

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Shepparton—28 April 2021

MEMBERS

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Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

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WITNESS

Ms Sharon Terry, Manager Environment, Greater Shepparton City Council

The CHAIR: All right, I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee 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. I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are gathered here 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. I would also like to welcome any members of the public who are watching these proceedings in the room today as well.

So I will just take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra, I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Mr Clifford Hayes, Deputy Chair. Joining us via Zoom, Dr Samantha Ratnam. Back in the room Ms Melina Bath. And Dr Matthew Bach. Now, 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. So if you could just for the record, if you could state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

MS TERRY: Sharon Terry. I am the Manager of Environment at Greater Shepparton City Council.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. And with that, we will invite you to give your opening statement. So five, 10 minutes. And that will give us then time to ask questions of you. So over to you.

MS TERRY: Fantastic. Thank you. So as a representative of Greater Shepparton City Council, I would like to acknowledge the Yorta Yorta peoples of the land on which now comprises Greater Shepparton. We pay our respect to their tribal Elders. We celebrate their continuing culture and we acknowledge the memory of their ancestors. So thank you for the opportunity to appear here today and we congratulate you on this inquiry.

We know that our biodiversity's decline. There has been a number of reports starting with environment reports, whether it be from a global organisation, national or state. We know that that – and regional – we know that that biodiversity is declining. We have invested millions and millions of dollars into biodiversity decline and along with millions of hours of community labour and passion. And still our biodiversity is declined. So the opportunity to revisit what we have been doing and to look at a different way of managing this into the future is very much welcome.

For Australia, our reputation precedes us globally for extinctions and evidence that this is going to continue is clear. Climate change – all of this discussion should be undertaken with the lens of climate change. So our local environment here in Greater Shepparton City Council is heavily cleared, as you will have seen as you have been driving around the area and if you are familiar with the area. We have a long history of successful agriculture and significant investment is still being made into that space and it is something that we are very proud of. But it has led to significant biodiversity decline.

At this point in time, there is less than 3 per cent of natural areas or remnant areas left in the Greater Shepparton City Council and the majority of that intact biodiversity, or intact as it can be, is along our riparian areas and our roadside. So really significant, mostly public spaces. But we also have really strong biodiversity values on private land as well. For Greater Shepparton, we absolutely acknowledge the biodiversity crisis that we are in and the climate crisis.

In March 2020 last year, the councils declared a climate emergency. We have a number of projects that we have in place now and we have done over time as well and really what we are doing now is an evolution of

what we have done in the past. But just to give you a bit of a snapshot, we have an overall objective of greening Shepparton which is not just our urban spaces but also our rural areas. That incorporates a number of different strategies and plans.

One of our most significant from a biodiversity point of view is the One Tree Per Child project, which has evolved from our National Tree Day project. The One Tree Per Child project started off in 2016 and we had a target of planting 16,664 Indigenous plants for each child or each person under the age of 18 in Greater Shepparton. Each year since then we have incrementally increased that by 10 per cent. So this year our target is almost 25,000 plants. And to date we have planted over 90,000 Indigenous trees, shrubs, grasses and forbs and herbs as well. Those plants have gone into urban environments, but also our native open space and we have restricted that just to council managed land for a number of reasons.

That programming is really about engaging young people in volunteering and it is to give them a sense of connection with the life cycle. So they are planting these plants and as they grow, these plants grow with them. We also have an urban forest strategy, which has a target of increasing the carbon – the urban forest canopy to 40 per cent. That is due for a review and we are likely going to increase that in light of recent climate science. We also have for a number of years been heavily involved in stormwater urban design, a sustainable urban water design process, which has meant that for all of our developments in the last 15 years have a constructed wetland process to naturally treat stormwater prior to entering our riverine systems. That is a growing area. There is more and more developments. We are all in a process of growth at the moment right around the state and the nation. And we are seeing more of those come online now.

We also have in place six gross water pollutant trucks that capture stormwater prior to going into the Goulburn and Broken rivers to pull out those large pollutants from the stormwater system. We are really fortunate to have the RiverConnect project, which is part funded by Greater Shepparton City Council but also the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority through primarily state government funds. This – we have been running this for 15 years. We are having our 15th anniversary – well, it was last year actually, but of course we could not celebrate, so we are looking to do something this year.

But this project really came about from a community desire to have all of the agencies at the table to manage our riverine eco systems, the rivers as well as the flood plains. we have traditionally had a – we have really turned our backs onto the rivers and that was really the key driver. How do we turn back? How do we face the rivers? How do we look after those rivers, and how do we do that in a collaborative fashion. So we have the structure of the – of the RiverConnect is that there is an implementation advisory committee and that has representatives from all of the managing agencies along with five community members and a number of other departments as well, including the Department of Education. And it is about connecting those faces to our community.

So we run a large number of environmental education programs both through the schools but also for the general public as well. That continues to increase every year and really reflects a desire out there in the community to understand our natural areas and the biodiversity, the threats and what they can do to reverse that.

Okay, so just quickly looking at the causes of decline. Habitat loss is one of the big recognised causes of decline. From a local government perspective, we are the responsible authority under the Victorian Planning Provisions to implement the guidelines for the removal of native vegetation. The overarching objective of both the state planning policy framework but also Victoria's – protecting Victoria's environment biodiversity 2037 is to have no net loss. Quite clearly, we are seeing net loss in our municipality and in our regional – in our neighbouring municipalities. That loss is being – the reason for that loss is – and I invite questions about this – but there are many reasons why we are having a net loss. So I will leave that there.

The other thing to note on the VPP is the three-step approach we have to avoid, minimise and offset. It provides an assumption that native vegetation will receive approval to be removed and offsetting is the third step. To have offsetting as one of those overarching approaches is incorrect and we would – that is one of the recommendations we would like to see go forward. The losses that we are seeing are on private land and the biodiversity value of those losses are significant for us.

One of the flaws we see in the planning scheme is that since the review into the framework and the adoption of the new guidelines, biodiversity is valued across the state. And I understand the reason for that but it does not apply to our situation. To consider that the biodiversity loss in our region compared to a very intact ecosystem

in another part of the state is not an equal footing. The biodiversity that we have here we feel should be valued in a very different way to the way the scheme applies it. For most of our area, it is in the low pathway, which means it is much easier for – it is much more difficult for planners to decline a permit to remove native vegetation.

Another issue that we are facing around the VPP is illegal removals and exemptions. So on average, Greater Shepparton City Council is notified of between 12 and 15 illegal removals per year and we know that there is many more going on out there that we are not notified of. Under the current regime, the incentive is to go down that path, financial incentive, is to go down that path. So as an example, an average permit fee is \$1200 to apply for a native vegetation removal permit. And then there are offsets on top of that and the value of the offsets vary according to the amount of native vegetation that is lost. In comparison, an infringement notice for an individual is \$826 and for a company it is \$1600.

So the incentive very clearly is for people who are of that - is to remove native vegetation illegally financially. The infringement does not go down – it is not a criminal record so there is no record of that infringement. The other area is exemptions. There is no requirement. The application or exemption can be done by anybody. So they may or may not jump onto the DELWP website or have a look at the guidelines around exemptions. But the application of that exemption, there is no requirement for them to come to the responsible authority and seek advice on whether that exemption applies. For that exemption to apply, it must have the avoid minimise principles considered. There is absolutely no way we can track this. There is no way to track how much loss we are experiencing under exemptions.

Another exemption of concern for us is the 4,000 metre square exemption for native vegetation removal. So on a development - urban residential development space – if you are dividing up land of 4,000 metres square or less, you do not require an exemption to – you do not require a permit to remove native vegetation. So there is an exemption that applies there. This is a really significant area of land, it is around an acre. It is a big bit of land to put a house and a shed and a driveway and design can allow for those trees to remain but because that exemption applies, we are losing significantly large trees. And these trees are our habitat trees, which are crucial for biodiversity in our area.

The other major area that I would like to just raise, and I know you all went out on Country yesterday and experienced the burn – the cultural burn with the Yorta Yorta community members. And they spoke so eloquently about traditional land management practices. We see this is a major cause of habitat loss. The removal of traditional management practices from Country is a major source of biodiversity loss and continues to be. And we think it will increase until that management is put back onto Country.

Water extraction is another area where – that is contributing to biodiversity decline in our area. So I know that there is some work going on through the Department of Environment Land Water and Planning on intervalley transfers both on the transfer rules and operational rules and we welcome that and we will be providing submission into that. But the loss of overland flows through our flood plains is really significant. We – while we welcome the investment into water efficiency and the return of that water back to the environment, how that water is applied back into the environment is really critical if we are really going to be serious about biodiversity decline.

As I mentioned before, most of our biodiversity's and our riparian areas and the sandhills that you visited yesterday are right smack bang in the middle of a probably one of the wider sections within the Shepparton municipal area. And the surrounding Red Gum Country, again, Victor and Michael spoke really eloquently about the decline in that. Putting water back into that Country is absolutely critical.

There is also the conflict and policy that I would like to raise with you around the water efficiencies. So we very much welcome those policies around increasing efficiency particularly on farm but for all users of water. But it has created a conflict in biodiversity protection. What we are seeing locally is that water efficiency are leading to a mechanised form of irrigation and that includes pivot irrigators and lateral irrigation. Those pivot irrigators conflict with scattered remnant vegetation.

Those trees are really important frameworks for the biodiversity that remains in our shire. Up to – there has been some studies, those trees act as really important stepping stones for fauna to move through the landscape. They provide really critical habitat for a number of mammals, lizards and insects. And as we are increasingly losing those, that biodiversity loss – and I will bring it back to the state, concept of biodiversity value is

significant for us because we do not have that framework around us, that strong large areas of good intake native vegetation. So the impact of that loss while the value from a state perspective is minimal, locally it is highly significant. So one of the things I would like to talk about is how do we address that. How do we bring it back to a regional approach.

Pests, plants and animals are another great concern for us in a role that Greater Shepparton place a – has a role to play in this. And it is both a cause and a result of biodiversity loss. Conversations I have been having with land holders both within Greater Shepparton – I live close to the Murray River and my local community is that in the 80s the Lands Department was – there was a restructure and Lands Department was removed and land officers were taken off land. So we lost some really integral resources and, again, anecdotal evidence suggests that since that happened, weed spread has greatly increased. That is a really significant gap, I think, in the way that we are trying to holistically and as a collaboration deal with these issues.

Cats are a really highly significant impact on our wildlife. There has been a number of reviews. There has been a lot of media and information out there about that. Something we are very much struggling with here. Our development – we have significant development and a lot of that development is happening adjacent to natural areas and the impact both on feral animals but also domestic animals, that interface is really causing some significant issues for the remaining biodiversity that remains in those areas.

To roadsides, this is an area where Greater Shepparton has a very significant role to play so the changes from the (indistinct) and the Road Management Act, there was a review, there was conflicting legislative requirements under those two Acts. There was a review and some very clear directions giving around road managers, meaning that local governments are now responsible for weed and pest control on roadsides, along with all road managers.

Greater Shepparton, we have over three and a half thousand kilometres of road, about a third of them is sealed, two-thirds are unsealed. It is a significant road network. The funding that is being provided for the roadside weed and pest control plan has been really important. That was implemented as those changes came into place as a way of supporting local government to enact those obligations. We strongly recommend that that continues into the future. We have had – because of the funding constraints, we have focused on our high and very high biodiversity roadsides. And that funding has had really good impacts on the biodiversity of those roadsides, particularly from a weed perspective. It does not really help us out with our medium and low biodiversity value roadsides.

Our capacity to respond to emerging threats in a way is related to our roadsides. We know that weeds just love a roadside. It is one of their main dispersal avenues. So just back onto talking about the management of roadsides, we really do need some cohesions and collaboration between all road managers. What we have found that in areas where we have focused - along with our conservation roadsides - we also focus control on species such as (Indistinct) grass. It has an agricultural economic impact for particularly sheep graziers.

We focused our control in those areas. But a lot of those roads join up to – come up to meet regional roads, Victoria roads, so state roads. And we are seeing that the effort that is been put into controlling those species on regional roads, so on council managed roads, is not met from a state perspective. So we really do need to find a way to collaboratively approach this, otherwise we are just going to continue putting pesticides out there – weedicides out there - into the environment without any real long term benefit.

Indian mynas is another example I would like to just talk quickly about in terms of pest animals. Rabbits and foxes and feral cats are a significant issue, but Indian mynas is a really good example of an emerging threat that we identified about 10 years ago. There is no one agency responsible for the containment of those types of threats. So what we have seen in the last 10 years is those birds come into our municipality and they have now used the roadsides to move up into other areas where there were no Indian mynas in the past. The impact of those birds are that they are hollow nesting so they aggressively outcompete native species. Hollow nesting opportunities in our environment are very scarce and becoming more and more scarce from some of the things I have talked about before. This is a really significant biodiversity issue.

So I have mentioned climate change and the lens that we apply here but quite clearly the impacts of climate change are here right now and it will only continue to increase into the future. And those threats to biodiversity will continue to increase. The summer of 2020 bushfires, I think, and the conditions – the weather conditions - prior leading up to that really was a bit of a red flag, I think, to most of us just on what we are facing now and

what we will continue to face into the future. The fact that estimates of 3 billion animals were killed in that one event is truly confronting. And that is just animals without considering the flora that was destroyed in those events as well. So how do we manage that into the future.

The last thing I would just like to raise with you quickly is around community values. We do – I think to really have an impact on this, we need to fundamentally think about how we as a community and as a society value native vegetation and value our biodiversity. COVID has given us an opportunity to have a bit of a window into when our other freedoms are removed, how does that connection with the natural environment – it showed us that we were yearning for that.

Just locally for us, we have a number of shared path systems through between Shepparton and Mooroopna and along our riparian areas and they are expanding and the use of those continues to go up all the time and we put out monitors just to monitor usage at different times of the year. And what we found during particularly the lockdowns was that that usage doubled and tripled in use. So people were actively seeking access to those natural areas and to that connection to birds, to wildlife and to our nature.

So we know that the desire is there, but that fundamental shift is very much integral. RiverConnect works towards that. We are very lucky that we have access to that program but we are probably one of the very few local governments in the whole state to. And we see through that an intense and a growing interest in expanding that knowledge, that understanding, and that capacity to care. People want to know what can we do and they really take every opportunity to get involved. I will leave it there. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much. All right, we will throw open to questions. Mr Hayes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yeah, thanks very much Sharon. Couple of things. Something that really struck me about what you were talking about is the VPP, which is Victorian Planning Provisions under the Planning and Environment Act. I just wonder how do you believe biodiversity is addressed in the VPP and I just – yeah, I will ask you that first and then I will follow it up with something on that same subject.

MS TERRY: I think there is an overarching intent to consider biodiversity, but in reality, the policy is very much geared towards development, both urban development and agricultural development. So I think there is some work that we can do around the policies and how to reach a more balanced motivation for applying the planning scheme.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay, yes. Under the intentions of the Act, it talks about equal consideration being given to social, economic and environmental issues. But you think that it would be helpful to raise environment as a overarching principle in the VPP?

MS TERRY: Absolutely. I think planners need very clear guidance on how they apply the scheme to their decision making. At this point, environment in practical terms, in terms of the guidelines and the supporting material that comes along, it does not feature strongly at all. So the decision making really does come down to broadly economic growth. How do we assist development.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes. Talking about roadside management, do you see any use in involving Indigenous management on roadsides?

MS TERRY: Absolutely. I think having an opportunity to be exposed to the knowledge and the techniques yesterday at the Sandhills, it really did give me a very clear understanding of the way that that knowledge and those techniques can be applied to council managed land generally. Just on that though, I think that the message was very clear and we would concur that that knowledge must be used by the Traditional Owners. I do not feel that it is appropriate that we take that on as a management tool.

But for all the reasons that were discussed yesterday, such as the ability of those burning techniques to manage weeds and to manage pests, to manage the fuel load. So a lot of our low and medium conservation roadsides are infested with primarily agricultural weeds. So things that are very – so they tend to come from Africa. So very resilient plants. Really well adapted to our climate and they will probably persist really well and adapt really well into future climate. But very dense bushy heavily fuelled plants, such as *paspalum* and *Phalaris*. It is a management nightmare for Greater Shepparton and I am sure it is for our regional councils as well. But being able to be smart about burning back into those environments, I think is a very smart way to go. It will – it

clearly reduces cost around weedicide, slashing, labour and is a much kinder form of treatment than what we are employing right now, which we are not doing well, if I am honest.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes. Not doing well, yeah exactly. And one other thing. Just quickly. On irrigation and the use of the sprays and things like that, would you think that it'd be reasonable to ask that all irrigation should be dripped irrigation these days?

MS TERRY: I think there is a really strong role to play in certain areas for drip irrigation. I think that that method of irrigation would allow the co-existence of some of those biodiversity values that we mentioned before in terms of scattered trees in particular.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Bach.

DR BACH: Thank you, Chair. And thanks, Ms Terry, for coming and being with us. I was fascinated to read about the council's tree planting program you spoke about just briefly in your very comprehensive presentation. I would like to invite you to speak about it a little more. I thought it was really interesting that you talked about the impact upon volunteering, educational impact on young people. I would not mind hearing from you too simply about what you feel the benefit is of programs like this for broader biodiversity.

MS TERRY: Okay. So I will start with the last one first. So habitat loss is quite clearly one of the big drivers of biodiversity decline and its ability to adapt into the future. We know that by putting that vegetation back into the landscape, we provide habitat, we provide food, we provide shelter, we provide soil health for biodiversity. It increases biodiversity. Revegetation increases biodiversity. And as that revegetation matures, different levels of – different species are able to make use of those – of that one patch of vegetation.

For example, we know that there are some woodland that like a recovering forest or ecosystem. So summer birds will come in and they will just love that growing and I have seen this at my own place in my own revegetation. But as those plants mature and the canopy levels change and then becomes in structure, other birds come in. Those birds move out and they rely on other re-vegetating areas to come back in.

That life cycle is something that only a few of us have access to, and it is those of us who read science papers, or who have had some tertiary education. That is why we know this information. The community have continued to show real interest and fascination in this. There is 60,000 years of knowledge out there; we have 200 years. We are still trying to learn about this, so we are investing in science, we are investing in our tertiary educations, to understand that. But we are ignoring that 60,000 years of knowledge. So we are constantly chasing our tails, and we are making significant mistakes along the way.

But that knowledge exists, and we know that the community are really interested in this. And with knowledge comes understanding, and compassion and empathy, and them wanting to change, wanting to be a part of that. So we see this on all of our RooConnect activities, and in other activities that Greater Shepparton do as well. The media response we have to all of those types of activities is really intense, and it is probably from a local government perspective, it is one of the areas where we do get regular interest in the projects that we are doing. So the media are interested in getting this story out to the public, because they know the public are interested in this.

In terms of for young people, for children being involved in this, and for their families as well, because we hold family national tree day, large planting days. People love coming to it, parents understand the value of this for their children. Being able to plant something and grow something is fairly inherent in all of us. We all want to see – you want to be able to do something, and then see the results after it. And you can see that really clearly with vegetation, whether it be a veggie patch or a fruit orchard or native veg. So that link back to the cycle of life I think is something that is really important. And I think these newer generations are more and more aware of that.

In terms of volunteering, we know that volunteering is declining, and the majority of volunteers are aging, so there is a real gap there for probably my generation and a bit younger – quite a bit younger – around, what does volunteering mean? We have this perception we have a very busy life. And we do have busy lives, but that connection back to community, and back to actually being able to do something and contribute to the place that

we live in, whether it be helping people or helping environment, which if you are involved in the environment you are helping people.

This is a real tangible way that people can get out, it is a morning, it is about three or four hours but it has a lasting legacy that they can continue to go back and visit and see these things grow, see birds and butterflies and insects come in. And we hear stories of people continuously going back to those areas; they make the effort to get into contact with us and tell us about this.

So, and I would just like to say, too, that during Covid, where we were not able to have those community days, planting days, the community were probably more engaged in some ways than they ever were before. The amount of positive feedback we had of people being able to go to those sites where we had done plantings in the past, comment on their health, on their growth, comment on the birds – it was the most feedback we had ever received. So again, the connection was really obvious to us.

DR BACH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: I would like to just ask a question. Just a follow up on the Tree Per Child. So I guess the question is, two aspects to it. How did you involve the local First Nations people in that project, and then also once – because you just talked about the community involvement, and volunteering and all those sorts of things. So is there a follow up then, once trees are planted, or whether it is a tree or other plant or a shrub or whatever, is there some follow-up to make sure that it does not die, or how things are looked after and that sort of thing? And how do you also ensure that those plants are the right plants for that right landscape and right country? Can you talk a bit about that.

MS TERRY: Okay, so I will start last first. So that just requires local knowledge. So we again are really lucky to have a small team of environment officers, or environment team at Greater Shepparton, and their knowledge of all about our local environment. But we also rely on our relationship with the Goulburn-Broken Catchment Management Authority, who we partner with them to produce booklets and pamphlets around native vegetation, around birds, reptiles, that kind of thing. So it is local knowledge, basically.

In terms of engaging First Nations, we have a couple of small plantings just with Yorta Yorta nations, but we are looking to expand that into the future, particularly with the sand hills. So our relationship with Yorta Yorta nations is one that is continuing to develop and to grow, and we are really excited about where that might go. And there was another question there, I am sorry, Chair, about volunteering.

The CHAIR: Oh just when they are planted, is there a follow-up and do you make sure that they are nurtured. Because there will be some plants that die, of course.

MS TERRY: Indeed, yes. We have about a 82 per cent success rate, and that is because of follow-up for those plants. So our planting season now – because of the volume of plants – our planting season now runs from the start of April until, depending on weather conditions, but generally end of September, middle of October, depending on conditions. So as soon as the planting season is finished, we have a staff member whose sole job description is to go and care for the plants.

So they get a watering for the first summer, because they are indigenous, the seed is sourced locally and they are grown locally, and they are hardened fairly – in a challenging environment. Which is great, because we want strong stock that we are putting into the ground. So after that first summer of watering, they should be right to just manage the natural conditions on their own. So, and that also includes – because a lot of our plantings are in an urban environment, so it will be on some form of public open space. And so people are visiting those plantings on a regular basis. So we do weed control around them, we slash and we whipper-snip, we just make sure that it is safe for people to visit those. And of course we go back and take the guards off and remove anything dead, that sort of thing. So we invest in that.

The CHAIR: Okay, great, thank you. Ms Bath?

MS BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much, Ms Terry, you can see a great passion and understanding in your role, so thank you for your good, amazing work that you are doing. I am interested in riparian areas and river frontage. I am interested to understand how many kilometres, if you have got it off the top of your head, would Shepparton Council have, or to be responsible for that land?

MS TERRY: That is a good question, and I do not have those figures I am sorry. But it is not insignificant. And that is a challenge for us, because while we responsible for a certain amount of river frontage, we also have other land managers downstream of us. So again, that collaboration is really important. So we might do some weed control on our particular area, but it is really relevant. The next flood that comes through, those weeds that are all the way upstream all come down and recolonise the area that we manage. So, there is some work to do around a more collaborative approach to weed and pest control in riparian areas, for sure.

MS BATH: Thank you. And do you have caravan parks and camping along those areas that you manage as council?

MS TERRY: No. We do - at the Victoria Park Lake, just across the road there is the caravan park—

MS BATH: I have done the lap a couple of times.

MS TERRY: Have you?

MS BATH: Yes.

MS TERRY: It is an asset we are really proud of. And again, formed on those natural wetland system – treatment systems. So there is a catchment right where we are, stormwater goes directly into the wetland. And all the plants are locally sourced. There is over a quarter of a million of plants went into that entire development, all indigenous plants. So a really successful – and again, a really good example of the community connecting with that.

So, when I first started council 12 years ago, my first job was actually to do that planting down there. So I have heard people were initially quite concerned about what we were doing. But since it has been completed, and the public are accessing it the way they are, I have not heard of one negative response on what we have done down there. So, and the interaction, the public space that is provided for the community is diverse, and it is highly utilised, as you will see.

MS BATH: Yes. But no camping directly on the river frontage?

MS TERRY: No.

MS BATH: Okay.

MS TERRY: Not on council managed land, no.

MS BATH: Okay, thank you. I raise this because, as members of this committee will know, the government is opening up camping on licensed river frontages, and I think that there needs to be a strong balance on this, because there is a number of groups, and farmers being one of them, quite confused about that interface, and the loss of biodiversity. I know you talked about biodiversity on private land. So I think there needs to be a sincere management of that, in the favour of all, not in the loss.

MS TERRY: So I would like to comment on that a little bit more, actually. So we are seeing camping, a significant amount of camping happening in our riparian area, in the urban zone. And that is creating significant issues around safety for the rest of the community, and rubbish is an enormous issue. We are – the amount of times that between Parks Victoria and council, jointly, go and clean up the river banks from the waste that is just tipped over the bank. The people who are camping do not see it, but if you are walking on shared paths on this side of the river, you see very clearly. And it is mattresses, it is tents, it is chairs, it is not bits of paper, it is a significant waste issue.

That – yes, there is, it really is affecting biodiversity now, and if it is done in a controlled way it will continue to do that. The other thing I would like to make note is that locally our Parks Victoria staff are very passionate. We work really closely with them, they are representative on the RiverConnect implementation advisory committee. They are very constrained by resources. The recommendations from the River Red Gum VEAC report, and the subsequent once a (indistinct) changed. The recommendations really need to be implemented from those reports, and while we very much welcome the committee's access into those areas, resourcing needs to be provided to ensure that that is safe, it is controlled. The amount of tracks that are open through that tiny

little bit of bush is really causing some significant issues. I do not know if you saw yesterday, just down behind one of the sandhills there is a huge dump of rubbish.

MS BATH: I did see that.

MS TERRY: Yes. So that takes much time and money for us to go and collect that, on a regular basis. And so, accessing those smaller riparian areas is really critical, that we really do need to deal with from a state and local level.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are running out of time, but I know Dr Ratnam, you may wish to ask your question and then get an answer on notice, so over to you.

DR RATNAM: Certainly. Thank you so much for your submission today, Ms Terry, it is really important, and a real area that we had not heard a lot from. So I will send you a number of questions if that is okay, following this. But the main gist of my questions that I want to ask you are about the interaction between local government and state government agencies in the protection of biodiversity. You alluded to it in a couple of instances in terms of some regulations and laws and who is planning authorities in what case. But I would really like to get a bit more of an understanding of how that works in practice. What is working well, but what other areas do we need to look at in terms of improving as well. We have heard from other witnesses about the need for more overall co-ordination state wide, and I would really like to know what the role of the government is, currently, and how we can improve kind of the co-ordination and roll-out of the biodiversity protection. So I am happy to submit a number of questions on notice, if that is okay?

MS TERRY: Thank you, Dr Ratnam. So, there are a number of ways to my answer for this. It really comes back to the design of the guidelines around the protection of native vegetation. We – local governments are the responsible authority, and applications may trigger referral to DELWP, to staff. It is required to move from council planning offices to DELWP planning offices. It is whether that application then goes to the biodiversity team within DELWP – it may or may not happen.

The importance of bringing in subject matter experts, both within local government – and this is one of the recommendations I would like to see happen, is a requirement for environmental experts to be referred to when considering an application to remove native vegetation. In Greater Shepparton, we have a relationship – we have a team, and we have a relationship to support our planning department. Not many local governments do that, or have the capacity to do that.

The same applies within DELWP. The fact that biodiversity is valued across the state, rather than on a regional scale, means that local DELWP biodiversity staff are constrained around responses that they can provide to council to apply appropriate decision making on whether an application should be approved or not. And what I am getting at there is that if we just follow the scheme, and the clauses – and it comes back to the policy, the underlying of the policy of the scheme – is that the decision is in favour of development, whether it be agricultural development or urban development.

So, there is constraint, there is – in terms of Greater Shepparton's relationship with DELWP, we have a very strong relationship with the biodiversity team based in Wangaratta, and the planning team have a strong relationship to the strategic planning team with DELWP in Seymour. There is a geographical distance there, Seymour to Wangaratta. And while Zoom and phone calls are fantastic, it is nothing like being able to jump up from a desk, go and talk to a colleague and say hey, this is what we have got, what are your thoughts. It just provides a completely different conversation. So I think there is a bit of work to do there, to really significantly consider biodiversity in the scheme.

DR RATNAM: Thanks, Ms Terry, that is really helpful as a starting point. I might send a few more questions on notice, if that is okay to ask that?

MS TERRY: Yes.

DR RATNAM: Thank you so much.

MS TERRY: That is fine.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. We have run out of time again. This is our common theme for today, running out of time. But yes, thank you so much for your presentation in relation to today. And so we can declare this session closed. Thank you.

MS TERRY: Thank you again for the opportunity.

DR BACH: Thanks a lot.

MS TERRY: I appreciate it.

DR BACH: Thanks a lot.

Committee adjourned.