



Environment and Planning Committee  
Legislative Council

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Inquiry: Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Hearing Date: 10 August 2021

Additional question on notice provided by a Member

Directed to: **Mr Wood**

**1. Ms BATH**

**Question asked.**

Can you expand on your comments in relation to circular economies and Victoria being 15 years behind global thinking and how do you think an independent land use commission can address this gap?

**Response:**

It might be even more than 15 years, depending on which areas you are talking about. I've spent a lot of time looking at sustainability projects in hi-tech countries throughout the EU and Japan where a much higher population density and resource restrictions have forced them to think in circular terms and to innovate much more aggressively. Much of this thinking has a historical basis due to the ways they've adapted to their local conditions and they've done especially well in combined agriculture and bioenergy. Almost all of their farm wastes become inputs either for agriculture or energy and they have a well developed biofuels sector both for industrial and transport use. Our energy economy is wasteful and inefficient and we have a serious fuel security problem which threatens everything - our food supply chains, our environment and our production capacity. Australia has a virtually non-existent biofuels sector and ranks second last in the world in per capita carbon emissions. We are drawing negative press from institutional and sovereign debt investors who are starting to turn their backs on Australia because we are not innovating towards a circular economy. We've had it too easy for too long. These are all issues in sustainability generally.

When we are talking about transitioning to renewables we are talking about mining raw materials and that's the elephant in the room. We need lithium, silver, gold, rare earths as well as more common materials like aluminium to build all this infrastructure and they only come from resources projects. Anyone can plant a tree and say they've done their bit for climate change, it takes a lot more courage and skill to drill a hole in the earth whilst pitching the case for sustainability. For the Victorian government to propose being a world leader in renewable uptake without addressing the sustainable mining question is hypocritical and dodges responsibility. We don't get to choose where these minerals



are found, they are where they are and as we decarbonise, the pressure to extract them from sensitive habitats is only going to increase. It's a matter of when, not if, and we all know it. Until we can have a rational meeting of minds about how to integrate mining and other industrial activity into ecological outcomes, all progress in sustainability will continue to suffer.

The next 5 years are going to be critically important for the resources sector globally as the global push for electric vehicles, renewables and remote working technology pushes up demand for minerals. Victoria is in the spotlight due to its large gold reserves and its poor performance at facilitating projects so the government is at a crossroads. On the one hand we can continue down the path of leaving development projects to fight and scrap their way through a sea of red and green tape, whilst repeatedly hitting the taxpayer for ecosystem repair in a post COVID economy. Alternatively, we could create a better structure that could position Victoria as an international best practice benchmark in reconciling the different fields of endeavour so we can pitch all land use proposals (government and private sector) on a competitive basis according to a common set of sustainability metrics.

Australia was built on mining, it is one of the few sectors keeping us going and many of the countries I mentioned will be depending on us for mining. We absolutely must un-demonise mining by inviting the sector to have input and feedback on ecological questions with as much dialogue as possible in a non-adversarial forum if this is to ever happen. This is the opposite of what we have now.

Mining companies are actively looking for biodiversity outcomes and technological innovations that can be built into their projects, driven by the demands of green oriented investors. If Victoria continues down the path of shutting mining out of discussions about land use the likely eventual outcome is that the resources sector will find it cheaper to simply take the government to court to manage their business risk and they'll be doing it on ecological/sustainability grounds, not economic grounds.

The prime minister has hung his hat on innovation and disruptive change as the solution for climate change - I feel that it's only under a framework of healthy competition for sustainable outcomes rather than parasitic adversarial debate over stakeholder interests that such innovation can possibly thrive. Sustainability issues are all linked, treating ecosystem decline and climate change as standalone issues is a very poor approach to sustainability that is not tenable any longer and our land use approval framework needs to be overhauled to look at these challenges in a more complete way.

VEAC offer us no hope of how we can sustainably address the mining requirements for implementing decarbonising technologies, nor how we can fund ecosystem repair under the present regulatory system. There are ecosystem challenges in Victoria that could be addressed



without government funding right now, that cannot get licencing approval because they are being treated by VEAC and the government as mining projects when they should be assessed as sustainability projects.