



Grassy Plains Network

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Eleven threatened urban grasslands

State-led action required for lasting solutions

Briefing paper to James Todd, Executive Director of Biodiversity, DELWP
21 October 2021

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Introduction

The Grassy Plains Network

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.

Urgent action at State level required

Melbourne's urban grasslands are vital to the preservation of a critically endangered ecological community. Numerous grasslands within Melbourne are of higher quality than the grasslands being actively acquired for the Western Grassland Reserves, and they represent some of the best examples of Themeda-dominated grasslands within the Victorian Volcanic Plain.

The eleven grassland patches discussed in this document all occur within the 2009 Urban Growth Boundary and are outside the Melbourne strategic Assessment area. They are often associated with other natural assets such as creeks and wetlands, and they are essential elements for ecological connectivity in the urban landscape, especially in the context of the mounting effects of rapid climate change. These grasslands provide rich near to nature experiences for residents and workers; are green infrastructure contributing important ecosystem services across the city, including improved health and well-being; and are an integral part of the identity of Melbourne's west and north.

These grasslands are all under threat, and in most cases their biodiversity values are declining because of inaction or poor management. Urgent action is required.

The Grassy Plains Network is calling on DELWP to step-in and help resolve the longstanding issues that are preventing the permanent protection of these critically endangered remnants. In many cases, DELWP has had previous engagement with these sites.

Mechanisms for protection

The main mechanisms for protection that we envisage are:

- Implementing planning controls, including environmental significance overlays and statewide clearing controls, as part of development approvals
- Retaining offsets on-site and in the urban area
- Public land acquisition
- Facilitating transfer of land and subdivision
- Coordinating liaison across multiple landholders and agencies
- Survey and management
- Salvage and translocation

The State Government, especially DELWP, needs to be proactive in developing a new overall strategy for urban grassland sites, and in assisting local government. DELWP need to assist Hobson's Bay in applying Environmental Significance Overlays to its grassland sites, and to undertake strategic conservation planning across the Altona industrial precinct. DELWP should assist both Brimbank and Hobson's Bay in responding to development and clearing applications when they arise, guided by an urban grassland strategy that seeks to minimise offsetting and maximise the retention of urban grasslands.

An urban offset strategy may be crucial, directing offsets from clearing in existing urban areas to other sites in existing urban areas. DELWP will need to take the lead on this, which might require a mini EPBC Act Strategic Assessment for greatest effect.

The Grassy Plains Network sees the following as priorities for State Government action:

1. Develop a land use planning and land acquisition strategy to protect high quality grassland remnants on existing urban zoned land (focusing on the municipalities of Brimbank and Hobson's Bay). As part of that strategy, assist Hobson's Bay Council to undertake strategic conservation planning across the Altona industrial precinct and to apply Environmental Significance Overlays to high quality grassland sites.
2. Develop an urban grassland offsets strategy, to direct offsets from the clearing of urban grassland sites to other urban grassland sites, and to retain offsets on-site where a good conservation outcome can be achieved. This may require a localised Strategic Assessment under the EPBC Act as a support mechanism.
3. DELWP to support urban councils by recommending the protection of high quality urban grassland sites through the development approval process.
4. Fund whole or partial land acquisition of urban grassland sites, where an effective conservation reserve cannot be achieved through development approvals and offsets alone.
5. Direct some of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment environment mitigation levies to urban grassland sites to support land acquisition.

The grasslands

Priority urban grassland sites to protect

The Grassy Plains Network considers the following eleven grasslands (Table 1) to require priority action by the State to ensure their protection for conservation. Individual characteristics and pressures mean that each must be considered on a case-by-case basis, and with varying urgency, which is a product of the immediate intensity of development pressure.

Some of these grasslands occur in geographic clusters. The Altona industrial precinct grasslands require a precinct-wide approach, as do the grasslands of the Cairnlea.

Overall, as indicated in Mechanisms for protection section above, all would benefit from an overarching urban grasslands strategy that should then guide responses at the cluster and individual grassland scale.

Table 1: Principle threatened urban grasslands by type and urgency.

Type of grassland	Name of grassland	Urgency
Large, high quality, species-rich, grassland remnants threatened by development in the near future	Solomon Heights and River Valley Estates	Very high
	Burns Rd (Merton St) Grassland (Altona industrial precinct cluster)	High
	Broadcast Australia site	High
Moderate size, high quality grassland remnants, linked to habitat corridors and threatened by development in the near future	Ajax Rd Grassland (Altona industrial precinct cluster)	Very high
	Ajax Rd North Grassland (Altona industrial precinct cluster)	Medium
	Jonesfield Corner (Cairnlea cluster)	Medium
	Reid St Grassland (Cairnlea cluster)	Medium
Moderate size, high quality grassland remnants on publicly owned urban land, but not protected	VU Grassland (Cairnlea cluster)	Medium
	Outbound WRR Servo Grassland	Medium
Small, high quality grassland remnants, easily protected and incorporated into future development plans	Section G grasslands (Cairnlea cluster)	Very high
Grasslands approved for clearing, with species to be salvaged and translocated	Modeina Estate grassland	Very high

Altona industrial precinct

Two large and significant grasslands remain in private hands in Hobsons Bay: Ajax Road Grassland and Burns Road (Merton Street) Grassland. Both are strategically located close to other biodiversity assets. Both are under imminent threat and are currently unprotected by any Environmental Significance Overlay. Ajax Road was the subject of a recent planning application to subdivide and clear native vegetation. Two hectares of native vegetation were cleared earlier this year at Burns Road. The Grassy Plains Network consider the best chance of saving these grasslands lies in coordinated action between state agencies and Hobsons Bay Council. Several smaller grasslands in private ownership also require action to secure their long term future.



A large expanse of Themeda grassland at Ajax Road.

Ajax Road Grassland



Key facts

- Size 78 ha (35 ha grassland, plus wetland)
- Privately owned by Axxcel
- Subject of recent rejected planning application (PA 1841550) to subdivide and remove native vegetation. Proposal included an on-site offset on the southern portion, as well as contentious off-site offset for Sunshine Diuris.
- Unmanaged (some occasional Melbourne water management of southern portion)
- Parcel includes new Altona Police Station on leased land at south-east corner
- Strategic location for ecological connectivity on Laverton Creek, Kayes Drain and rail lines
- High biodiversity value, 500 Spiny Rice-flower, Arched Flax-lily, Small-flower Flax-lily, Yellow Rush-lily, rare salt-tolerant Themeda, intact rocky substrate potential Striped Legless Lizard habitat.
- **Northern portion**
 - High biodiversity values (A, D, E), including a large number of Spiny Rice-flower plants, with areas in places impacted by dumped soil (B, D, F) from Crown Casino and weeds
- **Southern portion**
 - An important brackish grassland ecotone, adjoining the estuarine Brackish Wetland of Truganina Swamp – a Biosite of State Significance – and includes rare form of Plains Grassland dominated by Coast Tussock-grass and Australian Salt-grass.
 - Will shift to brackish wetland as Truganina Swamp retreats or expands with climate change.
 - As an on-site offset for grassland, this portion is neither like for like (it will become wetland), nor in perpetuity (it will become a wetland).
 - Only vehicle access through Melbourne Water land (Truganina Swamp)
 - Herb-rich, very large population of Spiny Rice-flower plants
- **Areas G and H**
 - 3.8 ha
 - Not part of recent Biosis survey. Clearly high quality Themeda stands with weeds at edges only. Needs survey. Relatively easy to restore
 - Spiny Rice-flower plants present
- **EEPBC referrals**
 - 2014/7208

Outcome sought

Core reserve consisting of habitat patch A, with link to rail-line and Kayes Drain, and all grassland and wetland south of Altona rail-line (existing offset proposal). As supporting reserve areas, some or all of patches G, H, D, E, where they can be incorporated into small reserves and an additional link north as part of the development plan.

Suggested mechanism: Apply statewide clearing controls and future Environmental Significance Overlay to development proposals for the larger lot H, as part of strategic conservation planning across the Altona industrial precincts. Locate any offsets on-site as far as possible, and direct other urban offsets to this site. Supplement any offset reserves with State Government land acquisition as needed.

Ajax Road North Grassland



Key facts

- Size medium, 5.6 ha
- Owned by unknown private
- Rocky, dense stands of Themeda, some native herbs, limited weed, relatively easy to restore.
- Needs survey
- An important link in the grassland habitat corridor along Werribee rail line.
- Spiny Rice-flower
- **EPBC referrals**
- Unknown

Outcome sought

1. Burn followed by survey and weed control. Site purchased and reserved for conservation, strengthening the habitat corridor along Werribee rail-line.
2. This block could be retained as a local offset for clearing elsewhere in the Altona industrial precinct. It has little impact on orderly development or the area of developable land in the industrial estate.

Suggested mechanism: Apply statewide clearing controls and future Environmental Significance Overlay to development proposals for this block, as part of strategic conservation planning across Altona industrial precincts. Direct other urban offsets to this site and supplement with State Government purchase as needed.

Burns Road (Merton St) Grassland



Key facts

- Size large, 39.5 ha
- Owned by many private landholders
- A historic subdivision of hundreds of land parcels, zoned industrial, and is similar in that regard to the Solomon Heights subdivision in Brimbank.
- Themeda paddock, rocks intact, some native herbs, some weed invasion. Heavily grazed in the 1980s but has regenerated well. Spiny Rice-flower believed present. Only known Hobsons Bay location of Striped Legless Lizard (apart from Laverton North Grassland reintroduction).
- Large parcel on northern edge has been cleared for development. VCAT process complete.
- Council pursuing strategy of consolidating land parcels to facilitate future development.
- Surveyed in 2018 by Abzeco.
- Key location on inland-coast biolink
- **EPBC referrals**
 - Unknown

Outcome sought

Protect all the high quality, intact Themeda grassland, as part of a contiguous, manageable reserve – all or the majority of the estate.

Suggested mechanism: Apply statewide clearing controls and future Environmental Significance Overlay to lot consolidation and development proposals for this block, as part of strategic conservation planning across Altona industrial precincts. Retain any offsets on-site and direct other urban offsets to this site. This is a priority site for State Government land purchase.

Cairnlea

Several grasslands in the south-eastern corner of Cairnlea are under threat. They are associated with the proposed development of Section G of the old Albion Explosives Factory, and the parcel referred to as Jonesfield Corner. The Jonesfield corner parcel extends south across the freeway to include the high-quality Reid Street Grassland. Jones Creek forms the eastern border of Cairnlea and connects the large and popular grasslands of Iramoo Wildflower Reserve, Howardson Circuit Grassland, VU Grassland and Pimelea Wildflower Reserve to Jonesfield Corner and the adjacent Section G grasslands and Reid Street Grassland. To the east lies the large, high-quality patch of Denton Avenue Grassland and the immensely significant St Albans Railway Reserves.

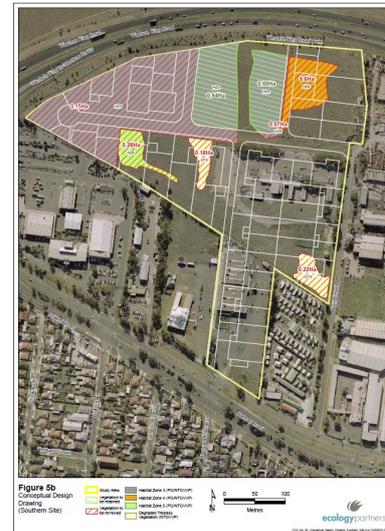
The integrity of the Jonesfield Corner Grassland and VU Grassland and their association with Jones Creek thus becomes strategically important in establishing the habitat corridor that runs from the St Albans Railway Reserves through to Iramoo. Reid Street Grassland and the Section G grasslands strengthen this connection and bolster the integrity of the Jonesfield Corner site.



Jonesfield Corner and Reid Street Grasslands

Jonesfield Corner also known as Jones Creek Grassland

Reid Street also known as Albion Explosives Factory Grasslands (K)



Key facts

- Size medium, Jonesfield Corner parcel is 9 ha, Reid Street is 7 ha
- Parcel extends both sides of freeway, northern portion known as Jonesfield Corner, southern portion as Reid Street Grassland
- Northern portion has areas of good diversity, Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain, Spiny Rice-flower, Arching Flax-lily, Striped Legless Lizard with other patches badly degraded.
- Southern portion more intact, Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain, Spiny Rice-flower, Tough scurf-pea, moderate to good diversity, weedy only in disturbed areas, Striped Legless Lizard. Relatively easy to restore.

- Both considered biosites of State Significance
- Important link as biodiversity corridor establishing connectivity between St Albans Railway Reserves, Denton Avenue Grassland and Iramoo via Jones Creek
- Areas of northern portion appropriate for public open space and recreation
- **EPBC referrals**
 - 2014/7358; 2010/5486
 - Latest activity 10 October 2014

Outcome sought

Jonesfield Corner: Development as public open space and recreation with retention of grassy values and connectivity

Reid Street: Protection at a minimum of habitat zones 3 and 5, with a managed habitat link to Jones Creek alongside the Western Ring Road.

Suggested mechanism: Apply the current Environmental Significance Overlay and statewide clearing controls to development approvals for both sites. Locate any offsets on-site and direct any other urban offsets to this site. Supplement any offset reserves with land acquisition by State Government.

VU Grassland

Also known as Albion Explosives Factory Grassland E



Key facts

- Size small, 4 ha
- Owned by Victoria University
- Themeda grassland
- Documented Striped Legless Lizard population
- Tussock Skink
- Contiguous with grassland along Jones Creek
- Not currently considered threatened
- **EPBC referrals**
- Unknown

Outcome sought

Retained as conservation reserve, and permanently protected through a conservation covenant.

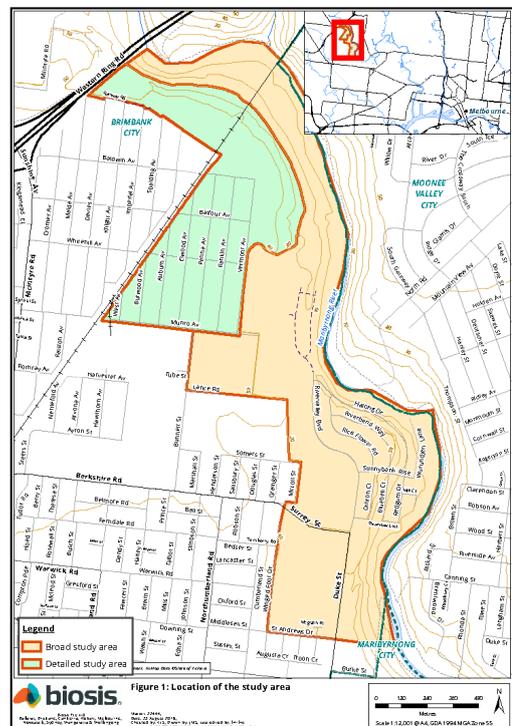
Solomon Heights and River Valley estates

The Solomon Heights and River Valley estates need to be considered together. They include areas of high biodiversity on the Maribyrnong River, an important conservation corridor. Disagreement over their future has been longstanding, and needs to be resolved, and will probably require state involvement. Their considerable biodiversity values are considered to be under immediate threat.

Outcome sought

The Grassy Plains Network believes the best achievable outcome for these estates involves the creation of a conservation reserve to the north, and if possible a supporting reserve in the southern portion rather than permitting development to the southern portion, as outlined in the Council-commissioned Solomon Heights Biodiversity Report (Biosis, 2016) recommendations. The southern section is the only part of the site where Striped Legless Lizard have been recorded and therefore consider it to be valuable habitat for this species, despite the high level of weeds and rubbish.

The proposed conservation area has significant potential to provide an offset site. Areas of grassland surrounding this core conservation asset contain ecological values and should be treated as ecologically sensitive areas. The broader area of the two estates should be given first option for securing the offset requirements for any development at Sunshine North and within Brimbank, to ensure these biodiversity values are retained within the municipality. Areas of open space between the proposed conservation area and the Maribyrnong River should be retained and managed in the long term for their habitat corridor values. This is the only remaining corridor in Brimbank for the broader movement of large mammals such as Eastern Grey Kangaroos.



Left: Map outlining the high-quality biodiversity values of the Solomon Heights estate and the proposed conservation area and habitat corridor. **Right:** Extent of Solomon Heights Biodiversity Report study area, which includes all the Solomon Heights and River Valley estates. Figures extracted from Solomon Heights Biodiversity Report (Biosis, 2016).

River Valley

Key facts

- Size small, 5 ha
- Owner Atlantic Link (private)
- Adjacent (east) to Solomon Heights
- Only protection a section 173 agreement. Wording of agreement poor, unclear
- Application to rezone to residential rejected by Council because of insufficient information supplied by Nature Advisory (Allen Brennan)
- Potential for purchase to be through developer contributions rather than by State
- Only patch on Maribyrnong with Themeda extending from upper flats down escarpment to river
- Integrity of Themeda extent threatened by bike and pedestrian paths
- Stage 7e already zoned residential, but residential boundary to industrial land not allowed
- Considered under immediate threat
- Longstanding problem site in need of resolution
- Good biodiversity across the site, especially north
- Resolution should be considered in conjunction with Solomon Heights
- **EPBC referrals**
- 2018/8227

Solomon Heights

Also known as Baldwin Avenue Grassland



Key facts

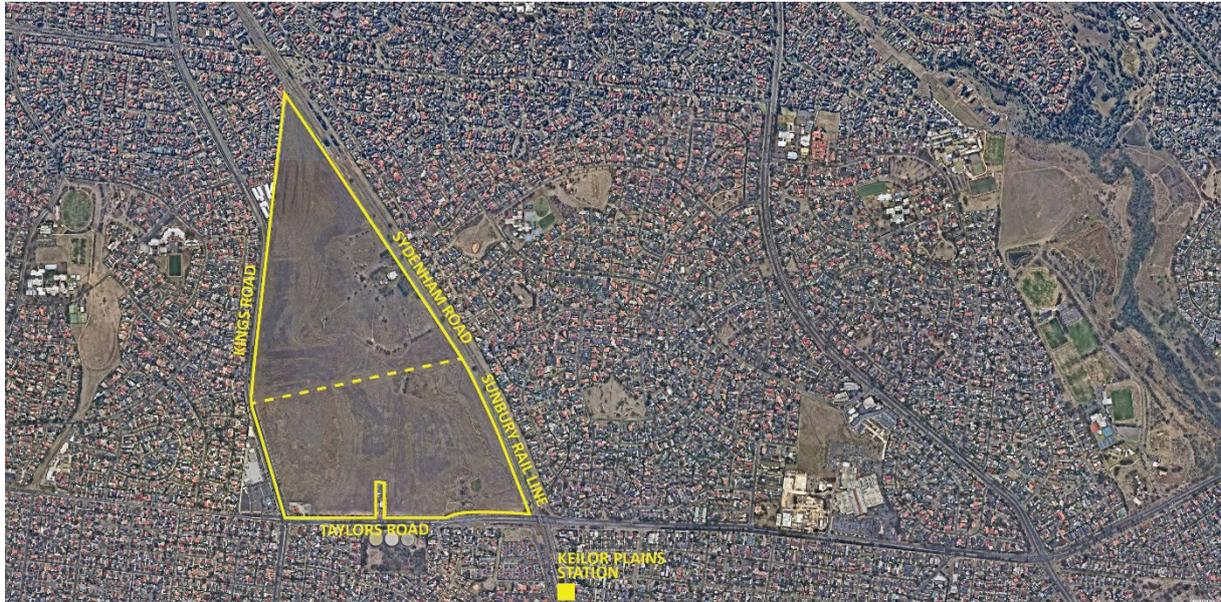
- Size large, 32.8 ha
- 465 lots owned by 120 owners from 1920s subdivision
- Roads in south owned by Glen Ora. Roads in northern section owned by Council

- Effectively in two portions with Whitehill Road the Glen Ora-owned border
- Ongoing destructive works from roadworks and soil dumping
- Northern portion has Spiny Rice-flower, Golden Sun Moth, Striped Legless Lizard and Tussock Skink and is floristically diverse
- Southern portion has Striped Legless Lizard and Tussock Skink and Pale Swamp Everlasting, more damaged than northern portion
- Glen Ora recently constructed large bund wall from contaminated soil without the necessary planning permission, an action now possibly under EPA investigation
- Considered to be in immediate threat
- Longstanding problem area desperately in need of resolution
- Resolution should be considered in conjunction with River Valley
- **EPBC referrals**
- 2016/7677, 2016/7688, both withdrawn

Other grasslands

Broadcast Australia

Also known as Sydenham Radio Transmission Tower, ABC



Key facts

- Size large: 80 ha
- Formerly federal land, now private land
- One parcel, considered in two portions: north and south.
- Both parcels under federal legislation because of ownership
- Heavily fenced. Genuine danger to public in northern portion because of high voltage underground infrastructure in northern portion
- Very high biodiversity values. Long history of DELWP translocating rare plants to site prior to its sale. Has Striped Legless Lizard, Golden Sun Moth
- Mismanagement
- Environmental Effects Statement required by DELWP for any future development on southern portion, unless developer commits to retaining all 21 ha grassland plus wetland system
- DELWP has intervened to prevent Brimbank rezoning land
- Radio transmission function to continue in foreseeable future so north parcel out of scope of this discussion. However, note action required to prevent ongoing mismanagement
- Considered under immediate threat
- **EPBC referrals**
 - 2008/4453

Outcome sought

Core reserve: Retention of all 21 ha grassland plus wetland system in the southern portion. Management of the northern portion to be undertaken with oversight by DELWP or Brimbank Council. Potential to suit Development Australia involvement.

Mechanism: Apply the current Environmental Significance Overlay and statewide clearing controls to any subdivision, residential rezoning and development approvals for this site. Locate any offsets on-site and direct other urban offsets to this site. Supplement any offset reserves with State Government land acquisition.

Outbound WRR Servo



Key facts

- Size medium, 9 ha
- Owned by VicRoads
- Well-managed, including burns
- Risk that VicRoads may decide it excess to their needs and sell it or use it as an offset site
- Immediately adjacent to Derrimut Grassland
- Not presently considered under threat, though ongoing discussions about expansion of Western Ring Road and presence of powerline easement make future of site uncertain
- Spiny Rice-flower population.
- **EPBC referrals**
- Unknown

Outcome sought

Permanent protection for conservation. VicRoads to use site as an offset.

Modeina

Also known as Burnside Grassland



Legend

- Precinct 1a
- Precinct 1
- Precinct 2
- NTGVVP
- GGF Habitat

Threatened Fauna Species

- ★ SLL
- ◆ GGF

Native Vegetation

- Escarpment Shrubland (EVC 895)
- Heavier soils Plains Grassland (EVC 132_61)

Threatened Flora Species

- Arching Flax-lily
- Matted Flax-lily
- Rye Beetle-grass
- Slender Bindweed
- Slender Tick-trefoil
- Spiny Rice-flower
- Tough Scurf-pea

Key facts

- Size medium
- All grassland will be lost to development through poor planning action
- Owned by Dennis Family
- **EPBC referrals**
- Unknown

Outcome sought

Salvage and translocation of Striped Legless Lizard. Salvage of threatened flora and genetic rescue. Opportunity for improving understanding of Spiny Rice-flower habitat requirements (especially the soil biome).