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South East Timber Association Submission to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council Central West Investigation

INTRODUCTION

The South East Timber Association Inc (SETA) makes this submission on behalf of members and supporters who live in small communities in forested areas of Victoria. It is understood that VEAC *has been driven by the specific terms of reference for this investigation and its legislation to look at whether the protected area system (also known as the conservation reserve system) is representative of the natural biodiversity of the areas. Most of the public land in this region hasn't been reviewed by VEAC and its predecessor organisations for 30 years. The draft recommendations propose a significant increase in protected areas while retaining some areas of forest in the Mount Cole–Pyrenees block for timber production.*

The recommendations for new national parks, conservation parks, nature reserves and bushland reserves make an important contribution to improving ecological representation of the protected area system and include a large part of the most important habitat for rare and threatened species.

It is unfortunate that VEAC has not recognised that some of the underlying principles established by the Joint ANZECC/MCFFA NFPS Implementation Sub-Committee (JANIS), which continue to drive "protection," are rooted in the myth of *terra nullius*.

So called "high quality wilderness" is actually an artefact of European neglect, rather than the maintaining the pre 1750 distribution of each forest type, which were actively managed by Aboriginal people. Consequently, much of the conservation reserve system seeks to preserve slabs of land covered by native vegetation, altered in structure and in places, species composition.

SETA does not accept that VEAC should blindly follow the terms of reference, unless that outcome is more to do with the politics of conservation, rather than genuine conservation outcomes.

VEAC noted in the Final Report of the River Red Gum Forests Investigation July 2008: *As a community, Australians have agreed to set aside representative areas of natural habitat and ecosystems for biodiversity conservation.*

In making these statements, it would be assumed that the "protected area system" would actually be protected and that active and adaptive management systems would be used to protect biodiversity from a range of threats and aid in the recovery of threatened species and threatened ecological communities.

SETA wishes to express extreme disappointment that after 30 years, the VEAC investigation continues with the ingrained *terra nullius* view of Victorian ecosystem conservation.

This and earlier VEAC investigations have failed to recognize the adaptation of Victorian ecosystems to regular disturbance over tens of thousands of years, prior to Aboriginal peoples' dispossession. What VEAC looks at today and calls the "natural" biodiversity, is an artefact of 200 years of European management and/or neglect, that is fundamentally different to management applied by Aboriginal people.

The simplistic assumptions underlying the tenure changes recommended in the review, imply, that if timber harvesting is stopped and recreational uses excluded or restricted, the current environmental values and threatened species will be "saved".

It is clear that VEAC has failed to review the outcomes of expected ecological improvements from past public land tenure changes. It appears to SETA members, that the VEAC recommendations are, at times, more fitting of some wilderness driven activist organization, than the peak Victorian



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ecological science advisory body, with a deep understanding of the historical ecology of the Victorian biota.

It is of deep concern, that an environmental charity, The Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) is the only land owner of significant scale, that has thought deeply and embraced the principles of active and adaptive management at a landscape scale.

BIODIVERSITY

Many of the 375 threatened species will not be saved by simply changing land tenure. All public land tenures in Victoria, in particular, the conservation reserve system, need to embrace the principles of active and adaptive management. Key tools in restoring a reasonable portion of the investigation area will include thinning of regrowth a return of cultural/ecological burning across significant parts of the landscape, if Victoria is to reverse the current extinction trajectory for many threatened species.

The 1899 Royal Commission on State Forests and Timber Reserves Wombat Forest noted: *At the present day the former open forest of large trees has been replaced by dense belts of saplings overcrowding and hindering each other's growth.*

The terra nullius driven recommendations in the VEAC report, which will continue to drive threatened species to extinction, include:

General recommendations for national parks

- *permanently protect the natural environment and natural biodiversity along with underlying ecological structure and supporting environmental processes*

General recommendations for conservation parks

- *permanently protect and restore the natural environment and natural biodiversity*

General recommendations for nature reserves

- *protect significant natural ecosystems, species and/or geodiversity features*

All good words, but the reality is, the passive neglect manage approach will be locked in, as soon as most of the current area of state forest is transferred to the parks and reserves system.

A specific example of the VEAC *terra nullius* view of Victorian ecology is confirmed by the following recommendation:

That the following areas totalling 1202 hectares shown on map D (numbered N1 to N5) be used as reference areas proclaimed under the Reference Areas Act 1978:

N1 Buangor (69 hectares)

N2 Musk Creek (91 hectares)

N3 Ruths Gully (261 hectares)

N4 Ah Kows Gully (475 hectares)

N5 Pyrete Range (306 hectares)

The Reference Areas Act 1978 does nothing more than legislate active neglect of the designated areas. Of all the conservation legislation in Australia, this Act epitomizes the *terra nullius* ecological view, that has almost eliminated active and adaptive management from Victoria's parks and reserves system and increasingly impacts State Forest and private property native ecosystem management.

This Act holds up neglected, overgrown and moribund areas of native vegetation as the reference against which our parks and reserves can be benchmarked. With the bar set so low, it is little wonder



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that across Australia, as the area of "protected" land has increased, the threatened species list has continued to escalate.

Recommendation 1: It is recommended that VEAC shelve all proposals for new parks and reserves in Central West Victoria and recommend to the Victorian Government that the Reference Areas Act 1978 be repealed.

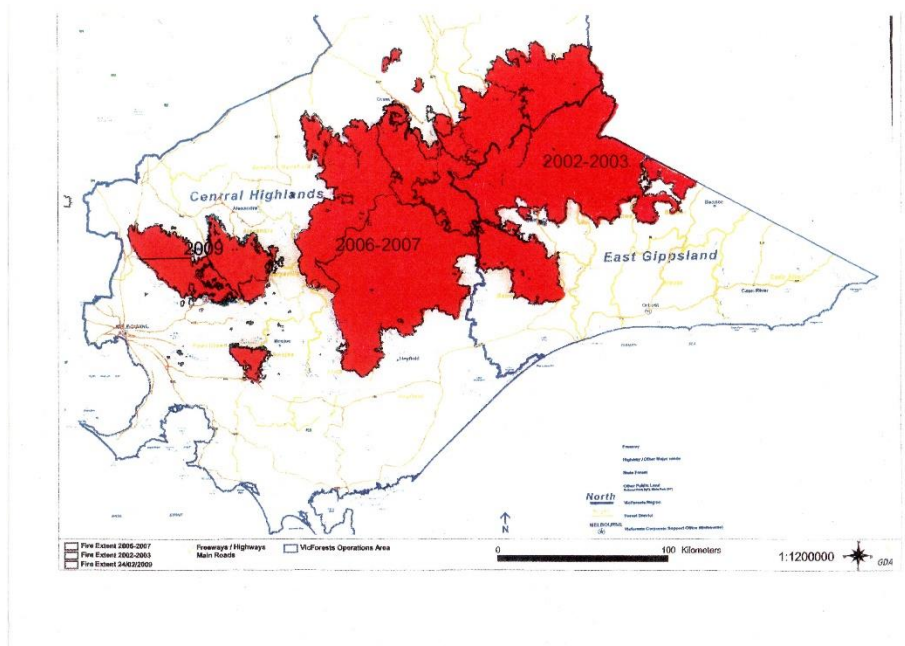
Recommendation 2: It is recommended that the Victorian Government direct an expert panel to lead a rewrite of Victorian conservation legislation to enshrine the principles of active and adaptive management into the conservation regulatory framework.

FIRE

The 1899 Royal Commission on State Forests and Timber Reserves Wombat Forest noted: *In several parts of the forest extensive damage to young timber has been caused by fires, the last serious outbreak having occurred during the unusually severe summer of 1898.*

Altogether over 26,000 acres (10,500 hectares) have been damaged, some 12,500 acres (5,000 hectares) being badly burnt.

This highlights that large wildfires are not new to the forests of central west Victoria. To give some additional perspective, a map of the areas of mostly forested land, burnt in Eastern Victoria between the end of 2002 and early 2009 is shown in the map below. Almost 2 million five hundred thousand hectares (2,500,000ha) were burnt by megafires in just over eight years. VEAC and its predecessor organisations have undertaken a number of reviews across the megafire footprint, always recommending improved environmental "protection" through significant expansion of the parks and reserves system.



Recommendation 3: Before any additions are made to the Victorian parks and reserves system, the Victorian Government direct VEAC to review all previous investigation recommendations, to see if the changes of land tenure have actually provided enhanced biodiversity outcomes compared to that prior to the change of tenure.

The VEAC report notes: *The combination of increased fire frequency and a drier climate may be contributing to the decline of rare and threatened plants in central western Victoria.*



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Throughout the Mount Cole–Pyrenees block, fire frequency is generally much higher than in the past due to the prescribed burning regime that commenced after the 2009 bushfire

In combination with the drier or unseasonal weather experienced over much of the last two decades, increased fire frequency is likely to be contributing to changes in understorey structure and the decline of some plant species

Fire is a given in the forest environment and much of the biota of central west Victoria has evolved in an environment, where, prior to European arrival, fire was the dominant creator of disturbance. If VEAC has no ideas on what needs to change, the question VEAC needs to be put to the fire and ecological management agencies in Victoria is, how can fire be used intelligently to help restore the habitat of threatened plant species. This question must be answered, if plant species, that were relatively common prior to European arrival, are to be returned to those parts of the landscape that have not been permanently converted to other land uses.

Another part of the report states: *A mature and **long-unburnt** stand of austral grasstrees that occurs in Ben Major State Forest was identified in the LCC Ballarat Study (1982) as a 'special value for protection'.*

It is not clear what "protection" actually means. If protection means total fire exclusion, the likely end for this special value species is likely to be eventual death from old age or disease, or else death in the inevitable catastrophic wildfire that will roar through the heavy fuel loads, which accumulate in long unburnt landscapes. If there is a genus that it is the icon for adaptation to Aboriginal fire management, *Xanthorrhoea*, is one.



Xanthorrhoea Responds to Disturbance

The apparent one-dimensional view of fire tends to support fire exclusion policy, rather than the intelligent use of fire to improve ecological outcomes and reduce the intensity of future wildfires.

The VEAC report states: *A good example is the threatened Ben Major grevillea which occurs in the Ben Major Nature Reserve and Musical Gully and Camp Hill state forests. It appears to be an obligate seed regenerator with mature plants killed by fire and seedlings usually appearing after fire.*



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The combined effects of these highly modified fire regimes and a changing climate – predicted to be warmer overall, with drier winters – have not yet been modelled but are likely to pose a serious threat to some of central western Victoria’s flora and fauna.

If Victoria is to meet human asset protection and get enhanced biodiversity outcomes, there must be more broadscale cultural/ecological burning, on shorter return times, than the current rules allow, so that planned burns are delivered at a lower intensities, than is often the case, under current rules.

After decades of fuel build up, the land management authority is often faced with high fuel levels and a rule book that does not allow a second burn, for 10 to 15 years or longer. Depending on the particular seasonal conditions, the burn plan might seek to burn 60 percent of the planned area. If the target is achieved, and line burning is done for efficiency, rather than spot lighting, about a third of the area actually burnt, might be burnt at the top end of the planned burn intensity scale. Another third may be burnt with a scorch height greater than desired and a third will be about right.

If there were no return time rule, particularly in areas with threatened plant and animal species, planners could aim to burn the drier 10 to 20 percent of the forest in the first year. Often threatened species are located in drier areas. Two or 3 years later, do the next 20 percent, when conditions are a bit drier and the fuels are broken up by the previous burn. Then 2 or 3 years after that, burn the next 20 percent of the block. Then enshrine frequent mild patch/ecological burning. This should be more in line with Aboriginal fire management strategies and assist with rejuvenation of fire dependent ecosystems, as well as provide protection for biodiversity and human assets. A change of land tenure is not needed to get improved ecological outcomes in drier climatic conditions.

Recommendation 4: If the long unburnt stand of austral grasstrees still exists it be used for extensive and ongoing cultural/ecological low intensity burning, to restore ecological functions and manage future wildfire risk.



Low Intensity Patch Burning Using Spot Ignition

Recommendation 5: An expert panel be appointed to provide guidance to review return time for ecological and fuel reduction burns.

Recommendation 6: The expert panel provide DWELP and other land management staff with expertise to refine burning strategies for broadscale low intensity ecological/fuel reduction burning.

PUBLIC ACCESS & TOURISM

The VEAC Final Report of the River Red Gum Forests Investigation July 2008 stated: *Around 0.24 million people a year visit River Red Gum forests in the investigation area, with a strong trend towards increasing numbers. Designation of additional national parks and associated promotion has the potential to increase visitation by up to 20 percent.*

In 2008, 140,000 hectares of state forest on the Victorian side of the Murray River became national park. In 2010, 117,000 hectares of state forest was transferred to national park on the NSW side of



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the river. The VEAC report was not the only party to claim that tourism would expand, despite there being dozens of examples over more than twenty years of job losses in small rural communities because rising tourism projects have proved to be fanciful.

The “boom” in tourism in Mathoura, in the heart of the river red gum forests, actually saw total visitation levels fall from 32,000 in 2010, to 23,000 in 2014. A 28 percent fall, resulting in the closure of a supermarket, bakery and bed and breakfast. These businesses should thrive under a tourism economy.

The VEAC report states: *This report is clear about which activities will be affected by the draft recommendations, and they are fewer than is often thought.*

Along with nature conservation, recreation – and associated tourism – is now the major use of public land in the Central West Investigation area and recreational use is likely to continue to increase.

The range of popular recreational activities in the investigation area is large and includes four wheel driving and car touring, horse riding, bushwalking, mountain bike riding, picnicking, metal detecting, camping, trail bike riding, nature study, deer and other hunting, and car rallying.

The report highlights the potential conflicts between recreation uses and conservation. Yet, the report lists tourism at the top of the list of “key engines of growth”. Given the decline in tourism as a result of the Victorian and NSW red gum lockups, why does VEAC assume that tourism will not be affected by tenure change?

In past, similar assurances have been made. In the report, a number of continuing recreational uses are conditioned by “*as specified by the land manager*”. Consequently, as soon as the land tenure changes, a range of areas will be deemed to be environmentally sensitive and users will be locked out, with new signage and locked gates. The continuation of some uses, such as fossicking have been allowed by regulations in the past. Typically, the regulations have a five-year time frame and at the review, the regulations are not renewed, so the current users, local communities and businesses are initially divided by smart politics and then diced, when broader communities have faded.

Recommendation 7: Before any additions are made to the Victorian parks and reserves system, the Victorian Government direct VEAC to review all previous investigation assumptions and recommendations, to see if the changes of land tenure have actually provided enhanced tourism and other outcomes compared to the situation prior to the change of tenure.

CATCHMENT WATER YIELD

The VEAC report states: *National, conservation and regional park management priorities include the protection of water quality and yield.*

Earlier descriptions of the 1899 Wombat Forest Royal Commission Report, remind us of the larger trees and more open forest structure that existed prior to European arrival. The report also documented the transition of the forest to predominantly dense regrowth, due to a combination of uncontrolled harvesting and bushfires.

Hydrologists, ecologists and forest managers have recognised the benefits of thinning regrowth. Benefits include higher catchment yields, bigger trees sooner, with potential for larger hollows and reduced crown fire risk. If we are moving into drier climatic conditions, the idea that the landscape can carry high densities of regrowth eucalypt and understorey species defies biological logic.

The creation of the new parks and reserves as proposed in the draft VEAC report will totally stifle the ability of land managers to actively manage vegetation density and will add to the bank of post wildfire water guzzling regrowth forests that increasingly dominate our forested landscapes.

The amount of forest being consumed by wildfires and the consequent impacts on biodiversity and water yield and quality should be understood by VEAC and taken into account in the final report.



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Recommendation 8: That VEAC ensure no barriers are put in place to stop the active management of regrowth forests by thinning to deliver improved biodiversity, water and community outcomes.

FIREWOOD

While some recognition of the need for firewood is shown in the report, the proposed new parks will have a major impact on firewood availability and the distance residents must travel to access firewood. Shelving proposed parks and reserves and requiring the land management agencies that manage the state forests to ensure fire and thinning management programs are done to deliver enhanced biodiversity, water yield and firewood will deliver a more durable outcome, than the current VEAC recommendations to add to the current unmanaged native vegetation land bank in Victoria.

Past programs to replace sustainable firewood supplies with more expensive, non-renewable natural gas, were seen by many affected residents as perverse and uncaring. Using ecological thinnings as a source of sustainable domestic firewood supplies will facilitate cultural burning programs, reduce heavy fuel loads and reduce the risk of intense wildfires.

While finalizing the draft report, VEAC members need to keep in mind the following definition.

Insanity: Continuing to make similar recommendations and then managing the conservation reserve system, the way we have always done, while expecting enhanced environmental and community outcomes.

Geoff Proctor

South East Timber Association Member

