

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 11 May 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

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Mrs Beverley McArthur

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WITNESSES

Ms Emma Germano, President (*in person*), and

Ms Lisa Gervasoni, Senior Stakeholder Policy and Advocacy Adviser, Land Management and Planning (*via videoconference*), Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR: 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 various lands which each of us is 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 watching these proceedings via the live broadcast.

At this point I will take the opportunity to introduce committee members to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Mr Clifford Hayes is the Deputy Chair. Joining us via Zoom are Ms Nina Taylor, Dr Samantha Ratnam and Mr Stuart Grimley. I am just not sure whether Dr Matthew Bach is with us at the moment—no, not yet; he might join us later on. Back in the room, we have Mr Andy Meddick and Ms Melina Bath.

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. 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. Could I just get you to please state your name and the organisation you are representing for the Hansard record.

Ms GERMANO: Yes. I am Emma Germano, and I am representing the Victorian Farmers Federation.

The CHAIR: And?

Ms GERMANO: And joining me is our senior Land Management and Planning adviser, Lisa Gervasoni.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much. And with that, we will hand over to you both now to give your opening remarks. If you could, please just keep them to about 5 or 10 minutes, and I will give you a 2-minute warning as well.

Ms GERMANO: No problem. Thanks very much for having us here today. The subject of this inquiry is one of real importance to Victorian farmers, and one where Victorian farmers are uniquely capable of having a very significant impact. The VFF believes that currently the regulatory system in Victoria is negatively impacting ecosystem decline, and we are very frustrated by this fact and we are frustrated that our advice continues to be ignored by the bureaucracy.

For a time, Victoria went through a golden era, if you will, of partnership between government and farmers as a result of the Landcare movement. Through this partnership public and private investment went into solving the salinity crisis in northern Victoria, the planting of shelterbelts and the fencing and revegetation of our waterways to the benefit of both the environment and to agricultural production. The existing regulatory system and programs, including Landcare, have crept far towards the benefit of solely the environment through the top-down approach, and this has been to the detriment of landholder participation and, we believe, environmental outcomes. Farmers and Landcare groups get really frustrated by the focus on loss since European settlement. Ecosystem loss on farming land is often attributed to agriculture. This is despite government requirements to clear sites upon alienation from the Crown that were in place until the 1980s. Absolutely we have collectively

gotten it wrong. But blame placing is not helping to right past wrongs; it is only disempowering those who are in the best position to improve ecosystems on private land—the landholders.

I would like to take some time to just touch on some of the perverse outcomes of existing regulatory arrangements—for example, native vegetation regulations. Projects in the 1990s to control dryland salinity in northern Victoria involved the planting of native plantations. Native plantations are the most effective at lowering the watertable in their first 10 years, and after 30 years the benefit basically ceases. In the 30 years since the establishment of these plantations Victoria has introduced native vegetation regulations that prevent their lopping, even for regeneration to improve salinity control, and because there was no need at the time, they were not registered as plantations.

These same regulations are also preventing many farmers from adopting new technologies that reduce chemical and fossil fuel usage and increase soil carbon, such as GPS and controlled trafficking. Many of these farmers want to be able to remove a small number of isolated paddock trees that are degrading over time but are happy to plant new trees and protect existing trees in exchange, linking biodiversity hotspots on their farm. Native vegetation regulations are also encouraging some landholders to revegetate with introduced species that can be more readily managed and modified. I think this is a sad, perverse outcome that demonstrates to me that we have got the system wrong.

The proposed rules to allow camping on our licensed river frontages—farmers are seeing decades of stewardship of riparian lands being threatened through regulation to promote long-term occupation of sensitive land for recreational camping, including the ability to collect firewood in these areas, and that is at odds with the native vegetation regulations. In addition, these changes not only threaten landholders' environmental programs but so too their safety and productivity. This legislative change has severely damaged the landcare partnership between landholders and government.

Crown land management could be far better. Private landholders who abut public land will tell you of their incredible frustration dealing with the incursion of pest plants and animals from public land onto private land. Public land managers simply are not doing enough to manage pest plant and animal species on public land. This includes local councils and VicRoads on roadsides and Parks Victoria and DELWP in our parks. As long as the government imposes regulatory burdens on private landholders while not meeting its own management obligations in regard to these invasive species, decline will always be inevitable. Not only is a system that places expectation of management on private land that is not occurring on Crown land inherently unfair, it is also destined to fail. Decades of underinvestment in private sector stewardship coupled with a failure to manage pest plants and animals on Crown land has exacerbated decline and led to a scenario where rectification is extremely costly and difficult to achieve. For government to successfully reverse ecosystem decline it is critical that landholders are supported to identify the actions that they want to address in a way that works for them and their business.

In conclusion, landholders are often blamed for ecosystem decline, yet it is the state that is allowing high-intensity recreation to occur on our sensitive river frontages, it is the state that will not change the classification of deer despite their skyrocketing numbers and destructive impact and it is the state that is imposing regulations on farmers that discourage investment in increasing biodiversity on their farms, just to highlight a few examples. The farmers and the VFF stand ready to improve biodiversity on farm and restore our ecosystems, but we need to be provided with the regulatory toolbox and support to do so. I am more than happy to take your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath, over to you.

Ms BATH: Thank you. You have touched on a number of things that I am interested in or concerned about—via my constituents too—Emma. Camping regulations: this is a whole big discussion, and I will make an assumption that you are right across it and that some of our committee are really across it as well—28 days camping on grazing licences, biosecurity risks, animal welfare risks. But for this committee it is all about degradation of the river frontage. The regulations have been out for consultation and they have finished, and I know there are calls to continue consultation. The government has to get this right or it could go terribly wrong. Could you unpack some of your solutions that the VFF think need to happen?

Ms GERMANO: Just to start with, we think that a 28-day time limit is completely inappropriate. That is more than setting up camp. We believe that that is more than what the recreational camper or a family would find necessary to go camping. We are quite worried that that could potentially turn into squat-style camping for

people who are at risk of homelessness. And we also believe that there has to be a really strong registration system to ensure that where there is a need for compliance and enforcement we actually have an adequate tool to be able to do so. The notion of being able to call 13FISH, or whatever the thing is, when there are stray bullets flying across your property and dogs potentially upsetting your livestock and decoupling ewes and lambs and cows and calves—maybe if you make that phone call at 2.00 am you are not going to get a very quick response—

Ms BATH: That is if you have got reception.

Ms GERMANO: And that is if you have got reception, which is a whole other issue. But what we are concerned about is that we have to pertain to really strict rules, even when it comes to our QA system. So on the weekend I had my Freshcare certification, I had my audit, and there are such strong rules around the movement of livestock and E. coli and coliform levels in the water that you are using for irrigation or post-harvest washing and things like that, but we are now potentially allowing campers into these sensitive areas—not just for the sake of the ecosystem but even for food safety—and expecting that they will adequately dispose of their own human faecal matter. How that is going to go is interesting to all of us. And we are talking about the ecosystem here, so I guess the boundary that might not necessarily be prevalent between your farm and where the riparian area is kind of becomes a bit of a moot point. And we have got such stringent requirements when it comes to removing native vegetation as farmers and growers and land stewards; they will not apply to campers who potentially can be lopping trees to start a fire at their camp site. So they are some of the issues that we see. We think that there should be dedicated camping areas that restrict access to those isolated or sensitive areas, ensuring that people cannot just drive their four-wheel drives over potentially seedlings that are growing, sensitive grasses and things like that. We would like to see that vehicle access is completely out of bounds, and that includes motorbikes.

Lisa, did you have anything to add to that one?

Ms GERVASONI: Yes. I will just make a brief comment, especially around the 28 days, which I know you might sort of see as a side issue. But 28 days compared to someone at the moment walking through maybe for an hour is a lot more intense an occupation. So you have carrying capacity issues and damage issues that you will not have with a more transient level of visitation, including things like camp fires and, you know, half a cubic metre of firewood per day, in areas that often do not have a lot of vegetation or where it is not a simple matter to actually collect firewood.

Ms BATH: So I guess a follow-up question—and I would love to talk more about vegetation clearing; maybe someone else will bring that up or I can put it on the record with some questions—can the VFF put forward a paper? You have mentioned some things there. Can you put forward something that we can look at—take it on notice and put forward your recommendations, I guess, to this committee in relation to camping on river frontages?

Ms GERMANO: Absolutely, and that would echo the submission that we have made to the regulations. We are also very concerned that it has to be a very genuine review period—it cannot be something that is a review period that is actually a fait accompli—to ensure that some of these negative outcomes or perverse outcomes that we are anticipating can be rectified in the event where we are seeing a large number of those. But we are hoping that the government will continue to consult meaningfully with the people who are actually the people who have been responsible for this land for some time, and we take that responsibility very seriously. The licenses that we have in order to have that Crown land and those river frontages come with a whole bunch of responsibilities. Campers, who will be allowed into that land, will be sharing in those responsibilities.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thanks very much. I am very concerned about ecosystem decline, especially along the riverfronts, as you have mentioned, and I actively opposed that from going through Parliament. Unfortunately it has gone through and now we have got to make the best of it. Anyway, I am looking forward to reading what your recommendations are on it, but I do think that it is very important to our state, the work that farmers do in preserving our habitat and stopping species decline. I was interested in the presentation by Landcare before you today, and I am just wondering: how do you see what is provided by Landcare organisations—how could that be enhanced and made useful for farmers in protecting biodiversity and creating wildlife corridors and things like that?

Ms GERMANO: I think that, firstly, it is almost an attitudinal shift that is required here because it is often seen that it is the environment or the ecosystem versus farmers.

Mr HAYES: Absolutely.

Ms GERMANO: And whilst farmers definitely do not see themselves in that kind of dichotomy, there is an attitude that that is what exists. We have to acknowledge that farmers and farms are the ecosystem and are the environment and that the objectives and the outcomes should be ensuring that we balance the need for food security. Often when people are not hungry we can go very far in one direction, and that would all be well and good if it were not that we were seeing a continual decline in those ecosystems despite that prevailing attitude.

I will use my own farm as an example. We have a cauliflower crop—we always have a cauliflower crop—and we get tons and tons of little frogs on our cauliflowers and around our dam and our wetland area. I just took a photo of one sitting on a cauliflower and posted it on our page on social media. People often believe that the chemicals that we use are really, really harmful for the environment and harmful for human health, and so that was a demonstration that I put there that an amphibian with its skin and the sensitivity that it has to chemicals was living very happily amongst our crop. I posted that and then received a phone call very quickly from a student at Melbourne University who said he has been looking for green growling grass frogs for some time, that they are an endangered species and that they have been trying to find populations of these frogs and could he come out and monitor and see where our tadpoles are and do all of those things.

The CHAIR: So it was a growling grass frog?

Ms GERMANO: A growling grass frog, yes.

The CHAIR: There you go.

Ms GERMANO: It definitely was, and not only are they not in decline on our farm, they are actually completely thriving on our farm and they live very happily in the crop and we provide an environment that is suitable for something that is an endangered species. The risk of saying that too loudly is that the state or the bureaucracy can come along and say, ‘Well, hang on a minute, now we’ve got to protect that species. Here are the things that we’re going to impose upon your farm and your production methods in order to protect that species’, not acknowledging the fact that it is the very environment that the frog is living in that is allowing it to flourish. I do not need to be rewarded for that; the reward for me is seeing an endangered species living happily on my farm. But whilst we create rules and regulations that actually deter farmers from supporting those types of species or we start imposing a blanket set of rules that are top-down in their approach, we fail to acknowledge that each farm is its own ecosystem and that to create that ecosystem we balance our production in that system. The healthy farm is the one that actually makes you the most money. So I guess that, firstly, we have to stop not acknowledging farmers for the fact that they are stewards of the land that they are on and seeing it as a trade-off between environment and production, because it is just simply not the case, and it is also just not realistic.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Do you want to comment on Landcare at all?

Ms GERMANO: Would you like to comment on Landcare, Lisa? Because I do not want to speak on Landcare’s behalf, is what I am nervous about, and Lisa, you have probably got a bit more context with that one.

Ms GERVASONI: Look, it is always a difficult issue I suppose for VFF—as, you know, one of the parents of Landcare—that there is now an organisation that forwards those issues. But it is important to note that basically about 95 per cent, I think, was the last figure we had of farmers that were actually actively involved in landcare. What I am privileged to see when I get to go to many of our members’ farms—and the story you have just heard from Emma—you know, once they have checked me out a little bit they usually tend to show me their special places on the farm that they just go to the nth degree to care for and to protect and to improve. So I think part of that Landcare ethos was it was meant to be good for your farm and good for the environment and it was, ‘Let’s encourage and reward people for all of the good stewardship that they’re doing rather than trying to restrict the range of things that they are doing’. It is better to actually encourage good work rather than to try and regulate, which really just tends to try and stop you from doing things, so we can look more at regulations as a bare minimum and then encourage good behaviour and progress through things like Landcare.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks so much for your submission and your evidence today, and actually my question was around stewardship, so a good point to ask my question. You mentioned both here today and I think in your submission as well kind of your view that governments do not recognise environmental stewardship of farmers enough, and you can contrast that with, for example, somewhere like the United States, where they have got quite a well-established system of financially supporting farmers to restore native prairies. I think this program was established after the Depression and has flourished since. So I was interested in your views, taking on from where you just left off, about what you think the government could be doing more of to kind of help recognise the stewardship role and help expand the stewardship role. Do you have any ideas for what we could be doing more of that would result in greater biodiversity protection?

Ms GERMANO: Thanks for the question. I guess if we reduce it to the lowest common denominator for farmers who potentially are not intrinsically motivated to protect that area, a framework of financial remuneration for doing such activities is something that should not be off the table and in fact should be important. I guess government has to take a very holistic view of the environment. We often will put one environmental priority ahead of another. I will use the Murray-Darling Basin as an example of that. The crude metric of how much water goes back into the river is used as the environmental outcome, never mind if you flood small trees in a particular area or flush particular amounts of water down the river in the high heat of summer that has negative impacts on the fish or the aquatic life or other flora and fauna. We have to be able to acknowledge that the environment does not segment itself into different parts—that is, carbon emissions versus water usage, versus biodiversity and things becoming extinct. So there firstly has to be an acknowledgement of that and not crude metrics.

Secondly, like I said, it has got to be about that attitudinal shift. Another example that I will use from my own property, my own business and family, is that I have noted that we often acknowledge, the nation's First Peoples when we speak about land management. That sentiment is never something that is extended to the farmers, and I am not suggesting that it is a legacy or a connection that goes back quite as far in number of years, but the example that I will use from my property is that recently I have had a hair mineral analysis, which means you cut your hair off, you send it away and like a soil test that we would do on a farm they do for a person and it shows you what things are in and out of balance and whatever else. I did it, and I have had some good health outcomes from that. So Dad says, 'Righto, I'm going to do the same thing and see if I can't sort out this itchy rash that I always get on my hands when I touch this particular type of grass'. His results came back, and they mirrored exactly the soil test results that we have on our farm. So farmers actually become living, breathing parts of their farm. I mean, he eats a lot of stuff off our farm, but what he eats is secondary to that immersion in soil and environment on our farm, and I just think that if we could acknowledge that custodianship and that stewardship in a manner that is maybe not to the same spiritual level of the First Nations people but an understanding that farmers really care about that land and rewarding them, rather than, as Lisa said, coming up with a bunch of rules that sometimes are arbitrary that we have to follow. So I think first and foremost would be the attitude, and it is incumbent upon us as farmers to extend those stories and make sure that the community understand that is the way we feel about our land and make the community understand that when we create monocultures and we do not rotate our crops properly and we do not utilise both livestock and crops in good balance with each other we end up having productivity issues and it costs us money, so it is in the farmer's best interests at all times to take care of that environment. So programs that acknowledge support of land care and ensuring that we do not see election commitments, I suppose, that essentially pit the public against farmers, such as the camping legislation that has come through, I think is really important.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you both for your submission and for attending today. I just want to unpack something that was in your submission, but first of all I want to say thank you very much for your cauliflower crop—I am a big fan of vegetable crops—and for providing that habitat for the growling grass frog.

Ms GERMANO: Win-win.

Mr MEDDICK: Yes. Look, you spoke about in your submission that, and I'm quoting here:

If habitat was valued in the market then farmers would want to fence off clusters of trees and allow regeneration as this would in itself earn an income stream.

I want to unpack that a little bit further than that. I want to understand a bit more about how habitat can be better valued to facilitate those things, but in tandem with the question of how farmers can then be incentivised, because you have spoken about that. What does that actually look like? Have you gone down the path as far as saying, 'Well, let's put an actual dollar value on X' and creating a formula where it says, 'Well if, say, river red gums are inherent to that particular area, you will replant X and what does that look like in terms of remuneration'? Is there a formula that you have worked out for that?

Ms GERMANO: I am going to throw to Lisa actually, but I guess that framework has to be something we adopt nationally. Things like a carbon price are important. We want to be part of those zero net emissions targets. We have got to, as an industry, be able to make our way there with our own understanding of our industry and those R and D dollars that we pour into those sorts of things. I suppose it is a public good and it is something that everybody in Australia wants to be part of, and so in some cases it would be really easy to say, 'Well, just do the works, take off a couple of acres, work out what the production value would be and then increase the cost of your goods by that amount' and then the market actually pays for it already. But unfortunately that does not quite exist, so whilst there are schemes, you have got to be able to demonstrate the value and find a customer who values that. So, again, things like a carbon price would be helpful.

We also really need tools in order to benchmark. I have just bought a block of land off my aunty that is next door and there is a creek corridor through there. And I am thinking, 'Okay, I'm going to turn most of that back into native vegetation, but I want to ensure that it is a species that is local to the area otherwise it is a bit of a moot point'. I mean, it is a good thing, but it is not as great as it could be. And I looked at it and I thought to myself, 'I really need to ensure that I benchmark what the carbon emissions are of my farm, because I do not want to preclude myself, which sounds selfish, from the opportunity to receive incentives by just planting them, doing that because I believe that it is important—which I do anyway and I will plant them even if there is no money there, but if there is the opportunity for me to benchmark the amount of carbon emissions, do the activity, place a value on that land, those emissions and all those things then obviously what that does is strengthen the viability of my farm moving forward and encourages me to do more of that. But I will throw to Lisa with a case study as well.

Ms GERVASONI: Thanks, Emma. I am just going to give a really brief, high-level example of a property that is just outside of Horsham, on the Western Highway. It had not been actively farmed for a few years—you know, an elderly owner, sick—and it had a fair amount of regrowth and regeneration on it that would be of fantastic habitat value. It was on the market. No-one was prepared to buy it because you could not probably get a return on it. It was not able to be cropped because of the level of regrowth, grazing probably would not be overly viable there. Yet it is sitting there because even when you have got that native veg system with offsetting, the value of those trees is actually a lot lower than the biodiversity value that is put on them, so it is not viable for someone to buy it and create it like an offset and sell it on the market.

So there are some theoretical processes put in place, and native vegetation is basically designed around urban systems and urban development. So if you are in Horsham, where there is not a lot of major urban development going on, there is no market for that EVC even though it might be critically endangered. So the system under that set of regulations is not working, and sometimes we also find that some of the incentive systems out there have a lot of paperwork involved that is greater than the ability of the time that the farmers have but also a lot of them have this concept of additionality. So if you have done a great job for 60 years protecting a patch of forest, removing weeds, whatever else, the market goes, 'Oh, there's no value in that because you have already done a good job'. So it is perverse incentive—it is a disincentive really to do a good job, because if you let it degrade, you might get a payment to actually restore it.

At the moment the National Farmers Federation has an objective that farmers should be able to earn about 5 per cent of their income from payments for the ecosystem services they deliver for the community. And they are also working on a project at the moment about how you could actually look at some common benchmarks and objectives across a range of things so you have got a simpler form of paperwork that might be able to see you get potentially a carbon payment and a biodiversity payment, for example. So it is looking at how can we actually make those systems work in a practical sense for farming.

Mr MEDDICK: So as a quick question just to add onto that, when you are talking about the discrepancy in value there, would it be helpful in that sort of discussion to view those things that can have an intrinsic value rather than something that either appreciates or diminishes? So there is a recognition of a set value of something just because that is what it is, rather than saying, 'Well, there's a market value for this' or, 'There's not a market value for that'. Because that automatically, to my mind, would necessarily alter a value over a period of time.

Ms GERMANO: Potentially, but the risk is that—I mean, someone has got to pay for it. That is the reality. Someone has to pay for it. So it is either a farm owner that pays for it, it is the public that pays for it, it is the government that pays for it—someone has to pay for it. And ultimately when someone does not pay for it, usually the environment does.

Mr MEDDICK: Done. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Emma and Lisa, for your submission. I have no questions, Chair, so I might defer to my colleagues. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Okay. Now, I just cannot see who else is with us on the Zoom screen at the moment. Dr Bach, are you there? There you go. Dr Bach, over to you.

Dr BACH: Thank you, Chair. Just a couple of IT issues. Thanks so much, Emma, for your presentation. That has been fascinating. I have got a question about the native vegetation clearing regulations. I wonder if you might expand a little bit upon the comments that you have already made, in particular thinking about the impacts upon landowners, and then also how you see that the current system and these regulations could be improved.

Ms GERMANO: I will start that one. The notion, particularly around if you are going to revegetate, that you would instead use introduced species, for example, so you have got more options down the track—that is one of those perverse outcomes that we have seen. Now, the environment from a carbon sequestration perspective does not discriminate about, you know, which species is supposed to be planted where, but the koala that wants to climb up a tree does care about which species is planted where.

We have got a gum tree that is sitting out the back near our infrastructure area and we are actually about to build some new livestock races and whatever else. So we were about to put in this shed but we could not work out where it was going without removing a gum tree. And Dad said to me, ‘But that gum tree’s nearly dead. Who cares about that gum tree?’. And he says, ‘It’s got a giant great big hole in the middle of it’. And I said, ‘Well, that’s even worse because now it is a habitat tree’. Now, whether or not it is sequestering carbon and whether or not there are any koalas that can actually feel safe climbing over to that tree—or a possum, you know—because they have got to go through all this cleared paddock to get to it. I mean, the likelihood of it being used as a habitat tree is just about zero. The ability to remove that tree is something that is difficult. It is an onerous process to go through, and there is this justification that you have to make that you are not ruining the environment. So with the ability to offset that and remove it, there is that type of impact that means that I get to have my livestock in the right spot for their animal welfare and issues and things like that.

And then there is the notion of the controlled traffic that we were speaking about—so GPS tractors, controlled traffic—and ensuring that you are using less chemical, less fertiliser because you are able to utilise your GPS. Well, if you have got three trees in the middle of your paddock that undo that particular activity, we are not allowed to remove those trees and revegetate somewhere else necessarily, which is to the detriment of actually being able to utilise technology that has really great environmental impacts.

So I guess the problem with the native veg regs is just simply that they once again use a really crude metric, which is ‘Do not remove any trees’. And those particular trees are not necessarily sequestering much carbon anymore and replacing that tree with a number of other trees that are in a growth phase actually does really wonderful things to the environment. And that is just not really acknowledged. But Lisa I am sure has some more to add to that. She has got a real passion for the native veg rules and regs.

Ms GERVASONI: Look, one of the things that the Farmers Federation put forward during the native vegetation regulation review process is that we have had native veg regs for 30 years, a bit over 30, but for at least 20 years it is going, ‘Oh, it is not getting to gain, therefore we need to tighten them’.

Ms GERMANO: Yes.

Ms GERVASONI: But the perverse issue is that sometimes tightening means that you are actually less likely to get to gain, because trees are like humans—they have got a life cycle and if you want a healthy community, you need a range of ages in your community. At the moment we tend to be focusing on, let us

politely say, our senior citizens. We are not looking at, ‘Do we have enough people that are in child-rearing age groups?’ for example. So we need that same approach with trees and on a landscape scale.

So again, with native veg regs, a lot of what they have been designed about is widescale loss and rezoning for urban development. We call that permanent landscape change. Whereas with a farm system you have got, you know, the ability to be more strategic. Let us pick on the area between, say, the Grampians and the Little Desert. You have got quite a large landscape there, you need to provide some habitat linkages, there are some paddock trees where you might be able to protect and put in a clump and have some edge-of-paddock regeneration and planting that helps create those corridors, and if you do all that work and establish that work, then you might be able to clear some of the more problematic trees that have a lower habitat value.

So it is about actually, ‘Let’s be strategic. Let’s look at what we need to do to actually, in 50 or 100 or 150 years time, have a much healthier habitat’. And so, you know, it is ‘How can we actually plan for that?’ rather than putting all of our eggs in the planning system basket without understanding that planning controls can only stop you from doing something. So stopping you from doing something is never going to reverse decline; you need to actually actively manage. You know, we do not say that there should not be any form of regulation, but we need to actually make sure that we are not just focusing on one little tiny piece of the picture we are trying to achieve, that we actually look at all the things that we need to do to achieve that picture and actually make sure that it is a win for everyone: it is a win for the farmer and it is a win for the environment.

Dr BACH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Emma—my apologies for being a bit late, and congratulations on your presentation—and Lisa also. I would like you to comment on two aspects of government intervention into the environment and into the agricultural community. They would be the proposed dumping of PFAS-contaminated soil in the Bacchus Marsh area, which is adjacent to a very productive horticultural community—feeding Melbourne and beyond, effectively—and also the western Victorian transmission line, which will cause no end of difficulty for the environment as the proposed track is through the Myrmiong biolink, but also up into the potato farming area and other agricultural land. So this is government intervention which will potentially damage the environment, let alone the economy, and also the productive capacity of farmers.

Ms GERMANO: Yes, I think that you highlighted what I mentioned, which was what feels at times like gross hypocrisy and again the attitude that we have towards farming and agriculture—which, again, when have got plenty of food, it is easy to say that it is the farmers that ruin the environment.

It has also got to be said that what we do on our farms—and everybody has got to go back and really do their year 10 biology around what is the carbon cycle. So that production of potatoes, the production of pastures, what we are actually doing is just growing carbon. So again to the point where we could be incentivising that carbon sequestration not just for food production but for carbon emission reduction, it would be valuable. And then perhaps we would not look at tearing through agricultural land as being something that is just simply okay.

To the specific examples that you have given, and I will throw to Lisa shortly, that contaminated soil issue has been one that has created—hysteria is not the right word—real fear in those Bacchus Marsh growers. And we see it not just in Bacchus Marsh but we see it in other things where we put minerals or energy production or, you know, the need to dump some soil somewhere. We see those issues cropping up around Victoria all of the time. And again, not only is that bad for the environment but we are actually risking that food supply, which we seem to forget. So we will be very stringent or we will go out looking for organic production, but the government might happily dump some contaminated soil within a few hundred metres of vegetable and fruit farms there in that area. Lisa, did you want to add more specifically to that?

Ms GERVASONI: Thank you, Emma. Look, I think one of the things that is starting to become clearer to us is that a lot of people actually do not really quite understand agriculture. And I think a lot of decision-makers and project planners look at a farm and they see vacant land; they see something that is waiting for something better. And I think sometimes that colours their understanding of the issues. So, for example, the Bacchus Marsh irrigation district. When the state government initially did their strategic agricultural land document a few years ago that was highlighted as something really critical to protect at all costs. But over the last, you know, 20 or 30 years—

The CHAIR: I will just let you know, sorry to interrupt. We are just about to run out of time, so you have about a minute.

Ms GERVASONI: Yes, okay. I will be really quick. There have been, you know, a couple of freeway alignments, a couple of other things that have actually impacted on that really critical production area to a point where it is maybe on the edge of remaining viable. And something else that threatens that production, or the market acceptance of that production, is actually quite serious. Similarly, with, I suppose, the transmission network I do not think there was a lot of thought done about: what type of farming is in this area, and is it appropriate to say, 'Oh, it's not going to have no impact, but by the way, we are not going to let you spray-irrigate your potatoes because that might cause arcing in the powerlines'.

The CHAIR: And with that, I am sorry, we are out of time.

Ms GERMANO: Thanks so much.

The CHAIR: I thank you both very much for your presentation today.

Witnesses withdrew.