



Newham & District Landcare Group

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To: Michelle Wyatt, environment@mrsc.vic.gov.au

Response to the draft Updated Macedon Ranges Environment Strategy

Newham and District Landcare Group (NDLG)'s vision since inception in 2004 is *"to enhance biodiversity and natural ecosystems within the local environment"*. From this viewpoint we made a detailed submission to the Environment Strategy which was adopted in 2016, and now here in response to the draft Updated Macedon Ranges Environment Strategy.

We note that **the vision** (p8) from the original strategy has been retained: *"A place where council leads by example and works with the community to maximise improved environmental outcomes in all aspects of life."* We ask, as we did in our 2016 submission, what is meant by *environmental outcomes* – are they plans for example? We continue to argue for a stronger vision statement incorporating preservation of priceless, significant but vanishing ecosystems.

Key Principles on page 8 remain the same also. The third - *Environmental outcomes are to be a key consideration in major decisions* is good, but we query the bolded line in the fourth - *Plans and actions primarily delivering environmental outcomes also deliver other benefits - including social and community well-being, **financial benefits for Council, and economic benefits for the local community** – which should be acknowledged and promoted by Council.* Presumably the underlying rationale here is tourism which has driven much of the controversy over development at Hanging Rock, the only public land with entry fees and other income (café, concerts...). There are no fees at bushland reserves or other parks and presumably no financial benefits, but managing and protecting these and roadsides are well worth the expenses involved.

Noting that further actions delivered since 2016 are a Climate Change Action Plan and Waste and Resource Recovery Strategy, we support the new suite of emerging priorities highlighted in the updated strategy:

- Responding to the climate emergency
- Sustainable transport
- Waterway health
- Biolinks and habitat links

- Private land conservation
- Waste minimisation
- Community engagement and partnerships.

We address our remarks under the Strategy's Principle Themes.

Theme 1 – Climate Emergency

We strongly support the Shire's declaration of a climate emergency in 2021 and the actions under this theme.

Under Emerging priorities we would like to see added a commitment to financial investment in institutions divesting in fossil fuels, some details of which are listed in other Council documents.

Theme 2 – Biodiversity

We note the annual environment reports (<https://www.mrsc.vic.gov.au/About-Council/Our-Council/Strategies-Plans/Environment-Strategy>) and are pleased to see that since 2016 Council has delivered many of the strategy's actions, in particular the preparation of the excellent Biodiversity Strategy, outlined on p20ff. However this is being undermined by Shire's current draft Rural Land Use Strategy (RLUS). For example the Biodiversity Strategy stresses *"investigating rezoning identified areas with significant native vegetation in the Farming Zone to ensure their protection"* (p3), but the draft RLUS goes backwards by extending Farming Zone to significant areas in the RCZ, in particular the Cobaw Biolink. Saying on p39 of the RLUS that *"The Farming Zone will be applied to areas where agriculture and equine uses will be the primary land use"* is a nonsense in biolink areas where protection of environmental values should remain the priority. Other contradictions involve proposed new overlays.

NDLG particularly notes the development of the draft Roadside Conservation Management Plan which we were pleased to be involved in; we look forward to its adoption.

NDLG congratulates the Shire on *Achievements to date*, and heartily supports the Emerging priorities listed (p22).

In particular we recommend ongoing and increased support of the private land conservation program to encourage rural land holders in regenerative agricultural and land management practices – as per Action B5, page 23.

It vital that plans and action are acted upon to be effective. The fourth item under Emerging priorities (p22) is *Increasing resources for compliance to ensure illegal native vegetation removal is addressed, environmental planning permit conditions are implemented and Council's compliance actions are consistent and transparent*. We see a glaring gap between Compliance policy and actions, and have several experiences of reporting illegal damage without seeing penalties or reparation. We recommend that priorities for Actions B6 (*Increase resources for environmental compliance activities*) and B7 (*Develop a Native Vegetation*

Compliance Policy to guide how Council responds to illegal native vegetation removal) (p23) become a **Very High** rather than High priority.

We are very pleased to note Action B9 *Develop an ecological and cultural burn program for reserves and roadsides* (p24), having long advocated this for some of Newham's special roadsides.

Themes 3 Water, and Theme 4 – Waste

Support.

Theme 5 – Community Engagement

This involves far more than the policy of *“Council preparing community engagement and communications plans, running consultation for at least 28 days, ensuring consultation is accessible and reporting consultation outcomes back to the community”* (p36).

Working collaboratively with community groups and members who have local biodiversity and land management understanding achieves better outcomes, as NDLG can attest. Our Landcare Group has built increasingly good relationships with the Shire's community engagement activities, resulting in active partnerships such as the Newham Roadsides Fauna Monitoring project 2020, and in 2021 Adapting to Climate Change - Monitoring Snow Gum Health, plus the ongoing Community Weed Partnership Program. These experiences illustrate the steps outlined in goals and actions (p39).

We support the priority topics below for Council's environmental engagement program, with comments in italics:

1. Climate emergency
2. Biodiversity in the shire and the biodiversity crisis
3. Waste minimisation
4. Regenerative agriculture
5. Roadside conservation values
6. Illegal activities – e.g. native vegetation removal, firewood collection, 4WD and motorbikes in conservation reserves, encroachment into conservation reserves. *Important as compliance is poor, as mentioned above.*
7. Weed management. *Important, as there is community confusion about who is responsible for noxious weed control on private land.*
8. Pest animal management. *Important as control is sporadic and piecemeal; feral deer are an increasing threat to both biodiversity and human interaction.*



Helen Scott
Secretary, and Committee members,
on behalf of Newham and District Landcare Group