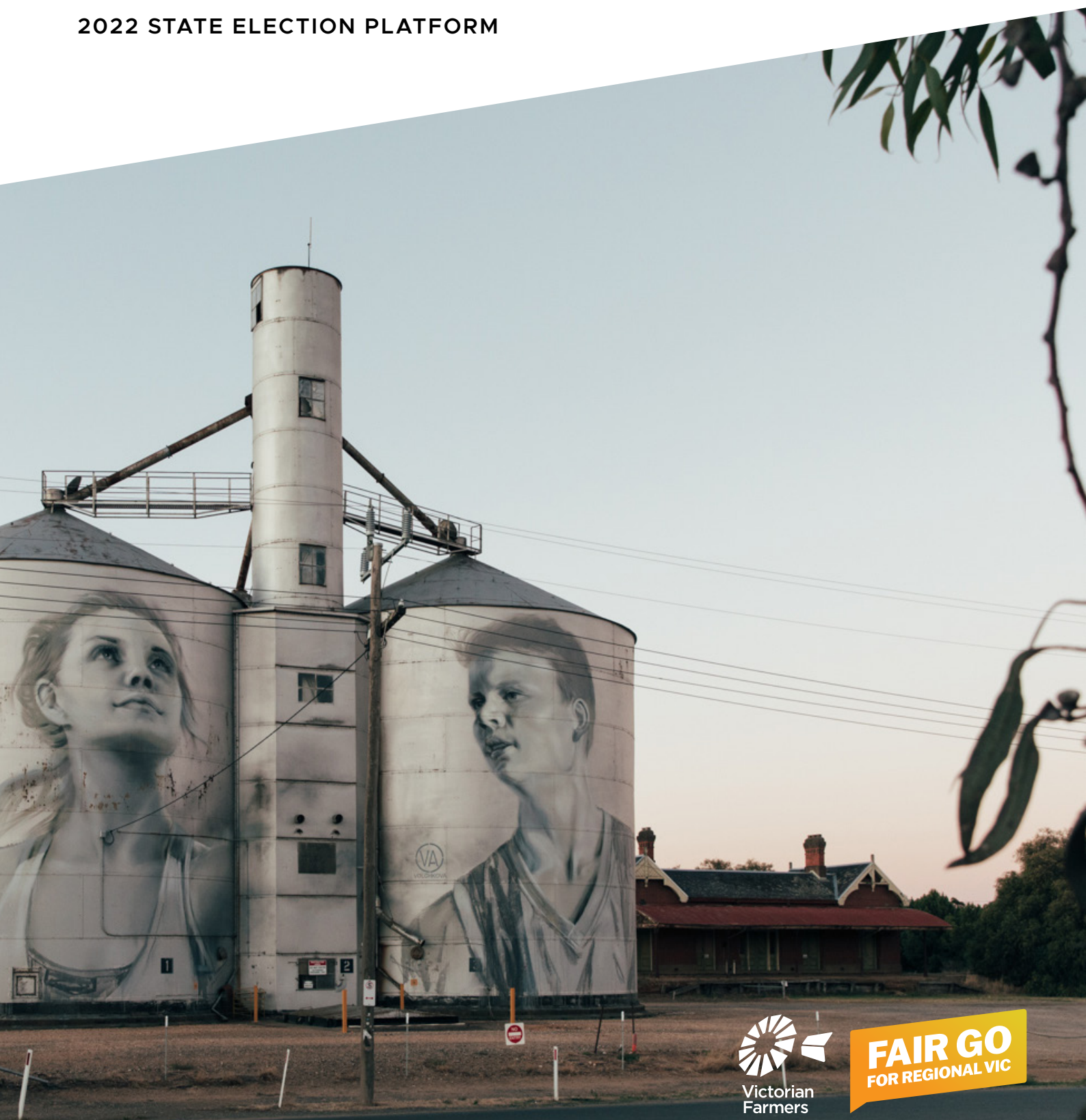


VICTORIAN FARMERS

Investing in Regional Victoria

2022 STATE ELECTION PLATFORM



FAIR GO
FOR REGIONAL VIC

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Regional Victoria is home to over 1.6 million Victorians who need and deserve equitable access to the services and infrastructure enjoyed by communities in Melbourne.

Too often, elections are focused on how to make Melbourne the most liveable city on earth, rather than making Victoria the most liveable State.

That's why the VFF is focused on delivering a fair go for regional Victoria as part of this year's State election campaign – to draw attention to the challenges and opportunities that our communities face on a daily basis.

Whether it's how we work together to maintain the success of industry, how we deal with a changing climate, or how we continue to sustain thriving communities, with a lifestyle envied by those in Melbourne – farmers are well placed to identify the issues that matter to all regional Victorians and to offer solutions.

Although most of the commitments we are seeking at this election revolve around the agriculture industry, we know the farming community doesn't exist in isolation and that regional Victoria receives a dividend when government partners with farmers.

The State election is an opportunity to put forward a positive agenda and vision for our community's future. We are calling for a clear plan from the next Victorian government that focusses on the following key areas

- Delivering better regional road and rail
- Making regional Victoria the best place to live and work
- Protecting farmland and our natural environment
- Supporting farm businesses and regional jobs

Farmers look forward to sharing these ideas with voters in battleground seats before we head to the polls in November.

The VFF will be an active voice on behalf of farmers and our communities. We are committed to ensuring regional Victoria is front and centre at this election, and equally to working with all parties and candidates to deliver a better future for our State.



EMMA GERMANO
PRESIDENT, VICTORIAN FARMERS FEDERATION

DELIVERING A FAIR GO FOR REGIONAL VIC

At the VFF, we believe in a secure farming future for Victoria and for generations to come.

Farming is the heartbeat of regional Victoria and without a strong agriculture sector, regional communities can't be prosperous, healthy and resilient.

Farmers are committed to a long-term vision for regional Victoria, and we expect governments to do the same.

That's why we are calling for all parties and candidates to share their vision for regional Victoria ahead of this year's election.

To show they care about regional Victoria, all parties and candidates should finalise and publish regional policy statements **before Tuesday 1 November 2022**.

These policy statements should share parties' and candidates' plans for the following areas:

- Agriculture
- Regional road and rail investment
- Regional health services
- Regional housing
- Renewable energy development
- Public land management

THE VICTORIAN FARMERS FEDERATION

The VFF is an active and powerful non-partisan lobby group dedicated to the interests of farmers and making a difference to regional communities.

With a strong record of successful political advocacy and leadership since 1979, the VFF has a proud history of achieving positive outcomes.

We are a diverse community of farmers – delivering for farmers. As a democratic organisation, our policy and advocacy is directed by our members and reflects their ambitions for their businesses, families and communities.

FOUR BIG IDEAS

The VFF has identified four priority areas that need to be addressed to ensure a stronger regional Victoria. A focus on these key priorities will help to ensure regional Victoria continues to thrive for years to come.

#1

DELIVERING BETTER REGIONAL ROAD AND RAIL

Boosting productivity, mobility and safety on regional Victorian road and rail must be an absolute priority for an incoming government. Funding for road and rail infrastructure has been neglected for too long and immediate action must be taken.

#2

MAKING REGIONAL VIC THE BEST PLACE TO LIVE AND WORK

Liveable communities must be prosperous, sustainable, healthy and safe for all community members. To create well-functioning and successful communities, regional Victoria requires key investments in housing, health services, community safety and education. Regional and rural local governments need support to deliver the infrastructure and services their communities need and deserve.

#3

PROTECTING AGRICULTURAL LAND AND OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Government must work in partnership with farmers and the community to deliver positive environmental outcomes. Farmers' rights over their land must be protected and the impact on agricultural land must be considered for all infrastructure development.

#4

SUPPORTING REGIONAL JOBS AND CREATING SECURE WORKPLACES

A prosperous regional Victoria depends on a strong agriculture sector, underpinning its ability to provide employment. Government must partner with industry to deliver biosecurity, water security, job security and workplace safety.



**DRY
WEATHER
ROAD
ONLY**

GET MOVING AGAIN ON REGIONAL ROAD AND RAIL

Victoria's ageing road and rail infrastructure is in desperate need of investment.

Much of the network was established more than a century ago and it can no longer perform the function for which it was originally designed.

RACV estimates 80 per cent of Victoria's 180,000km of regional roads with 100km/h limits need upgrading.

Regional Victorians are travelling on dangerous roads every day which is sadly reflected in the State's road toll. More than 50 per cent of all road fatalities occur in regional Victoria, despite it being home to 24 per cent of the State's population.

We know that fixing country roads, saves country lives. Safer roads help to reduce the most common crash types and the severity of injuries, but road managers are having to resort to using speed reductions as a 'band-aid' solution

The poor state of Victorian roads has only been compounded by underfunding Victoria's regional rail network, which is forcing more and more trucks on to the road.

In addition to posing significant safety risk to regional communities, this impacts the productivity of Victorian farmers. The international competitiveness of Victoria's \$17.8 billion agriculture industry relies on the productivity and efficiency of our supply chain.

According to CSIRO TransIT modelling, total annual transport costs the agricultural industry \$5.8 billion each year, with supply chain costs often accounting for the single largest cost in agricultural production.

The deteriorating condition of regional Victoria's ageing infrastructure is driving up transport costs and putting regional lives at risk. The VFF is seeking major commitments for greater investment in Local and State Government roads; rail; upgrades to priority freight routes; whilst also cutting red tape to help get keep Victoria moving.

OUR PLAN TO GET REGIONAL VICTORIA MOVING

Get our road and rail back on track with an Agricultural Freight Strategy

The VFF is seeking the Department of Transport develop a long-term agricultural freight strategy.

In addition to focusing on improving the efficiency of the entire supply chain including rail, road and ports through infrastructure investment and reducing red tape, the strategy would also explore ways for the industry to reduce carbon emissions.

To remain globally competitive, Victoria's thriving agriculture industry requires an integrated, long term vision for improving the efficient movement of food and fibre and providing the foundational measures to enable significant emissions reductions by 2030 and beyond.

Targeted long-term funding for rural arterial road maintenance

\$2 billion is needed over four years for targeted arterial road maintenance to address the deteriorating state of regional roads.

We need strategic, long-term investment in road maintenance and a shift away from the current approach that involves patching up roads or dropping speed limits when they have already degraded when they become dodgy and dangerous.

Future proof priority freight routes

\$500 million is needed to fix pinch points on priority freight routes to increase access for high productivity freight routes and improve freight efficiency.

Although there has been a significant increase to high productivity freight vehicle (HPFV) access throughout the State, the practical ability of HPFV's to operate continues to be impeded by pinch points throughout the network.

Many of the pinch points are bridges with load limits due to ageing bridge infrastructure that was built over 50 years ago and is coming to the end of its lifetime.

Fix our local roads

Council roads make up 87 per cent of the State's road network and represent 10 per cent of local government expenditure. This is putting disproportionate strain on rural councils that have large road networks but a small rating base to help fund their upkeep.

That's why we are calling for a reintroduction of the Fixing Country Roads Program to provide funding grants to rural and regional councils to undertake local road projects beyond regular road maintenance.

In addition, a dedicated program that assists local government undertake local road projects to improve access for agriculture and food supply chains is also required.

Cut red tape

It's not only potholes and rough surfaces that are holding back productivity on our road network. Red tape has a significant impact on the efficient movement of heavy vehicles and freight.

Increased resourcing for the Department of Transport's Heavy Vehicle Network Team is required to work with local councils to increase heavy vehicle access.

OVER 50%
OF OUR ROAD FATALITIES OCCUR IN REGIONAL VIC.

MAKING REGIONAL VICTORIA THE BEST PLACE TO LIVE AND WORK

Liveable communities must be prosperous, sustainable, healthy and safe for all community members.

To create well-functioning and successful communities, regional Victoria requires key investments in housing, health services, community safety and education. Regional and rural local governments need support to deliver the infrastructure and services their communities need and deserve.

The first step to creating liveable communities in regional Victoria is ensuring that people have a house and home. Yet many are struggling to put a roof over their head with sky rocketing rental and house prices. Urgent action must be taken to ensure there is a sustainable, long-term vision for regional housing.

Every Victorian deserves access to the best healthcare services, but if you live in regional Victoria, your access to services is diminished. Due to their remoteness and isolation, farmers are at particular risk of poor health outcomes. Greater investment in supporting the regional health workforce and to deliver health programs for farmers and regional communities is required.

The duty of every government is to ensure its citizens are safe and secure. Rural crime often goes unreported or unnoticed, despite its impact on regional prosperity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us much about the power of the internet and staying connected. But regional Victorians are forced to accept a lower standard of service, and in many areas, no service at all. Government has a responsibility to help communities to access this essential service to help drive economic growth and community connectedness.

Farmers believe in partnering with all levels of government to deliver positive outcomes. The partnership with local government is all the more difficult when it isn't properly resourced to do the job that it is increasingly being expected of it. It's time for the State to take greater responsibility for local government resourcing and look at alternative funding systems to ensure all ratepayers get a fair go, no matter where they live.

The future of regional Victoria is positive. We have every ability to create liveable communities that provide excellent jobs.

OUR PLAN FOR LIVEABLE COMMUNITIES

Responding to regional Victoria's housing crisis

The regional housing crisis is holding back Victoria's economic recovery as we grapple with the significant reduction in available properties and rental affordability. The housing crisis is affecting every rural industry from agriculture to tourism and manufacturing, and critical public services like healthcare, education and police.

We need a sustainable, long-term vision for regional housing, with a coordinated State-wide approach including targeted interventions in small regional and rural towns to address shortages.

Targeted increases to housing will be critical in supporting and sustaining the continued growth of regional Victoria and the broader Victorian economy.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Establishment of a Victorian government taskforce with the job of creating a State-wide regional housing strategy.
- Funding to local government or community groups to investigate community housing trusts or packaging developments in regional Victoria.
- Supporting regional *Housing Supply Action Plans* to facilitate faster and more cost-effective permit ready delivery of employment and residential land across Victoria.
- Policy changes to ensure government land is considered for affordable housing development before it is sold.

Supporting healthy rural and regional communities

We know people in rural and regional communities are more likely than their urban counterparts to experience chronic health conditions and risk factors, but regional Victorians are expected to receive a lesser standard of care.

It's becoming harder to see a GP in regional areas and to access the wide range of other health services every community needs access to.

Furthermore, we do not have a good understanding of the number of health workers across Victoria, let alone regional communities.

The VFF supports the Victorian Healthcare Association's call for *Health Workforce Plan*, documenting the number of current regional healthcare workers and positions available to coincide with the increased governmental support and increased awareness of current and future regional health needs.

Remoteness is a significant factor in the poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes for regional Victorians. Creative programs and policies that improve accessibility for farmers to GPs and mental health professionals must be supported.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Dedicated funding to maintain and support the vital work of the National Centre for Farmer Health.
- Deliver improved service and programs that support rural and regional mental health.
- Develop a regional health workforce plan to understand shortages and regional healthcare needs.
- Supporting the regional health workforce with additional funding for regional training and facilities as well as increased training caps.

Getting serious on farm and rural crime

Theft, trespass, property damage and fraud negatively impacts on the safety and security of farmers and their families and contributes to significant economic loss for our rural economy.

Sadly, governments have repeatedly failed to deal with farm and rural crime.

The fundamental duty of every government is to protect its citizens. For too long, crime prevention, investigation and punishment has operated in a two-tier system where regional police are under-manned and under-resourced.

Unlike NSW and Queensland, Victoria does not have a dedicated rural and farm crime investigative unit.

A fair go for farmers and regional Victorians is needed to make sure our communities have the police and crime prevention resources we need and deserve.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Creation of a specialist Rural and Farm Crime Squad to sit within Victoria Police Crime Command.
- Retain and support Farm Crime Liaison Officers and the Farm Crime Coordination Unit.
- Develop crime prevention education, tools and strategies that are purpose built to address criminal activity on farms and in rural areas.
- A review of the sentences and penalties that have been handed down for farm crimes to identify opportunities for tougher penalties, especially for trespass offences.

Fixing local government funding

Victoria's rating system has created the situation whereby rural ratepayers pay more in rates as a percentage of the value of their property than ratepayers in Melbourne. What's more, rural ratepayers receive and have access to fewer services from local government than ratepayers in the city.

The small rate base for rural councils is making it harder for them to provide adequate service levels for their communities.

Victoria should move to a local government funding model where the State sets a general rate for all property and redistributes funds collected from rates on the basis of equity and need.

This Equalised Funding Model will provide a more sustainable funding base for all local government and will ensure all Victorians, no matter where they live, receive quality and reliable infrastructure and services.

In addition, the Victorian Government's Fair Go Rate Capping policy must be reformed to stop continued unfair rate increases for farmers. Currently, the cap only applies to the total rates collected across a council area, but this does not consider the factors that apply to rates paid by different ratepayers.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Make rate capping rules fair for all ratepayers by providing a cap on the rates collected from differential categories of land.
- Undertake a feasibility study of the VFF's proposed Equalised Funding Model to drive real rate reform.
- Provide greater financial support for rural councils and advocate for the removal of minimum per capita funding from the Commonwealth's Financial Assistance Grants.

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and dark jeans, stands on a gravel path next to a large, cylindrical concrete water tower. The scene is set in a rural landscape with a field and a fence in the background under a warm, orange-hued sky at sunset or sunrise. The water tower is the central focus on the left side of the image.

438
MOBILE PHONE
BLACKSPOTS
IN REGIONAL VIC

Connecting regional communities

Access to quality telecommunications services is an essential part of our modern way of life, underpinning social connectivity and the delivery of essential services. Digital connectivity is also central to economic growth and industry competitiveness – particularly in agriculture as it undergoes rapid digital transformation.

Yet there is a significant divide in service equity between regional Victorians and those living in Melbourne.

All levels of government have a role in helping to deliver these essential services across the community. Victoria must continue to take leadership in partnering with all sectors to deliver equitable access to digital connectivity.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Continued and additional state government investment in mobile connectivity through a dedicated fund to fix blackspots.
- Continued advocacy from state government for Commonwealth and telecommunications provider co-investment in regional digital connectivity.
- Continued and additional support for on-farm adoption of IoT technologies by addressing barriers to uptake and to help farmers navigate the complex AgTech ecosystem.

PROTECTING FARMLAND AND OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Farmers are at the forefront of managing and caring for our natural environment.

They manage 50 per cent of Victoria's land – working to manage soils, waterways, pests and weeds, and to protect biodiversity. They do what they can with their own resources, but it's a job they do on behalf of all Victorians.

Farmers work in partnership with community and government to provide these environmental services. Whilst they are doing everything they can to hold up their end of the bargain, government on the other hand is consistently failing to fulfill its duties.

This places an additional burden on farmers in dealing with pest, plants and animals, bushfires and biosecurity threats.

At the same time, farmers face significant threats to the security of their land and their rights. Whether it be through the planning system or through land access arrangements for infrastructure, farmers constantly get a raw deal and have their rights trampled over.

The transition to renewables will be totally undertaken on rural land, yet current political and policy processes that are making multi-generational and multi-billion-dollar decisions on the renewables transition do not have regional and rural stakeholders at the decision-making table. Developments and planning are bulldozing ahead without any plan to protect strategic agricultural land or farming businesses.

Natural disasters are a constant threat to farms and regional communities, but our response to fires and floods rarely takes into account the best ways to protect on-farm assets to help businesses to rebuild.

In addition, with the potential for more frequent adverse weather events due to climate change, Victoria isn't keeping up with the needs of our emergency service volunteers who are forced to use outdated appliances and stations that are no longer fit for purpose.

Farmers can't be expected to do all the heavy lifting in managing the State's environmental challenges. It's time to renew the partnership between farmers, government and our communities to deliver a fair go for agriculture and the environment.

OUR PLAN TO PROTECT FARMERS' RIGHTS AND OUR ENVIRONMENT

Caring for farmland and our environment

Nearly 40 years ago VFF partnered with the Victorian Government to establish a global success story of community environmental action—Landcare.

Farmers remain proud of the Landcare partnership and fully understand and value its importance to managing biodiversity, healthy landscapes and waterways.

To ensure the future of the Landcare partnership, government must commit to ensuring communities have the resources needed to deal with local environmental management issues.

Every good partnership relies on all sides holding up their end of the bargain. Public land managers must do their share and comply with their duties as a landowner, just as farmers are expected to do the same. Continual failure by government to maintain its environmental duties only compounds the problems caused by poor management, and makes it harder to address them further down the track.

Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) are responsible for preparing Integrated Pest Plant and Animal Frameworks (IPPAFs) to coordinate cross tenure action. But they are not funded to do this and weeds have been removed from the State's priorities in catchment management plans.

CMAs also support Landcare. Without funding for monitoring and reporting on invasive species, the ability to avoid significant biodiversity and biosecurity issues from weeds such as wheel cactus or pest animals such as wild pigs will be lost.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Ensure public land managers comply with their duties under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act* and report on their compliance annually.
- Reverse a decade's inaction on delivering Integrated Pest Plant and Animal Management plans.
- Undertake a review of the partnership between Landcare, government, farmers and the community to ensure it remains fit for purpose and delivers for another 40 years.
- Support the objectives of Landcare and provide secure funding for its programs.

Reforming the planning system to support a farming future

The *Planning and Environment Act* provides for a balanced consideration of social, economic and environmental impacts yet the planning system it creates does not facilitate this balanced consideration for agriculture.

Rural and regional councils are struggling to keep up with demand of planning permit applications, causing major delays to the planning permit process, in some cases blowing out the timeline for a simple planning permit from three months to six. This backlog is partly due to rural and regional councils struggling to attract town planners with adequate skills to work for the council.

The councils that are facing these delays need help to ensure that they are creating and updating strategic planning documents that will support growth and development, without impacting on productive agricultural land.

Planning reforms must also be enacted to help protect agricultural land from unsuitable development. Right to farm continues to be a huge concern for farmers and they need support to navigate Victoria's complex planning system. Victoria should follow the lead of NSW in establishing an Agriculture Commissioner with a particular focus on resolving land use conflict and identifying growth opportunities for industry.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Amend the State's planning policies to ensure impacts on agriculture are properly considered when assessing planning permit applications.
- Establish an Agriculture Commissioner to advocate on behalf of farmers in planning disputes and to investigate how land use conflicts can be better mitigated through appropriate management.
- Establish a Ministerial Advisory Committee to review planning provisions impacting agriculture, to be overseen by an Agriculture Commissioner.
- Establish a specialised team of rural planners to help with strategic plans to ensure proper consideration of agriculture/ clear decision support to avoid land use conflict or clear the backlog of statutory applications.
- Undertake a program to map strategic, productive, and high-quality agricultural land throughout Victoria.

Protecting farmland and farmers' rights

The Mineral Resources Act is the only piece of legislation that requires formal consideration of land access, compensation and rehabilitation.

Yet, there are plenty of other sectors that want to undertake development on farmland.

Whether it's building new roads, powerlines, gas or water pipes, treating farmers fairly is a difficult task due to the myriad of different rules developers and government are required to follow.

Victoria needs a consistent and fair framework to resolve these issues, particularly with respect to protecting farm biosecurity.

Agreements between farmers and developers must be based on the concept of commercial consent. Farmers should not have to bear the cost of infrastructure that benefits the whole community. Development planning should aim to avoid negative impacts on farm businesses and proper compensation must be paid where this cannot be avoided.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Introduce minimum standards for land access across all statutes in accordance with the VFF's Managing Entry to Farms Policy.
- Amend the Land Acquisition Compensation Act to ensure all costs to farm businesses are included in compensation arrangements, including annual payments for ongoing costs.

Transitioning to renewable energy

Regional communities are getting everything but a fair go in the transition to renewable energy. Despite more than two decades of renewable energy development, Victoria has no real plan on how that power is to be distributed to communities.

Victoria has surrendered its decision making responsibilities to the energy market operator AEMO. We are the only state to give AEMO the power to choose transmission corridors. Without the Victorian government setting the parameters for sensitive economic, environmental or cultural areas to avoid, or standards for development, AEMO is bound to deliver the cheapest transmission option for customers.

Renewable energy and transmission developments must be planned properly so they have minimal impact on farms.

The current regulatory framework has no safeguards around biosecurity, rehabilitation and compensation. After 20 years of operation there is still no access code for energy companies entering private land under the *Electrical Industries Act*. Farmers are left with companies saying they have unfettered rights and no obligations. Large companies can make profits from the land and wind-up commercial structures so that the costs of removing energy facilities falls to the farmer.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Create a statewide strategic plan for renewable energy and transmission developments that looks at the next century of the State's energy needs.
- Rescind AEMO's corridor planning powers and suspend further development of Renewable Energy Zones until agricultural land use assessments are undertaken.
- Ensure commercial consent of farmers is secured for all renewable energy and transmission developments.
- Reform regulatory processes to ensure Environmental Effects Statements consider impacts on farm businesses.

Supporting disaster resilient farms and communities

Regional communities are on the frontline when disaster strikes. Farmers are often the ones who are first to help defend their communities. But they are also the ones who often bare the full brunt of floods and fires.

Victoria's emergency response system rarely considers the impact that disasters have on farm businesses.

Whilst emergency response efforts must treat the protection of life as the absolute priority, consideration must be made towards the special circumstances that relate to protecting farm property. There have been too many instances of emergency managers failing to consider these impacts and this has a huge impact on the ability for a farm business to recover after disaster strikes.

Ultimately, our ability to protect life and property is dependent on supporting the volunteers who serve our community day-in and day-out. The VFF strongly backs continued investment to support emergency services volunteers in the CFA and SES to provide the highest level of response for the community.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Work with the agriculture industry to embed understanding of farm business aspects of property at all stages of the emergency management system and in all risk and consequence models.
- Ensure Inspector General for Emergency Management terms of reference include considerations of agricultural impacts.
- Ensure planning scheme provisions that allow protection of dwellings are also applied to farm structures.
- Support CFA and SES volunteers by funding the replacement of ageing fire trucks and the expansion of stations that are no longer fit for purpose.
- Support farmers with grants to invest in on-farm firefighting equipment to provide rapid response to outbreaks and stop potentially large-scale incidents.

HALF
OF VICTORIAN
LAND IS
MANAGED BY
FARMERS.



SUPPORTING REGIONAL JOBS AND CREATING SECURE WORKPLACES.

Victoria's agriculture sector is worth over \$17.8 billion with the State being Australia's largest agricultural producer by value.

We are proudly home to the largest agricultural workforce in Australia – directly employing over 81,000 people with a further 73,400 employed in food and beverage manufacturing. 75 per cent of these jobs are based in regional Victoria.

Unlike other countries across the globe, our agriculture industry thrives with very little government assistance. Australian farmers are some of the least subsidised in the world – second only to New Zealand.

Yet, Victorian farmers face significant challenges, with direct consequences for our ability to continue providing employment opportunities for regional Victorians.

Worker shortages exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic are holding us back. Victoria's economic recovery must be predicated on getting people working in the productive sectors of the economy, to help generate the revenue required to support the services and infrastructure our communities need.

With exotic diseases on Australia's doorstep, we are facing the most insecure biosecurity environment in our history. Letting these diseases slip through our control has the potential to shutdown industry and export markets overnight – and that means losing thousands of regional jobs.

And we know the effect that water shortages have on jobs. With Victoria disproportionately targeted for water recovery under the Murray Darling Basin Plan, we need a government that stands up for regional jobs in a resource constrained environment.

Farmers are excited by the huge opportunities to boost productivity and efficiency through investment in on-farm renewable energy, digital connectivity, safety and water infrastructure. Continued partnership with government will ensure Victorian agriculture remains resilient and continues to provide the jobs of the future.

OUR PLAN TO CREATE JOBS AND PROFITABLE FARMS

Developing regional skills

A job in agriculture is a job for life. There are so many career paths to take in agriculture: from animal husbandry, to developing and operating state-of-the-art machinery and technology, to business, marketing and STEM research and analysis.

There have never been more opportunities to kick-start a life-long career in agriculture. In fact, there are currently five jobs available for every agriculture graduate in Australia.

Unfortunately, enrolments in TAFE/VET and agricultural colleges are not meeting the workforce needs of industry and are having a significant impact on food and fibre production.

Victoria is struggling to provide a suitable long-term strategy for ensuring the entry level and future skills needs of Victorian agriculture are met. TAFE/VET students also require modern facilities to complete their training successfully. Greater investment is needed to help regional Victorians to take the opportunities that are before them.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Upgrade existing TAFE/VET facilities at key regional institutions, and for marketing of available TAFE/VET courses to address future agriculture skills, workforce and industry needs in regional Victoria.
- Provide ongoing funding for TAFE courses including Introductory Shearing, Shed Hand Training and Advanced Diploma of Agribusiness Management and the addition of TAFE Skill Sets to the free TAFE courses list to address the current agricultural skills shortage.
- Expand the VFF's successful Kids to Ag program to secondary school students, to assist in educating students about sustainability, food and fibre production, as well as the career opportunities available in agriculture.

Supporting on-farm renewable energy

Agriculture is an important end-user in the electricity system, however regional communities are often the stakeholders who have been left behind in terms of affordable and reliable electricity.

The benefits of on-farm renewable energy include productivity improvements, energy and water efficiency gains, emission reduction and waste reduction – helping to sustain Victoria's adaptable and internationally competitive agriculture sector.

The Victorian Government's *Agriculture Energy Investment Plan* has made some way towards supporting these aims, but the program has been oversubscribed, with many farmers missing out.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Extend and renew the *Agriculture Energy Investment Plan*.
- Support farmers to invest in on-farm renewable energy through a dedicated independent advisory service.

Protecting industry and jobs from biosecurity threats

Biosecurity, traceability, and the ability to manage weeds and pests are central to maintaining trust in the clean green image of Victorian agriculture. With over 75 per cent of Australian farm products exported across the globe, our reputation must be protected.

The constant threat of biosecurity incursions on our doorstep means government investment is desperately needed to protect the agriculture industry and the jobs and communities that it supports.

For example, if Foot and Mouth or Lumpy Skin Disease were to spread through Victoria, our beef cattle and dairy markets would be shut down over night. Cattle prices could drop by 80 per cent, and it would take more than a decade for prices to recover. Thousands of jobs in regional Victoria would be on the chopping block.

Despite the importance of protecting the agriculture industry from biosecurity threats, the Victorian Auditor-General has previously found the State's livestock biosecurity system has been weakened by a lack of financial resourcing and staff, compromising its ability to demonstrate livestock health status to key export markets.

Action must be taken to provide immediate and long-term certainty to Victoria's biosecurity system.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Immediate and additional funding for biosecurity preparedness and the development of early warning detection and surveillance systems, like Western Australia and Queensland.
- Perpetual funding for Victoria's biosecurity system through long-term sustainable funding arrangements.
- Prioritising the management of endemic and established pests, weeds and diseases that may impact Victorian agriculture.
- Guarantee of the farming community's participation in simulation or stress-testing exercises related to the specific commodity.

Supplying water for farming communities

Climate change presents significant risks for agriculture and regional communities. Partnering with government to deliver sound water policy and infrastructure is critical to the ability for farming communities to prosper in a resource constrained environment.

In northern Victoria, the *Murray Darling Basin Plan* remains the biggest challenge facing farming communities and additional water recovery threatens hundreds of jobs in irrigated agriculture and food manufacturing. Victoria has done all the heavy lifting in delivering the Basin Plan at a huge cost to industry, to our economic security, to jobs and to the health and wellbeing of our communities. Further water recovery will continue to cause socio-economic pain for very little environmental gain. Victoria must stand up for a fair Basin Plan that doesn't seek to hurt our communities further.

Every Victorian should have access to a basic water supply, but for many farming families this isn't the case during drought and dry conditions. That's why the VFF strongly supports the continued investment into the State's domestic and stock water supply network and for on-farm infrastructure that prepares farmers for drought and boosts resilience.

In addition, emergency water supply points are vital for rural landholders and emergency services to respond to on-farm emergencies such as water contamination, drought or bushfires.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Maintain the Victorian Government's strong position standing up for northern Victorian irrigators and farming communities in response to the Murray Darling Basin Plan.
- Invest in the expansion of Victoria's domestic and stock water network and on-farm infrastructure.
- Support local government to invest in emergency water supply point infrastructure to provide constant water supply to communities.

Making our farms safer

Farms are among the most dangerous workplaces in Victoria. The agriculture industry employs about two per cent of the State's workforce but accounts for approximately 30 per cent of workplace deaths. The industry also records a significant number of serious injuries. This, together with the considerable risks that farmers and agricultural workers are exposed to, is why addressing farm workplace safety is a significant priority for industry and government.

For over two decades, the VFF has partnered with the Victorian Government in delivering farm safety awareness programs to help protect farmers, their families and the employees in the workplace. The demand on this service continues to grow. Farmers are doing everything they can to create safe workplaces, but they require assistance.

The interface between farms and the public is also of serious concern for industry, particularly in respect to livestock on our roads. In 1999, the Bracks Government first funded the *Cattle Underpass Scheme* under the Regional Infrastructure Development Fund. Since then the scheme has enabled the farming community to take steps toward freeing Victorian roads from stock crossings, improving road safety and equipping farmers with the infrastructure to increase productivity.

The VFF is proud of its partnership with government to deliver these services to the farming community and seeks further government action to ensure safety remains its priority.

COMMITMENTS SOUGHT

- Provide ongoing support to farm businesses to manage safety risks with on-farm advice and education through the successful VFF *Making our Farms Safer* project.
- Support farmers with grants to invest in on-farm safety improvements particularly for livestock handling.
- Continue the successful *Cattle Underpass Scheme* to not only improve productivity, but to better protect farmers and regional road users.

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