



Victorian  
Farmers  
Federation

# Hepburn Shire – Draft Biodiversity Strategy

Submission on behalf of the Victorian Farmers Federation

**Victorian Farmers Federation**

**Farrer House**

**24 Collins Street**

**Melbourne 3000**

**p 1300 882 833**

**f 03 9207 5500**

**e [vff@vff.org.au](mailto:vff@vff.org.au)**

**w [www.vff.org.au](http://www.vff.org.au)**

**Contact: Lisa Gervasoni**

**Acting Policy Manager**

**p 1300 882 833**

**f 03 9207 5526**

**e [policyteam@vff.org.au](mailto:policyteam@vff.org.au)**

**w [www.vff.org.au](http://www.vff.org.au)**



Victorian  
Farmers  
Federation

## The Victorian Farmers Federation

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) is the only recognised consistent voice on issues affecting rural Victoria and we welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft Hepburn Shire Biodiversity Strategy

Victoria is home to 25 per cent of the nation's farms. They attract neither government export subsidies nor tariff support. Despite farming on only three per cent of Australia's available agricultural land, Victorians produce 30 per cent of the nation's agricultural product. The VFF represents the interests of our state's dairy, livestock, grains, horticulture, flowers, chicken meat, pigs and egg producers.

The VFF consists of a nine person Board of Directors, with seven elected members and two appointed directors, a member representative General Council to set policy and eight commodity groups representing dairy, grains, livestock, horticulture, chicken meat, pigs, flowers and egg industries.

Farmers are elected by their peers to direct each of the commodity groups and are supported by Melbourne-based and regionally located staff.

Each VFF member is represented locally by one of the 200 VFF branches across the state and through their commodity representatives at local, district, state and national levels. The VFF also represents farmers' views on hundreds of industry and government forums.

**David Jochinke**  
President

## Foreword

The Victorian Farmers Federation welcomes the opportunity to comment on Hepburn Shire's draft Biodiversity Strategy.

Hepburn Shire has a wide range of agricultural production on high quality soils close to market and transport. Our members cover grains, dairy, livestock and horticulture. Although the importance of protecting agricultural land from unplanned loss or conflict is recognised within Council's Municipal Strategic Statement (clause 21.08) members within the 'intensives' operations have relocated over the past 20-30 years due to increased conflict from dwellings within the rural area that are not related to agriculture.

Agriculture and primary industries have not only been the key strength of the Shire over generations, they remain a major driver of the local economy. It is concerning that the strategy not only undervalues the ecosystem services contribution of agriculture but it focuses on what attracts new residents rather than a strategy for the whole of the Shire.

## Introductory comments

Biodiversity management at its core is a government responsibility. Council needs to lead by example and demonstrate what it will do to better manage council controlled land and how it will advocate on behalf of the community to improve management of crown land and to support proactive action by private landholders.

It is disappointing that Council does not give credit to the role of farmers in biodiversity – which is understood within the Victorian Biodiversity Strategy launched in 2017. While there is often a focus on 'biodiversity loss' due to clearing, it is a less understood issue that land clearing was a mandatory requirement under crown grants until the 1980s.

Much of the 'native vegetation' that is found on public land or private land has been replanted or regenerated since settlement. On private land much of the vegetation seen has been replanted or let to regenerate over many generations. Landcare, developed as a partnership between VFF and the Victorian Government, and wider farm revegetation is one of the major sources of 'new' native vegetation and habitat links. The majority of vegetation clearing is undertaken by the Crown and urban development.

Hepburn also has a long history of 'revegetation' of crown land. For instance the Wombat Forest, originally a plains grassy woodland, was largely denuded during gold mining of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 'regrowth' within the forest is more of a 'coppice' in nature with limited understorey, weed infestation and limited thinning since the cessation of selective forestry.

Biodiversity and the concept of 'net gain' is not just about the area under cover but the quality of the habitat. Crown land can be dedicated for many purposes however the key role of many large parcels within the Shire is for 'conservation'. Despite this there are few management plans for crown land / forests and many opportunities to achieve 'net gain' through better management actions by Government, including local government.

## Direction and Focus of the Strategy

The critical flaw in the Biodiversity Strategy is found within the background and context. This is a misconception that colours the entire document away from a focus of the things that Council and the crown can do to deliver biodiversity outcomes and towards utilising incorrect regulatory tools to achieve outcomes on private land that will not be match on public land.

*The strategy is designed to improve biodiversity values across Hepburn. It recognises the limit of the Council's operation, management and planning responsibilities. Consequently, there is an emphasis on Council working with other government organisations and community groups to achieve biodiversity outcomes. Council has an important role in educating the community about the importance of biodiversity and providing information on how individuals can protect and improve biodiversity on their land.*

This statement is rather innocuous but the detail of the strategy does not deliver the stated purpose or 'design'.

When it comes to understanding the 'limit of Council's operation, management and planning responsibilities' it fails to understand Council's responsibilities as an owner under the Catchment and Land Protection (CALP) Act, nor does it address the key statutes from managing biodiversity issues and how they apply to public and private land. There is very little focus on resourcing CALP actions on Council land or planning nil tenure actions to address pest plant and animal issues.

When it comes to an 'emphasis on Council working with other government organisations and community groups to achieve biodiversity outcomes' there is little focus on actions to identify management standards on crown land and how these can be improved. Pages 3, 20 and 24 of the Victorian Auditor General's Report (VAGO) *Control of Invasive Plants and Animals in Victoria's Parks* highlight some of the known issues which are still relevant. Ensuring that Parks Victoria / DELWP have a management plan for all crown reserves that addresses opportunities and threats to biodiversity and that relevant actions are funded would be an appropriate action under this action.

Proposing to rezone land or place overlay controls on land to achieve a 'biodiversity' outcome is beyond the head of power of the enabling statute, nor does it demonstrate Council's willingness to work with the community. If 'biodiversity' is the primary purpose to be achieved then the appropriate planning tool is the Public Conservation and Resource Zone. As this zone would require acquisition the Public Acquisition Overlay should be applied and the consent of the purchasing authority gained.

Any action stating a planning scheme outcome should be deleted as the Biodiversity Strategy does not comply with the requirements of section 12 of the Planning and Environment Act and has not attempted to address the Strategic Assessment Guidelines. If Council proceeds with any proposed changes to the planning scheme full notification of affected landholders and a notice to the Victorian Farmers Federation is sought.

Pages 36 to 41 of *Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037* provide clear examples of how the state is both recognising the economic benefit of farming and biodiversity outcomes on private land as well as how to assist private landholders / achieve wider community action.

## Victorian Farmers Federation recommendations

The draft strategy states the need to align with state and other strategies. The strategy does not provide local articulation of the state strategy or even local catchment management plans.

Therefore the VFF believes that the Biodiversity Strategy should be completely redrafted to primarily focus on Council and the government leading by example through exemplary management of biodiversity on crown land.

Any action relating to the planning scheme / NRM training of planners or non related issues such as domestic waste water or flood overlays be removed from the strategy and invested in to pest plant and animal management actions.

The following elements of the Action plan should be deleted in their entirety:

- 4 (rezonings);
- 7 (ecosystem protection via planning scheme);
- 8 (flood overlays)
- 9 training of statutory planners in NRM
- 13 specialist advice to planners NRM
- 21 develop and implement enforcement (planning)
- 22 enforcement policy (correct tool is CALP Act)
- 23 annual enforcement update