

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 10 August 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Nina Taylor

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

Dr Tien Kieu

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Dr Megan O'Shea;

Mr Daryl Cochrane; and

Mr Jason Wood.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised, and please mute yourself.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would also like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching these proceedings via the live broadcast.

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce the committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra; I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Also appearing with us today are Mr Clifford Hayes, who is the Deputy Chair; Dr Samantha Ratnam; Ms Nina Taylor; Ms Melina Bath; Mr Andy Meddick; Mrs Bev McArthur; and Dr Matthew Bach.

All evidence that is taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

If I could please just get you individually now for the record to state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of. So Dr O'Shea, if we can start with you.

Dr O'SHEA: Hello. My name is Megan O'Shea. I am presenting as an individual, not on behalf of any group.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. Mr Cochrane.

Mr COCHRANE: My name is Daryl Cochrane. I am presenting as an individual but as an active member of the Bush User Groups United, called BUGU.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. Mr Wood.

Mr WOOD: My name is Jason Wood. I am presenting as an individual, but I am also representing the World Link Partners group of companies.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. All right. So with that, what I will now do is ask each of you to give a very short, 5-minute opening statement, and then that will allow committee members to ask questions of you. So Dr O'Shea, if I could start with you. Just a 5-minute opening statement. Thanks.

Dr O'SHEA: Great. Thank you. I would just like to also start by indicating that I am a fourth-generation Australian, and I pay my respects to the Wurundjeri people, who are the traditional owners of the land from where I present. I have lived and worked my entire life in the west of Melbourne on what is Victorian volcanic plains grassland country. So I have got a very long association with that environment and my submission has really been centred around the grasslands in the greater Melbourne area, but a lot of the points that I make are relevant to grasslands across western Victoria.

I have got three main points that I would like to make, and I can elaborate on those a little bit. So the main points are around the fact that this ecosystem is in decline. There is estimated to be between 0.5 and 2 per cent of that ecosystem remaining, and this is well below the CAPAD target of 10 per cent for each bioregion. So that is already problematic.

The two main causes, from my perspective, associated with the decline of this ecosystem are, by far and away, habitat destruction and habitat clearance, and the other is associated with a lack of management, poor management or inappropriate management regimes. So they are the two main themes associated with this system.

In terms of habitat destruction and clearance, obviously in Melbourne urban development is really the big driver of that, and one of the things that I see today is that, excluding the MSA area, we only have a very limited number of grassland sites in urban Melbourne that are not protected. I am associated with several community groups, and we spend quite a lot of time making submissions each time a development proposal comes forward to put the case for why these particular grasslands should be permanently protected.

From my perspective I would like to see a more proactive approach to protecting these grasslands in urban Melbourne. So I think what would be really great is if we could have a list of the grasslands sites—and the grasslands I am talking about are really good-quality grasslands—and if we could work on some way to proactively have those areas protected rather than this case-by-case approach, where we have to go in and assess each grassland on its merits each time a developer decides that they would like to proceed with development. I think because there are so few sites it would be really great to be proactive on this one. I understand if it was a larger area, that might be a bit more problematic.

In terms of habitat destruction also there is, particularly in Melbourne, a bit of a perception that small sites are small, they are isolated, they might be a bit degraded, so there is a bit of a perception that they are not really valuable. But there is scientific research done by Dr John Morgan and a few other people showing that collectively our really small grassland sites support a greater diversity of species than just one or two really large grassland sites. So we really need to start valuing our small sites. We also need to step away from the perception that if a site is weedy it is of no use—

The CHAIR: You have about a minute left, Megan.

Dr O'SHEA: Okay. We have got numerous examples of where those sites have been restored because we have got a good base to start with.

The other main point is around habitat degradation and a lack of management, poor management or inappropriate management. I have seen that some of our state agencies in particular, but probably other management bodies as well, are really under-resourced to implement appropriate management. There is also a lack of understanding around the impacts of some of those management activities, so really large areas getting burnt all in one go can be quite problematic. So one of the things that I think I would really like to see is a well-resourced and highly skilled management team for these grasslands, particularly in the Melbourne area. Within that it would be great to also have a grassland recovery team, with threatened species sitting underneath that so that we have got the overarching recovery team and then we have got smaller subgroups for individual species. I think I might stop there. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Yes. No worries. Thanks very much for that, and like I said, there will be plenty of questions for you, so do not worry, you will have more opportunity to talk.

Dr O'SHEA: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Cochrane, over to you—5 minutes, thanks.

Mr COCHRANE: I have timed this so hopefully it should go under. I am here to engage you. Please engage with me. My parents were biodynamic farmers at Yarra Junction from the early 1960s. My parents considered that this was simply the right way to farm ethically with respect to our environment and our community. My wife and I were market gardeners. We then opened and ran a conventional and organic fruit shop at Yarra Junction for 15 years. As a family we financed and ran a wildlife shelter for 20 years. Healesville Sanctuary asked if we would expand to birds of prey rehabilitation. Flight aviaries and rehabilitation aviaries

were added. But no longer—age and grandchildren have caught up with us. I currently work off-farm. We purchased our property in 1982 and started restoration on the overgrown river reserve as time and money allowed—sorry, we are on the Yarra. Goats were introduced for two years as a way of reducing the use of ecologically harsh chemicals, and we gradually restored the area until the formation of the Yellingbo conservation area. We moved our riparian management licence. It has now reverted to a weed and feral animal haven.

I naively tried to engage, thinking that this was a misunderstanding and practical and sustainable conservation was their goal. Never in my life have I encountered such cunning manipulation to degrade fellow Australians. The cause justifies the means. Morality of stewardship to be replaced by the business of environmentalism. Vindictive misinformation of pathogens from landowners' animals used as one furphy. The known cause of pathogens is thousands of septic tanks in the valley's urban areas and also the area's uncontrolled stormwater. Our rural stewardship has been removed and pathogens from septic tanks and stormwater continue unchecked to pollute the river's waterways—incomprehensible disregard of a duty of care to nature. Those that work in association with nature to produce the necessities of life, now worthless. I did not sleep properly for two years. I learned computer skills and wrote emails to every Victorian MP—no response except for my local MP, yet all voted to remove my voluntary stewardship. The bush users group was my mental saviour. Members as diverse as our Australian community—prospectors, farmers, forestry, fishing, hunting and many more groups. Their services could be enlisted, yet they are ostracised.

Every action has a reaction or a consequence. Thousands of different ecosystems, yet stewardship is replaced with one lazy lock-up solution from centralised government. Yet historically our environment has never been without management, never before locked up and left without evolution—and now left without evolutionary defences from weeds, feral animals, population and ideological stupidity. Ex-CSIRO scientist David Packham says this results in fuel loads that are now up to 10 times pre-colonisation levels. Thousands of stewards of the land replaced and silenced by legislation, also destroying our financial ability to care for nature. My wife and I both wept, seeing the destruction of life after Black Saturday, vowing never again to be silenced.

The CHAIR: You have a minute, Mr Cochrane.

Mr COCHRANE: Yes, I am almost there. I withdrew my outstretched hand of engagement for self-preservation. I care not for political alliances. I have firsthand knowledge of VEAC and also Engage Victoria's system in use. Nature is now the sole ownership and responsibility of autocracy. Would you replace the responsibility of the care and development of your child's life to the hands of a removed centralised bureaucracy, as has been done to natural life? I am here to engage you and will answer any questions honestly and openly. Please engage rural Australians. We have so much to offer, yet our integrity is treated as no more than a tradable commodity for urban votes. Rhetoric is no substitution for reality. Thank you for listening.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Cochrane. Mr Wood, we will go to you now. You can give your 5-minute opening remarks, and then after that we will throw open to questions from members.

Mr WOOD: Good afternoon, everyone, and thanks for having me. In my submission I point to the fact that Aboriginal culture and land use was completely centred around the principles of ecologically sustainable development, and they were successful precisely because they did not take a siloed approach to caring for country. They tended their land to maximise their own sustainability according to the local resources that it offered and the resources they could manipulate to improve it. They never locked it up and left it, and they never looked after it merely for posterity's sake. They were too concerned with their own survival to pursue anything that did not enhance their sustainability.

Government has done a complete about-face from this approach, and continuously pouring taxpayer money into ecosystem repair is not efficient and not sustainable. Many of the issues related to ecosystem decline can be easily dealt with by industry without any additional funding at all. They can be absorbed into existing project costs if those desired outcomes are planned in from the start.

My career centred around sustainability and green energy for over 25 years. I entered the gold exploration sector in 2018 to set up a functioning project that could be used to tie together a number of green energy R and D projects and environmental initiatives. My intention was to demonstrate the three pillars of ecologically sustainable development by showing that industry can restore the ecosystem whilst also delivering

innovative technologies and also delivering profit at the same time. I chose the gold sector not for its profitability but for its resilience and ability to continue to fund these projects in uncertain economic times. I work closely with a mining junior called Cauldron Energy, who have had great success through their community engagement process in discovering the relevant ecological concerns in the Wombat State Forest. The government is proposing to lock this area up as a national park, which will prevent us from implementing these sustainability programs.

The Victorian government agreed to the *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development* in 1992. ESD is the cornerstone of all modern environmental law and provides a checklist for balancing the fair, prudent and sustainable use of resources according to six main principles aimed at integrating economic activity with sustainable ecological outcomes. These principles are more generally captured by concepts such as the circular economy, closed-loop business systems or my version, which I call integrative ecology. Integrative ecology takes a more proactive approach to searching for ecological problems that can be solved as part of an industrial project that has its own pre-existing commercial objectives. Sadly, the prevailing view in the Victorian government still appears to be that resource projects necessarily come at an overall ecological cost. This is a fallacy that leaves us 10 to 15 years behind international environmental wisdom and best practice. The government's move away from ESD is evident if we scrutinise the terms of reference for this inquiry. No question has been posed about how government could better engage with industrial commercial interests, nor is there any discussion about developing or stimulating an integrated funding network for ecosystem restoration. If the government was following contemporary principles of ESD, these would be key questions in this inquiry and we would find that industry already has many of the answers.

Both the government and the taxpayer are nearly broke, so excluding industrial activity is no longer a sustainable pathway for long-term ecosystem maintenance, much less repair. When perfectly feasible solutions offered by industry are being held up because commercial stakeholders have been excluded from input on land use policy, then it is a signal that the system is in need of overhaul. Although the enabling legislation for VEAC demands that they have experience in project delivery, operating under the environment portfolio means they do not really have the required breadth of commercial exposure to understand how industrial activity can be integrated into positive ecological outcomes. VEAC's understanding of modern goldmining is incomplete and inaccurate, so for them the safest position is to ban it as much as possible. Consequently there has been a bias against mining in the production of their latest central west investigation report, which has recently been tabled in Parliament, and all avenues for industry input into ecologically favourable outcomes have been closed off. Ironically, goldmining companies have to comply with something like 18 overlapping pieces of environmental legislation, so not only are we experts on environmental law but we are also experts at reconciling conflicting requirements in innovative ways and thinking outside the box.

The CHAIR: Mr Wood, you have about a minute left.

Mr WOOD: Thanks. The existing system is old fashioned and dysfunctional. It has its roots in a different time when balancing ecological concerns with economic outcomes was more straightforward. Modern circular solutions to sustainability where wastes become inputs are very costly or difficult to implement in isolation and must be built into an operating project to bring the desired outcomes. At this time there exists no door that I can go through other than this inquiry to make the case that stifling resources exploration is not only having economic impacts but there are ecological outcomes that are being frustrated as well. If we had a more balanced land use advisory body with an approvals process that includes economic development as a key enabler of sustainability programs, then the next generation of circular economy initiatives would receive a fair hearing instead of being shut out of the debate, as is the case now. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you all very much for your opening remarks. Now we will go to questions, and perhaps I might start with Mrs McArthur. You can go first seeing as you missed out on a question last time around. I thought you would like to go first this time.

Mrs McARTHUR: Very kind, Chair. Thank you very much. I particularly want to focus on the presentations of Mr Cochrane and Mr Wood. Thank you, Mr Cochrane, for a refreshing approach from an individual who has spent a life caring about the environment in a practical way. But I also want to ask you: do you think that it is right that a government should lock out the public from public land? That is the first question.

Mr COCHRANE: Okay. We have a large population, and unfortunately the government has to have rules and regulations to lock out—

To go back, our land, our forests were never locked up before. We hear a lot of talk about Indigenous, but very few people go back to before white colonisation as to how it was. It was never without management. So jump forward to where we have, I think, 70 per cent of the population being urban population now, evolved in a biodiversity-dead environment, an artificial environment, and they are told, ‘Well, we must preserve it’, and they get a euphoric experience from saying, ‘We must preserve it’. But I as a steward of the land realise that this is harmful. What about all the pressures that we have put on it? So yes, it would be lock up and say, ‘Put heaps of managers there’. We cannot afford that.

So what is the balance? The answer is: no, lock-up is not right. We have the resource of 25 million Australians. Does a government have fortitude to try to engage those as best it can? There are always going to be the Tony Skaifes of the world, but for every Tony Skaife there are 100 good Australians.

So, yes, the government has to have rules and legislation—sorry, I am wasting too much of your time—but this is the first time I have put my hand out again. For emotional reasons, I had to withdraw my hand, for my mental wellbeing. I could not handle what was happening. So hopefully that answers your question.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, thank you, Mr Cochrane. Mr Wood, perhaps you would like to expand on your proposal for a new Victorian land use commission. I am very interested in your view that waste should be seen as not a problem but an opportunity and that we should work very hard to ensure that we do have a circular economy. I am also interested that you believe that there is not enough taxpayer largesse to fund every proposal to save or restore the environment and that we need to engage industry and farmers and the public in doing it, as Mr Cochrane says, because we simply cannot print the money and there are not enough taxpayers if we are going to do what many of our witnesses suggest, which is just pour more taxpayer money at a problem which is probably created largely by government.

Mr WOOD: Okay. Thanks for the question, Bev. I will start by giving some examples in the areas that we have been looking at for gold mining. Modern mining in Victoria is essentially deep-shaft mining, so groundwater is an issue that we have to deal with. It is a disposal issue and it is an energy issue, and it usually has to be either carted off site or, in the proposal we are looking at at the moment, which is in the Wombat—I am sure everybody is familiar with the contentious issues in the Wombat State Forest, and unfortunately the Wombat State Forest has a very high density of gold, so the demand for gold in that area is not going to go away—for us to remove water from the mine in that area it has to be either trucked off site or a pipeline of 10 kilometres has to be set up, with pump stations all along. It is expensive infrastructure, it is difficult to approve, it is energy intensive, it requires maintenance, it gets sabotaged et cetera, et cetera.

There are lots of creeks. Especially with the increasing impacts of climate change, many of these creeks are under threat, and the microorganisms and crustacea in these creeks form an essential pillar of localised ecosystems. Once they are dried up in a hot season, they are gone, and they rarely recover. It would be of benefit to the ecosystem and to a junior company like ours to be able to simply locate those creeks and put the groundwater into those creeks in whatever quantity is required. Any solution like that would be better than what we have now from a commercial point of view, and I cannot see any way that the government can reasonably fund that on an ongoing basis. They would have to bring water in by the same route that we have to send it out. So that is one local issue that we have identified, and that came in consultation with people from ‘no gold in the Wombat’, who identified ecological issues in the area.

Mrs McARTHUR: And just expand on the Victorian land use commission proposal and if we abolish the current regime, which clearly is not working well.

Mr WOOD: Okay. The legislation is adequate, but the structure is not. So we have an advisory committee that operate under the environmental portfolio, and like it or not they are going to be focused on ecological issues, not on broader pictures of project delivery or how to fund it. Up until now it has been easy for the environment portfolio to hold the hand out for taxpayers money, but we are not in that situation anymore, and we need a more integrated approach that is not under one portfolio and not attached to particular stakeholder interests. What we need is a range of areas of expertise that are not attached to stakeholders or portfolios so it is a more central meeting place for discussion about how a project could proceed, what projects are valid. And all

we need is a checklist based on the *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development*, and each project can be assessed on the merits of that checklist and even on a competitive basis, whether they are commercial or government projects.

The CHAIR: All right. We are going to have to move along, Mrs McArthur, so I will throw to Dr Bach now.

Dr BACH: Thank you very much, Chair. I might stay along a similar line and ask you a question, Mr Wood, just building on the comments you made in response to Mrs McArthur there. I was listening very carefully to them. In your view what is so wrong with VEAC?

Mr WOOD: It is not so much VEAC per se, it is the structure itself. The new paradigm of sustainability relies on a circular economy, so it necessarily requires us to look at both the economics and the ecological aspects of any discussion about any program we want to put in place. In VEAC's history—and this is probably a side effect of operating under the environment portfolio—there is a traditional perception that mining is bad and looking after the forest is good. That is no longer the case. Investors vote with their feet. If a mining company does not toe the line and does not get the green tick, they are deserted. Capital flight—they are left alone. The days where it is a debate between ecology and resource use are rapidly coming to an end, and if we do not find a better way to integrate those two opposing points of view and remove the polarisation from this debate, we are going to keep having the same problems with ecological decline, stalled economic projects, polarised debate, politicisation of the ecology and all the problems we are seeing now—bushfires. Industry has a lot of the solutions to these problems, but we are being shut out of the debate because we do not have a door to go through with an integrated solution.

Dr BACH: Thank you, Mr Wood. That clarifies things for me.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thank you. You know, it is really interesting. There will be people sitting here going, 'No, no, no, Mr Wood, this is not right, you are not right', but, in looking at your submission, you talk about this 'ecologically sustainable development'. I would like you to draw that out a little bit more. Where has that come from? Have you made it up or has it been around for a long time? What does it mean, why haven't we embraced it before and what could it mean for Victoria? So I want you to unpack that a little bit more, without probably getting down into—if you need to add something, you can write it up probably.

Mr WOOD: Okay. The national strategy for ecologically sustainable development was handed down in 1992. I believe it comes from further up the chain in the United Nations. It has now become the cornerstone of international environmental law. So it is mentioned in a lot of Australian legislation, and it is actually mandated by the VEAC Act. They are supposed to have comply with it. There are six established principles of ecologically sustainable development. There was a national council; Victoria signed into it in 1992. So it is mentioned in a lot of legislation, it has been de facto agreed to, but there has never been a standalone body that encapsulates all of that in one meeting place. So it still exists in an isolated form in various portfolios and various government projects and various pieces of legislation. The problem with it is that it can be interpreted according to the particular charter of the people that are adhering to it. So in the case of VEAC, yes, they are required to comply with ecologically sustainable development, but if they do not have the required breadth of experience or expertise, then critically important parts of that equation get left out and you end up with a bias. As I and Daryl Cochrane have pointed out, it leads to negative outcomes, and often they are not visible outside the sphere of influence of the people who are creating policy. So a more centralised structure that actually enforces compliance with ecologically sustainable development I think would alleviate a lot of the problems that we get when it is operating in a siloed fashion.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Mr Wood. I note too in your submission you talk about that representation should be a climate change adviser, an Aboriginal land management economist, an ethics adviser, a biodiversity adviser, a legal adviser and an energy adviser. You want everyone within reason in the tent. Is that the structure of this?

Mr WOOD: That is right. Ecologically sustainable development and global sustainability—they are multidisciplinary problems. There is no part of human existence that can be left out of this discussion, really. Clearly there has to be a practical limit on how many representatives and how many fields of expertise would

appear on that council, but I have tried to condense it down to what I think would be the bare minimum. They should not be attached to industry or stakeholders or a particular portfolio. They should be as independent as possible so they can bring a breadth of understanding to the debate and integrated as best as possible.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Chair. I do have another one, but I respect the fact that you have got other people. So if you can swing back around if we—

The CHAIR: Yes, we will come back around. Thanks. Dr Ratnam—question?

Dr RATNAM: Thank you, Chair. A question specifically for Mr Wood. I was just reading your submission, and I was a bit concerned about a couple of sections, particularly section 6, where you talk about ecosystem decline and climate change. Just to understand the perspective that you are making this submission upon, I just want to know whether you could expand on or clarify what you were asserting in that section. Do you believe in human-induced climate change, and also, do you believe that ecosystems should be conserved and preserved? Because there is an assertion there about what we should be aspiring to. We have just heard from the department this morning that in Victoria there are nearly 2000 species that face extinction. Are you asserting that we should not be trying to preserve and conserve our ecosystems and threatened species?

Mr WOOD: No, on the contrary. What I am suggesting is that we have not reached a consensus on the best approach, and individual government departments—not just government departments but lobby groups—everybody is pursuing this in a fragmented fashion, and it is often leading to conflicting outcomes. If we had a more integrated approach that was independent of separate government portfolios, then we might reach a better consensus on how to tackle the problems of climate change, biodiversity and ecosystem decline.

Dr RATNAM: Okay. Thank you. Just in terms of climate change, that is your view as well in terms of we have not got an agreed position on the causes or solutions? Is that what you are asserting?

Mr WOOD: We do not have a unified position, no, and I think that is part of the problem. I think technology has a lot of answers for it, too, but technology costs money and we need working projects to develop technological solutions to climate change as well as ecological solutions to climate change.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you. It was a bit hard to decipher your submission, so thank you. That is it.

Mr WOOD: You are welcome.

The CHAIR: Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Chair. Very interesting presentations today from you all, so I thank you very much for coming along. I have really got a question for Dr O'Shea and Mr Cochrane, and I would like to do a quick one to Mr Wood. I will start off with Dr O'Shea. In regard to protection of grasslands, do you think that there should be some protection of grasslands put into our planning schemes. The other one is: do you think we should disallow offsets? I might ask my questions to Daryl Cochrane too, because you may want to cross-answer; I am not sure. I was just wondering if you would like to suggest, Mr Cochrane, what sort of riparian management system you would like to see Victoria adopt if you could have some influence on that policy. And Mr Wood, I am thinking that you are talking about some sort of summit of industry and ecological groups, like the Bob Hawke wages summit or something like that, where you might be able to get a consensus view on how we can work together to achieve better environmental outcomes.

Mr WOOD: Absolutely.

Mr HAYES: And do you think that you could operate a goldmine and then restore the environment back to something like what it was before that time?

Mr WOOD: I believe we can improve it, otherwise I would not have entered the sector.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Thank you. And those other questions if you would like.

Dr O'SHEA: Will I go first?

Mr HAYES: Yes, sure. Thank you.

Dr O'SHEA: Okay. So for natural temperate grassland of the Victorian volcanic plain, as I mentioned at the start of my submission, the estimate is that there is between half a per cent and 2 per cent of the original extent of that ecosystem remaining. Therefore I think we should be looking at all options for protecting those good remnants that are supporting threatened species where we can. So, yes, it would be great to have something in the planning scheme. We already have environmental significance overlays in many of our councils. I am not an expert in planning schemes so it is a bit of a foreign area to me, but my understanding is that the ESOs really do help with protecting some of those areas. I am currently involved with some sites that have development proposals on them that are not protected by ESOs. The ESOs will not be the final say on whether a development does or does not go ahead, but they are helpful.

In the Melbourne context, as I mentioned, I think there are probably less than 20 grasslands that from my perspective are really valuable biodiverse grasslands. I think a proactive approach to making sure that they are protected would be a lot better than the approach that we currently have where a developer submits a proposal for development and that then goes through local government, state government and federal government, where people like myself have opportunities to make comments. It takes a lot of time and energy to do that for each of those sites and sometimes you do not even know whether anyone actually reads them or not.

In terms of the offsets, in the Melbourne context we have grasslands that are being offset to rural locations. So last year I attended VCAT for a site in Deer Park where the proposed offset was 130 kilometres away, so out past Geelong. The offset site in this instance is essentially farmland, and that is the reason why that proposed offset exists. It is being grazed, which has been a good management practice. There are no urban development pressures on it. So in terms of offsetting from Melbourne to a rural site, from my perspective that does not truly offset the loss in Melbourne because the rural site still exists and is highly likely to exist into the future. There is no likelihood that we are going to lose that site. So to offset from Melbourne to outside of Melbourne means that we are actually losing habitat. We are not actually achieving that no net loss that we would be aiming to achieve through that offset process.

The CHAIR: I will just remind everyone. We have got about 15 minutes and there are two other members who have not had a question yet, but I will continue on if the others want to answer Mr Hayes's question, and then we will keep moving around. So, Mr Hayes, does that satisfy you, with the answer from Dr O'Shea?

Mr HAYES: Yes, that is fantastic, thanks. But if I could have a comment from Mr Cochrane about the riparian management, just briefly.

Mr COCHRANE: Thank you. The question is spot on, so I thank you for that. The last thing we need is more bureaucracy. What we need is integrity, which is a simple solution, but integrity not just in governance but in personal responsibility. What we have now is a system of governance where rules and regulations are made and personal responsibility is taken away. Bureaucracy is set up with too many rules that do not work. Bureaucracy cannot be a successful environmental manager because the rules and the regulations get in the way. I am going to quickly read something here because it is better that I put it out this way.

The original Yellingbo conservation reserve was established in 1965—about 600 hectares. In the 1990s about 200 hectares of sedge-rich Eucalyptus camphora swamp, which is a suitable habitat for the helmeted honeyeater and lowland Leadbeater's possum, existed. Jump forward to 2018 and only a few tens of hectares of this swamp remains. What is left is in deteriorating condition. The Yellingbo conservation area was declared, and this same management team was given charge of 550 kilometres of waterways within that declared area. So a failed management team was given total control and took my stewardship away.

They have offered another riparian management licence. I call it a slave licence. It would be a very naive person that signs something that they have put up. I have had to leave it. I no longer go down the river. For instance, in 2018 within 1 kilometre of my place there were three fox dens in wombat holes. They successfully raised their fox cubs. I am not allowed to do anything. The rules and regulations are the reason that the current Yellingbo reserve at Yellingbo failed, because, for instance, instead of doing some basic earthworks, which would have helped the situation, they put in two massive pumps at an estimated \$100 000 a year for the diesel to run these pumps. Rules and regulations do not do it. It takes fortitude in government to engage the local people. You have to have rules and regulations for those that do not.

Mr HAYES: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Daryl.

The CHAIR: All right. We have to move on. Ms Taylor, a question?

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, I am just intrigued. Mr Wood, I am just trying to clarify the question of a unified approach with regard to climate change. Arguably the IPCC report—it is intergovernmental—and there are many nations around the world who may not have the same percentage goal, but there is a fair amount of unity there that is compelling countries around the world to take specific action. So what would it take for you to be satisfied about the true nature of climate change and the impact of humans on the decline of species that you have not seen yet?

Mr WOOD: I am not so much concerned with establishing a consensus on the validity or otherwise of the theory or the approach. The issue I have in my sphere of influence is that there are two ways we can approach climate change. We can either attempt to address it at a global level, or we have the option of addressing local issues caused by climate change. We have each got our own part to play in that. In terms of the project that I am trying to work on, what I am trying to do is mitigate the immediate effects of climate change from creek beds that dry up. In the example that I have given, we have spare water that we can use to mitigate that damage. I do not have an avenue such that I can go to government with that proposal, using a waste product from a mine, which is a cost for us, and putting that into an input to ecological repair. So my issue is more concerned not with establishing the parameters of climate change but establishing the mechanisms by which industry can participate within their own sphere of influence.

Ms TAYLOR: Right. Okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. And if I could just have the final question—and this is a question to each of you, and I asked the last panel the same thing—if there was one thing that you could change, if there was one thing that you would say to government would be a priority from your perspective that should change, what would that be? So Dr O’Shea, I will start with you. If you had a magic wand and you could change one thing, what would it be?

Dr O’SHEA: Tough. Really in urban Melbourne we should not be seeing any more grassland destruction.

The CHAIR: Okay, yes. Thank you. And Mr Cochrane, from your perspective, if you had a magic wand and there was one thing that you would prioritise that government should change, what would it be?

Mr COCHRANE: I would ostracise the people that actually have the experience, the generational knowledge, to be replaced by the business of environmentalism that we currently have.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you. And Mr Wood, if there was one thing government should do as a priority to change, what would your opinion be?

Mr WOOD: It would be to un-silo questions of land use allocation in Victoria to make it more inclusive of a broader range of industrial and academic inputs that are not connected to stakeholder interests, individual political interests or siloed spheres of knowledge—so an independent land use commission.

The CHAIR: Okay. And I might just ask one final question of all of you. One of the things that has featured pretty strongly throughout this inquiry, really, is the role of our First Nations people or traditional owners in the landscape, and I am just wondering what your views are about greater involvement of our First Nations peoples in healing country but also their role in the landscape. One of the things that has been talked about is fire in the landscape as well. So Dr O’Shea, I might start with you, given your passion around grassland. What do you say about that in terms of, you know, the role of fire in the landscape and how traditional owners could be more involved?

Dr O’SHEA: I think that that is a really important issue for grassland. So the current approach that we have in the grasslands that I am involved with is that we have these really massive burns. I actually today had a look at an aerial photo of one of our Parks Vic grasslands that gets burned. Forty hectares, about a quarter of that reserve, was burned in one go.

I do not have the science for that, but I think that that is actually a lot. Those fires are really intense and all consuming and really hot, and I think that bringing an Indigenous perspective and approach to burning in these

environments may very well result in much better ecological outcomes for the grassland and the threatened species that it supports.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. Mr Cochrane, do you have a view about that in terms of, you know, the use of cultural fire practices in the landscape and how we could involve our First Nations people more in caring for country?

Mr COCHRANE: You will not get a rural person that will speak against fuel reduction. As I said in my opening statement, we are up to 10 times—

I am living in a ticking time bomb there in the Yarra Valley, because it is basically locked up—environmental vandalism through no management.

I see the person; I do not see the culture. It does not matter what culture people are, they are welcome at my table. I only see the person.

I guess, in something else I wrote, I understand fully what the Wurundjeri people must have thought 200 years ago when our ancestors kicked them off the land, because everything has been taken from me except for me to pay my rates.

I am the owner of the land but not in the European sense of the word, in the sense of a responsibility for the time that I am here.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Mr Wood, what is your view about traditional cultural fire practices and the role of our First Nations people in the landscape?

Mr WOOD: Okay. Well, I think my submission pretty much explains that in my opinion the Aboriginals had land management under control, and they did it in an unsiloed fashion. They looked at every piece of land in terms of its soil quality, its soil use, its water and decided what it was best suited to, and they structured their entire culture and all their practices around the resources that were available on that land and how they could manipulate and use those resources to improve their sustainability. So I think their overall paradigm is something we have moved away from.

I would just like to point out that in the last VEAC report, the *Central West Investigation*, one of the government initiatives has been to ban private collection of firewood, and the proposal that has been put forward is to replace that with one of three options: one is move everyone to town gas; the second one is move everyone to wind or solar, or domestic solar, local solar; and the third one is to use plantation timber. Now, each of those three alternatives introduces a carbon footprint. So that is a nonsensical recommendation to me, and I think it is indicative of the siloed approach that we have. They have not done an overall analysis of that recommendation before putting it forward, and not only is it increasing our climate change carbon footprint, it is actually increasing the risk of bushfires as well. So that is a problem, and it is a problem due to structure as far as I have been able to tell.

The CHAIR: All right. Great. Well, look, thank you all very much for coming along today and presenting your evidence to the hearing. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to do that for us and appreciate everything you do in your local communities, and I just want to thank you again for coming along.

Witnesses withdrew.