place for future conservation reserves and was zoned Urban Growth Zone when it should have been zoned Rural Conservation Zone at a minimum.

These Conservation Areas are for the preservation of nature and for the enjoyment of future residents as Melbourne grows. And they are the compensation for the destruction of the remaining environmental values across the urban growth corridors. But the failure of DELWP to manage the MSA program properly and to protect places such as Conservation Area 9 in the interim highlights their poor management of the program and our most critically endangered ecosystem and flora and fauna species.

This is yet another example of the State and Federal Governments' inability to protect our critically endangered grasslands. This has occurred despite the 2020 Victorian Auditor-General's Office report *Protecting Critically Endangered Grasslands*, despite the findings of the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline, and despite the latest Victorian Auditor-General's Office audit *Offsetting native vegetation loss on private land*, which shows ongoing loss of native vegetation on private land.

We welcomed the increase in the levy in 2020. But the major issue and failure of the MSA remains the degradation of the grassland sites while the program slowly rolls out leaving these remaining grassland sites open to degradation through lack of management, continued grazing, weed infestation and illegal dumping like that at Conservation Area 9.

The MSA was meant to deliver the 36 Conservation Areas as well as the Western Grassland Reserves and Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands by 2020. This has failed, with the last decade seeing only 17% of the Western Grassland Reserves purchased, with the remaining 83% still in rapid decline, 0% of the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland acquired and many of 36 Conservation Areas left in limbo.

The decade-long MSA program was an ecological timeframe to acquire the sites before their conservation values were lost and degraded to a point of not being worth protecting. The Victorian people now look likely to be left with very expensive white elephants that may not be recoverable and that will cost many more dollars to stabilise than when they were first mandated.

We hold grave concerns for the other 35 Conservation Areas. The biodiversity values of these Conservation Areas are being rapidly eroded by weed encroachment, just like what has occurred in the Western Grassland Reserves. For instance, Conservation Area 11, Woods Road Truganina, is almost entirely lost to weeds.

The mismanagement goes beyond just a lack of weed control. In some instances, grasslands are heavily grazed as native pasture, destroying flora. In other cases, lack of burning or other means of reducing biomass means the thick grass thatch is smothering the biodiversity present in the inter-tussock spaces of the grassland. Other Conservation Areas are even being cropped.

The lack of any plans to purchase most of these Conservation Areas highlights this gross mismanagement. Instead, DELWP are going to leave these sites to developers to manage, with possible future handover to Councils or other authorities on some vague case-by-case basis, while their biodiversity values fade, and our grasslands decline to a point of no return. All the risk is being born by the environment, not the urban developers.


We are told the MSA team tried to have some Urban Growth Zoned land rezoned with conservation zoning or with the Environmental Significance Overlays, but apparently the planning minister vetoed it. This does not reflect well on the government's commitments to the MSA program, biodiversity 2037 or its obligations under the FFG Act and EPBC Act.

We are requesting the following action be taken as a matter of urgency:

- Immediate assessment of the current state of the Conservation Area 9 and a report identifying opportunities for rehabilitation and restoration if that is even possible
- Identification and securing of an alternative site of the same size and ecological value in the metro area
- A thorough audit and investigation that ensures all 35 other Conservation Areas have the appropriate legal protections and are being properly managed
- The Federal Government to undertake an urgent independent ecological audit of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment to ensure its approvals are being properly implemented
- Immediately acquire the Western Grasslands Reserve and Grassy Eucalypt Woodlands as a whole.

We look forward to your urgent response to this critical issue.

Yours sincerely,



Adrian Marshall,
Facilitator, the Grassy Plains Network



Jordan Crook,
The Victorian National Parks Association