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Parliament of Victoria: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Submission by Grassy Plains Network, August 30, 2020

The Grassy Plains Network (GPN), a subcommittee of the Indigenous Flora & Fauna Association Inc. (www.iffa.org.au), is a coalition of conservation professionals, academics, volunteers and community supporters who aim for better conservation of grasslands and allied ecosystems on the plains on the western side of Melbourne. The GPN came together in 2018 and has organised a successful public conference on grasslands conservation, and has held extensive talks with state and local government, Indigenous land managers and Traditional Owners, and community and professional stakeholders in the issue. This submission includes our responses to the Inquiry's terms of reference; two proposals from GPN for governance solutions; and we submit our 2018 Grassy Plains Declaration which summarises a thorough program to conserve the grassy plains ecosystems.

1. Inquiry terms of reference - direct responses

(a) the extent of the decline of Victoria's biodiversity and the likely impact on people, particularly First Peoples, and ecosystems, if more is not done to address this, including consideration of climate change impacts;

The area that the GPN focuses on consists primarily of volcanic plains grassland, which by most estimates is reduced to less than 2% of its original extent across the whole bioregion, possibly a lot less. Other associated ecosystems such as ephemeral wetlands, escarpment shrublands, grassy woodlands are scattered across the Melbourne area, and have also been drastically reduced in extent.

The Victorian Flora & Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 lists the following communities as threatened:

- Western (Basalt) Plains Grasslands Community
- Western Basalt Plains (River Red Gum) Grassy Woodland Floristic Community

The Federal Environment Protection & Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999) lists the following communities (in some cases more or less equivalent to those listed at state level):

- Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain (Critically Endangered)
- Grey Box (*Eucalyptus microcarpa*) Grassy Woodlands and Derived Native Grasslands of South-eastern Australia (Endangered)
- Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain (Critically Endangered)
- Seasonal Herbaceous Wetlands (Freshwater) of the Temperate Lowland Plains (Critically endangered)

Numerous species endemic to, or common in these ecosystems are also listed. Ongoing effects of fragmentation and weed invasion mean that many if not all of these ecosystems, and threatened/endangered species within them, will continue to deteriorate and disappear without active conservation management to turn the situation around.

The western and northern periphery of Melbourne in particular is significant for grassland conservation. It previously supported the largest concentration of high quality grassland on the

Volcanic Plain – mainly due to urban land speculation reducing the impacts of introduced pasture conversion and cropping. As recently as the 1980s and early 1990s large paddocks of kangaroo grassland, rich in herbs were common here. However over the last three decades urban expansion and development, and weed invasions, have reduced Melbourne’s grasslands to scattered fragments of their previous extent. In particular the massive expansion of the urban growth boundary since 2010 has taken its toll, along with in-fill development in established suburbs. Successive Governments and development approvals have typically allowed clearing of urban-fringe grassland in exchange for distant off-sets on the Volcanic Plains.

Melbourne’s grasslands are important not only for biodiversity, but also for providing natural open-space and a connection to nature for rapidly expanding urban communities and many different migrant groups. Without the grasslands, and connecting waterway corridors, Melbourne’s west risks becoming a vast, alienating urban sprawl, without a sense of the character that makes the region unique and beautiful.

Grassland ecosystems are undoubtedly one of the most difficult ecosystems to protect and restore. It has been almost 30 years since the Great Plains Crash conference in 1992 highlighted the desperate need for a better understanding of grassland ecology, and the urgency for conservation of unprotected remnants. Since that time, there has been a plethora of social and scientific research; conferences, workshops and seminars; field trips, community engagement and community education: all highlighting the substantial and ongoing threats to this ecosystem.

There have been some great achievements. New grassland conservation areas, large and small, have been created across Melbourne’s west and north. Some degraded remnants have been relieved of the burden of high threat weeds and pest animals; and in a few cases there has even been restoration of some elements of the indigenous biota. A multitude of scientific, technical and community-based networks that focus on the grassland story have been established and then disbanded.

Despite all of this, we continue to witness the destruction of critical grassland remnants. High quality areas that were known to support threatened plants and animals; or support an impressive diversity of flora; or support a unique suite of species. These patches have been lost forever to make way for infrastructure, roads, housing and industrial precincts.

(b) the adequacy of the legislative framework protecting Victoria’s environment, including grasslands, forests and the marine and coastal environment, and native species;

Much of the GPN's area of concern is affected by the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) conducted by Victorian state government with the Federal government in the years leading up to 2010. As noted in the recent report by the Victorian Auditor General's Office, this process has substantially failed to deliver the conservation outcomes that were a stated central aim, principally, the acquisition and conservation management of significant grassland and grassy woodland conservation reserves. This includes the 15000 ha Western Grassland Reserves (WGR) (only about 10% acquired to date), as well as numerous Conservation Reserves proposed to exist within the Urban Growth Zone.

In addition, State Government does not have any coordinated measures in place to protect the diverse, good-quality grassland remnants which still survive in existing suburbs (not subject to the MSA), or in the growth corridor (overlooked by the MSA). These sites are under imminent threat

of clearing for urban development, and many such sites have already been cleared in recent years. They also face deterioration due to weed invasion, rubbish dumping, and other impacts. Some local governments such as Brimbank Council are endeavouring to protect them through planning measures and other means, but face an up-hill battle due to development pressures.

The protection of Melbourne's grasslands within the 'Green Wedges' is also under threat. Due to major infrastructure proposals, such as the Outer Metropolitan Ring Road, duplication of main roads and rail corridors, the Western Outer Ring Gas Main Project, major clean fill dumping projects, major quarries and mines and changing farming practices. Currently grasslands subject to these proposals are not adequately avoided. This adds to the challenges already faced by green wedge grasslands such as uneducated landowners, weed invasion and land speculation.

It is alarming to see permitted clearing of so many grassland remnants continuing, despite the tiny amount of volcanic plains grasslands remaining statewide, and even more so given the failure to date of the MSA to protect any significant area of grasslands.

(c) the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs and funding protecting and restoring Victoria's ecosystems;

In 2019, the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (Environment Mitigation Levy) Act passed parliament to amend the methods by which offset payments were collected from developers to fund the conservation program. While allowing greater amounts of money to be recovered, the pace of development (of defined areas eligible for offsets) still sets the pace at which offset payments are made by developers. Conservation Areas within the Urban Growth Zone are also to be handed over to public management as development around them proceeds, and until that time are subject to the ongoing processes of ecological decline.

Given the current recession, it seems unlikely that the pace of development will change in a positive direction, leaving the failure of the MSA's conservation aims a likely ongoing open sore in the state's record of ecosystem design.

There is not consistent or adequate funding for the few grassland remnants that have been secured into public ownership. Parks Victoria manage some of the largest remaining grassland reserves on a shoe string budget. This has led many sites – such as Craigieburn Grasslands, Cooper Street Grassland, Derrimut Grasslands and many more to decline post reservation.

There is not consistent funding for outreach and engagement officers deployed in Parks Victoria to help local communities connect to these grasslands and participate in their restoration. It is clear that, if supported and facilitated, communities do want to help restore this ecosystem as has been demonstrated over two decades by the Friends of Iramoo in St Albans and Pinkerton Landcare group in Melton.

(d) legislative, policy, program, governance and funding solutions to facilitate ecosystem and species protection, restoration and recovery in Victoria, in the context of climate change impacts;

In order to turn around the dire situation for Melbourne's grasslands, it is imperative that state government fast-track conservation management of the Western Grassland Reserves and identified conservation areas within the Urban Growth Zone under the MSA agreement. In order to achieve this, it is likely to be necessary to undertake the following:

1. ecological surveys of the WGR and Urban Growth Zone areas to identify the best remnant patches for management and acquisition;
2. acquisition of WGR parcels and Urban Growth Zone conservation areas into public management, prioritised according to the best quality/most threatened areas first;
3. Conservation management (weed control in particular) of all ecologically valuable remnants immediately, including prior to and after public acquisition.

Increased funding, such as by government taking out a loan, is likely to be necessary to achieve these aims. However, it could still be possible to preserve many ecological values without purchasing all remnant grasslands immediately, if and only if the necessary minimum of conservation management is in place in the period from now until public acquisition. Much of the WGR area is not native grassland, but rather former cropland or improved pasture. As such, the failure to acquire all of it by the promised date need not result in an ecological disaster if the good grassland remnants are identified and preserved.

It is also imperative that State Government partner with local councils to commence an effective program to protect high quality grassland sites on urban development land, and connecting waterway corridors. This should include:

1. Partial protection of sites through development approvals, and use of appropriate zoning, overlays and other planning controls
2. Public acquisition of the highest priority urban grassland sites
3. Interim management and weed control by working with landholders prior to planning approval/ public acquisition

Many grassland remnants are currently managed by local government and by community Committee of Management arrangements, often very well. This should be continued and supported as new grassland reserves are acquired, where suitable. There are also good case studies that show how damaged and degraded grassland remnants can be returned to something like the natural wildflower gardens they originally would have been.

Two detailed governance solutions we would like to put forward follow, in sections 2 and 3.

(e) opportunities to restore Victoria's environment while upholding First Peoples' connection to country, and increasing and diversifying employment opportunities in Victoria;

The Public Acquisition Overlay for the Western Grassland Reserve includes Wurdi Youang, a property owned by the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative and managed with the stated aim of turning it into an Indigenous Protected Area. While it is GPN's understanding that the current state government has promised to remove the overlay from Wurdi Youang, to our knowledge this has not yet occurred. GPN believes this should be expedited, to show respect for Indigenous management and Traditional Owners. Further, GPN supports the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative's calls for funding to train and employ Indigenous Rangers (as exist in other states) to manage Wurdi Youang for conservation and cultural heritage (and potentially other areas beyond that).

The area of Wurdi Youang is approximately 369 hectares, and GPN believes government should commit to replacing this with the same number of hectares of grassland habitat elsewhere. GPN has identified a number of unprotected but valuable grassland remnants within existing suburbs, and in the Urban Growth Zone, that would make a valuable contribution to the conservation of this ecosystem and should be purchased for public management for conservation. Additionally, some good quality remnants remain adjacent to, but not included in, the WGR boundaries.

(f) any other related matters.

The GPN organised a public educational conference, "Respect Protect & Reconnect Melbourne's Grassy Plains" hosted by Wyndham Council in October 2018. We would like to submit the Conference Declaration as a summary of actions that GPN believes are needed to turn around the decline of the grassy plains ecosystems in the west of Melbourne (see following).

The 2018 conference was attended by over 200 people from conservation management, planning, academic research, conservation groups, and the local (western suburbs) community. Written submissions were collected from the participants as their suggestions for measures to better conserve the grassy plains. It was found the suggestions were practical, insightful and in many cases original, and were collated and edited minimally to create the declaration. As such, GPN continues to advocate for these measures which we think deserve to be enacted in their entirety, and which are the result of the collective effort of a large group of engaged people with much professional expertise and experience.

2. The need to establish a formal Grassy Plains Recovery Team

Over the last two decades, grassland conservation and restoration has been approached in different ways by different agencies and organisations. This has enabled a variety of management practices to be implemented and tested; ranging in focus from individual species, to site-specific biomass and vegetation management, to landscape-scale considerations. The benefit of this variety of approaches is that we have not put all our conservation eggs in one basket, and there are many lessons that have been learned.

It is problematic, however, that there is no collaborative or open way to share our conservation, management and restoration experiences. The valuable lessons learnt from mistakes are not shared, leading to repetition by others. Our successes are wonderful and often hard-won but are not shared widely between agencies and organisations, limiting the speed and pace in which we can implement recovery actions for this ecosystem.

Of immense concern is the significant disconnect between the research and practice of grassland management, and the development and implementation of planning and policy that leads to better outcomes for our grasslands.

A strong and outstanding exception is the *Pimelea spinesecens* Recovery Team (PsRT). Established in 2008, this recovery team continues to successfully bring together research, practice, policy and implementation. Additionally, it provides direction for funding and grant opportunities, which has driven a real improvement to the trajectory of this grassland species.

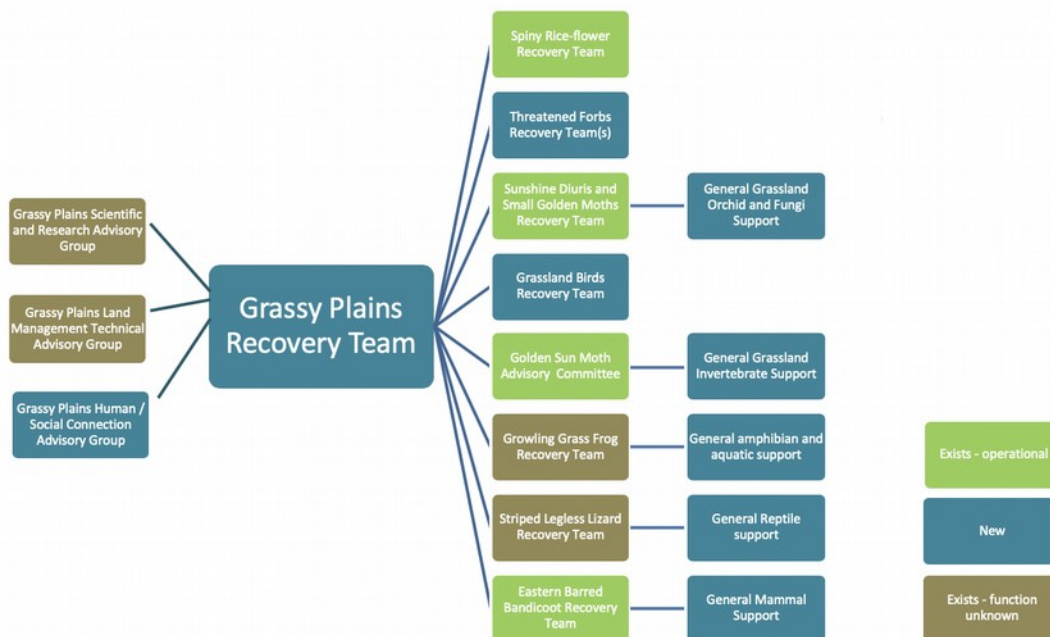
The key features that make the PsRT special, unique and successful are:

- a dedicated conservation trust fund that was set up at Trust for Nature (NGO) to provide secure and long term funding for management of the recovery team, research and recovery actions.
- A paid Conservation Officer who drives the Recovery Team and Trust Committee to administer the funds, coordinate meetings and recovery actions, and disseminate up to date knowledge and information. Recovery Team meetings are consistent and regular and include site visits where real on-ground research and management experiences are shared. There is an open transparent approach to the sharing of information, bridging gaps between various government bodies, private enterprise, research and non-government partners.
- A collegiate environment that is inclusive of all entities that work for the conservation of the species: community groups, land management practitioners, landowners, environmental consultation, local government bodies, CMA’s Catchment Management Authorities, researchers, infrastructure authorities, state and federal government. All are invited to meetings and correspondence and collaboration is encouraged.

Based on the success of the PsRT model, we propose the establishment of a Grassy Plains Recovery Team which is comprised of a network of eight focussed working groups and three themed advisory groups.

A concept for how the recovery team network could work is highlighted below:

A proposed functional structure to Protect, Respect and Reconnect Melbourne’s Grassy Plains



Within the recovery team network, each of the eight-working group acts independently, based on the PSrT model. They connect and interact through an overarching Grassy Plains Recovery Team which includes one nominated spokesperson from each of the eight working groups.

In addition, there are three advisory groups that focus on cross-sectional issues for the recovery of the Grassy Plains. To facilitate the sharing of ideas and collaboration, the advisory groups would include members of individual working groups, as well as people who are interested in the holistic

recovery of the ecosystem. One spokesperson from each advisory committee sits on the overarching recovery team.

For example:

A land manager might have a keen focus on the recovery of threatened grassland orchids and management of striped legless lizard habitat – that person could sit on the Sunshine Diuris Recovery Team and the Land Management Technical Advisory Group, while receiving the emails and correspondence of the Striped Legless Lizard Recovery team.

A social science researcher might have a keen focus on how grassland birds increase people's perception and awareness for the Grassy Plains ecosystem – that person might sit on the Grassland Birds Recovery team and the Social/Human Connection Advisory Group.

The idea is to break down silos, increase collaboration, skills and knowledge sharing across the entire grassy plains restoration community. As per the PsRT approach, everyone is invited and there is no need to limit the number of people on the working and advisory groups. Even when people are not able to attend every meeting, they can still receive the knowledge and wisdom of the group via digital correspondence. Only the Grassy Plains Recovery Team meetings would be limited in number. That is, one spokesperson from each of the eight working groups and three advisory groups (11 people) and an independent chairperson.

Financial implications

In order to establish this structure and to make it function effectively it is envisaged that a minimum of 4 full time positions would need to be created at Trust for Nature for a minimum establishment/evaluation period of 3 years.

Position 1 – Senior Coordinator (oversight of other three positions), Grassy Plains Recovery Team, Human Social Connection Advisory Group

Position 2 – Traditional Owner facilitator, Land Management Advisory Group, Scientific and Research Advisory Group

Position 3 - Grassland Flora Working Groups Coordinator (Spiny Rice Flower, Threatened Forbs and Orchids)

Position 4 –Grassland Fauna Working Groups Coordinator (Grassland Birds, Golden Sun Moth, Growling Grass Frog and Striped Legless Lizard)

The chairperson of the Grassy Plains Recovery Team should also be paid for their time to undertake this role, it could be position 1 above, or a suitable independent public servant could be found.

A small start-up trust fund must also be established for each Working Group, to be sourced from relevant government programs for this ecosystem (such as the Biodiversity Response Planning or the Melbourne Strategic Impact Assessment or through philanthropic investment).

Following the initial capital investment, models to fund the positions in an ongoing capacity should be identified and sourced. This may include:

- Ramped up membership fees based on organisational capacity (as per the Moonee Ponds Creek 'Chain of Ponds Collaboration' – where government organisations pay to join, but community groups and volunteer membership is free)
- State Government funding from general revenue;

- A small proportion of the MSA levy, as the positions are related to the delivery of the Bilateral Agreement; or
- some combination of the above

All other attendees for each Working Group would either participate in a voluntary capacity or at the cost of their home organisation. There may need to be consideration of a small stipend to increase attendance and representation of people from Traditional Owner groups and those who attend in a community-based capacity.

3. Governance Solutions – Better Funded Management for Grassy Plains regionally

To address the historic and current short-comings of grassland protection, management and restoration, the Grassy Plains Network considers that a new approach is required. The Grassy Plains Network propose that an independent advisory committee be established to investigate a business case for the establishment of a Grassy Plains Management Authority or some other model of effective grassland management.

In Melbourne, there has long been recognition that waterways have a bespoke need for bespoke management. Melbourne Water provides the overarching responsibility for the management and improvement to waterways in metropolitan Melbourne. Through its *Healthy Waterways Strategy* and the waterways and drainage charge, it delivers ecological improvements to waterways and their surrounding terrestrial habitats in public and private land, through capital works, grants and ongoing works programs.

To be able to respect, protect and reconnect Melbourne's grassy plains, irrespective of land tenure, there is a clear and strong need to establish a similar approach for grasslands. An authority that is funded, well resourced, supports and drives research, involves traditional owners, and is a point of knowledge-sharing and community connection.

One of the key issues leading to the destruction of grassland remnants within urban development projects is the lack of an obvious land manager who is able to commit to and take on the long-term management of high value but small remnants. As a consequence, ecological consultants often advise their clients and regulators, that clearance and offsetting are a better option. The lack of an ultimate land manager should definitely not be a reason for grassland destruction. Just as Melbourne Water has taken responsibility for the management of the new Growling Grass Frog Conservation Areas within the growth areas, the Grassy Plains Management Authority could take on responsibility for the management of new grassy conservation areas, irrespective of size.

Across metropolitan Melbourne there are a number of exceptional conservation areas that are successfully managed by a range of public land managers. This includes rail authorities, roads authorities, local government, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria, cemetery trusts and voluntary Committees of Management. Fire agencies, such as Forest Fire Management Victoria at the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, the Country Fire Authority and Metropolitan Fire Authority often help in the ecological burning of these reserves. The community through Friends groups, Landcare groups, orchid societies, universities and Council environmental programs also play an important role.

However, for every successfully managed grassland, there are sites where grassland quality is in decline due to a lack of effective management, insecure management funding, poor site-specific

knowledge and a lack of strategic long-term direction. Land management agencies/organisations rarely have substantial in-house crews to complete the on-ground works and often these are contracted out to the private sector, including consultancies, land management companies and indigenous nurseries. Oftentimes the private land management contractors have in-depth knowledge about the sites they care for and manage. These companies are often just as committed to these sites as the ‘official’ land managers and sometimes have a long history of knowledge about these sites. Recent moves towards short-term and ‘cheap’ management contracts undermine and undervalue the relationship between management agency and contractor, often resulting in poor on-ground outcomes and lack of long-term vision.

Management and funding of grassy ecosystems at Parks Victoria (the default manager for grassland reserves) needs to compete with their high-profile contiguous parcels of conservation land, such as Otways National Park, Little Desert National Park and the Alpine National Park. Thus resources are limited for the management of urban grasslands for the perpetual threats of weed invasion, rubbish dumping, incompatible leisure activities and biomass accumulation. These smaller urban grasslands appear to not be able to compete for management funds with signature Parks Vic estates that are major draw cards for tourism and recreation. The Grassy Plains Network has reservations about Parks Victoria’s track record for managing many of these grasslands reserves.

The advisory committee could find that there are ways and means to fund Parks Victoria to become an exceptional grassland manager, for all grassland reserves. While we would welcome that approach, some clear path forward for the organisation would need to be made, by the committee.

The Grassy Plains Network believe that the establishment of a Grassy Plains Management Authority could be the action, in conjunction with a lot of great work undertaken to date by land managers, that turns the tide for grasslands. The management authority could work across tenures, to get the best bang for our biodiversity buck. It could focus on the one-hectare rail reserve that supports the last known population of a threatened orchid, the 30-hectare site that supports a dense population of Striped Legless Lizard, and it could oversee the restoration of the 15,000-hectare Western Grassland Reserve.

Financial Implications

The creation of an independent advisory committee to government who can investigate and report on the idea and need to create a Grassy Plains Management Authority, or to propose improvements to the current model of delivery. At a minimum, this advisory committee must include representatives from Traditional Owners and consult widely with grassland industry experts across the public, private and research sectors.

4. Grassy Plains declaration 2018

Over October 12-13, 2018, the Grassy Plains Network held a conference “Respect Protect Reconnect Melbourne’s Grassy Plains” at Wyndham Council Chambers. Many of the over 200 community members and professionals who attended wrote down their suggested ideas for how to better protect Melbourne’s grassy plains. The suggestions were collated and edited to create the following declaration:

Respect:

- Seek and create opportunities for traditional owners to provide advice, guidance and assist in the active management of the Grassy Plains of Melbourne.
- Seek and support opportunities for communities on the Grassy Plains of Melbourne to ‘walk country together’ with Traditional Owners.

Protect:

- Seek the immediate purchase and management of priority natural areas, before they are lost or further degraded. This includes:
 - the immediate acquisition of all areas with the highest natural values in the Western Grasslands Reserve locations (i.e. categorised as ‘High Quality Native Grassland’ and ‘Themeda Grassland’ (DSE, 2011)),
 - the immediate acquisition of ‘Conservation Areas’ identified in the Biodiversity Conservation Strategy, within the Western Growth Area (DEPI, 2013),
 - the accelerated acquisition of all areas with high cover of native grasses within the Western Grasslands Reserve, including those that have been categorised as ‘Austrostipa Grassland’ (DSE, 2011) and areas dominated by C3 native grasses,
 - the acquisition of all unprotected areas with high natural values within the former Urban Growth Boundary and also within the Western Growth Area.
- Secure increased funding for land managers to ensure that management actions maintain or improve the quality of protected natural areas on the grassy plains of Melbourne. In particular, further resources are required for Parks Victoria who have responsibility for managing the Western Grasslands Reserve.
- Seek funding for a Traditional Owner rangers program that can work across public and private tenures to manage Grassy Plains landscapes.
- Advocate for all waterways of the west to be allocated to public ownership and managed for conservation and water quality via an integrated approach.
- All approved urban/industrial development projects on remnant habitat must include a plan to save and salvage the soil seedbank and threatened flora and fauna for re-establishment in protected areas.
- Identify and place planning protection such as Environmental Significance Overlays and conservation zoning for significant natural areas in public and private ownership.
- Create large scale seed orchards in conjunction with community, councils, government agencies and industry. Seek collaborative beneficial arrangements such as using recycled water on the seed orchards.

Reconnect:

- Seek to connect people with the natural landscape in areas where they live, work and undertake other activities (e.g. school, sport, community gatherings, shopping).

- Strengthen and create new connections between all groups, organisations and individuals who take an interest in the Grassy Plains of Melbourne.
- Engage with new and existing multi-cultural communities to the west of Melbourne with the aim of improved understanding, appreciation and involvement with the natural landscape and its values. Involve all land managers and pursue innovative techniques for this process.
- Continue to develop new approaches for engaging young people with the natural landscape.
- Include strategies that are focussed around health and wellbeing, social, spiritual and cultural themes.
- Use new, creative and engaging methods for engaging people with remnant native grasslands, including: art, film, photography, writing, song and education.
- Establish a Scientific Advisory Group for the Grassy Plains of Melbourne, including Traditional Owners). This group will collate existing information, identify knowledge gaps, lead programs of research that are likely to result in improved conservation and management outcomes, and prepare and distribute information in relevant formats/forums for the community and other relevant stakeholders.
- Establish a Land Management Advisory/Working Group (including Traditional Owners) to advise, collaborate and share knowledge relating to the practice and experience of managing and restoring the natural landscapes of the Grassy Plains of Melbourne. This group would also collate and disseminate their findings/advice/learnings.
- Create funded Recovery Teams for each group of threatened species within the Grassy plains (e.g. Orchids, Daisies, Insects, Reptiles and Frogs).
- Seek and promote positive examples of development and design that include natural areas or features of the Grassy Plains landscape.

References:

DSE (2011) Western Grassland Reserves: Grassland management targets and adaptive management. Department of Sustainability and Environment, East Melbourne.

DEPI, 2013. Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Melbourne's Growth Corridors. Department of Environment and Primary Industries, East Melbourne