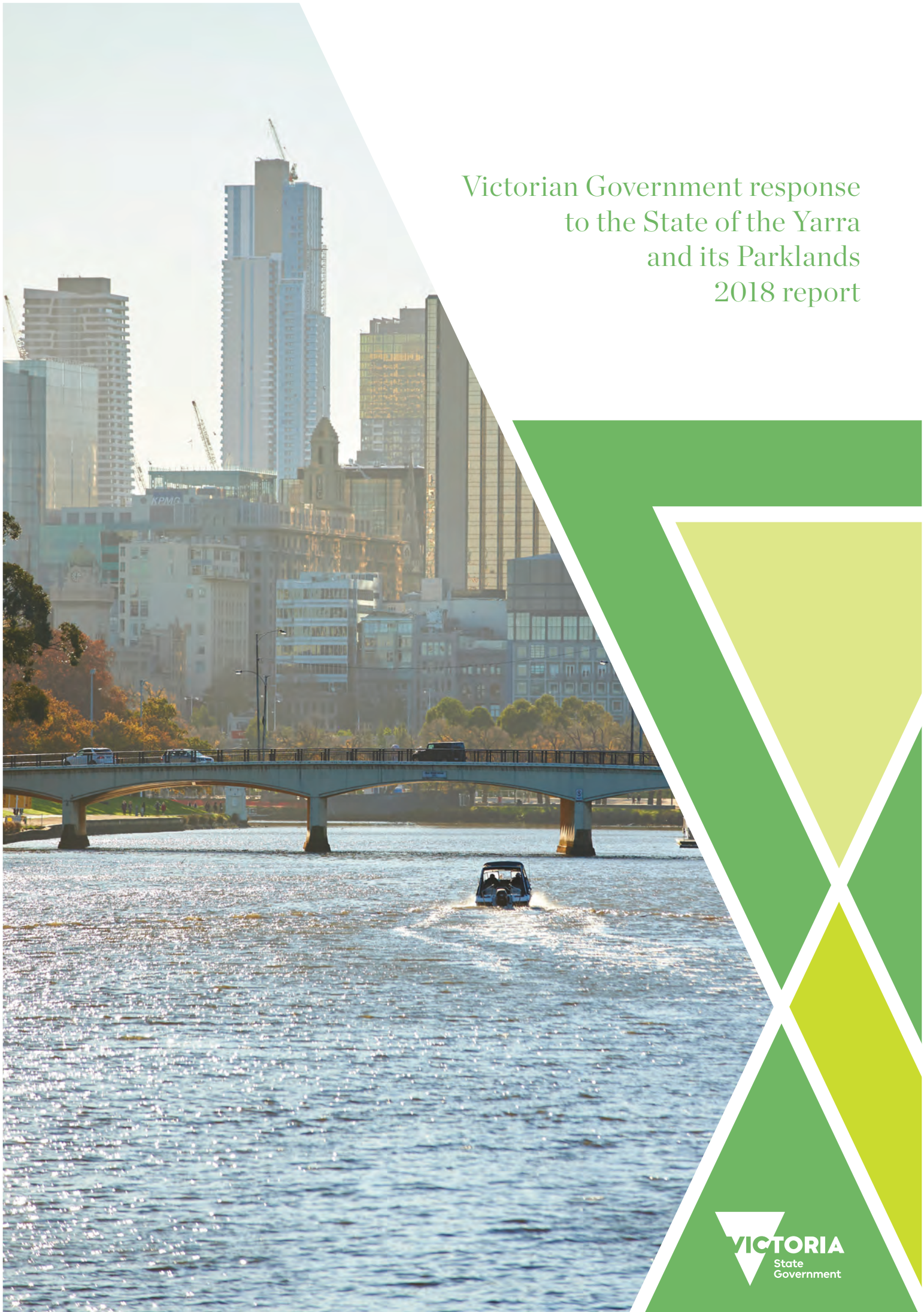


Victorian Government response
to the State of the Yarra
and its Parklands
2018 report



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Victorian Government Response

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Minister's Foreword

I am pleased to present the Victorian Government response to the State of the Yarra and its Parklands 2018 report.

The Yarra River, Birrarung, and its parklands is a central living entity in Melbourne that connects, sustains and enriches our flourishing city, suburbs, regions and beyond.

The *Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act 2017* recognises our responsibility to keep the Yarra alive. It is embedded in the cultural heritage of the Traditional Owners and is integral to our thriving sense of community. Therefore, accurate information and an engaged community is key to protecting and nurturing the Yarra River, Birrarung and its parklands.

The inaugural State of the Yarra and its Parklands 2018 report contributes to the understanding of the Yarra River, Birrarung and the public land it flows through as one living, integrated natural entity for protection.

The recommendations in the Report replicate some of those in the State of the Environment 2018 report by identifying knowledge gaps and improvements to data collection and monitoring regimes.

The Government's response to these recommendations has been developed in the context of the Yarra Strategic Plan process. Through this process we are partnering with the Traditional Owners, the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, and the community about how best we can protect and preserve the Yarra for future generations.

This response builds on the actions to be delivered out of the Yarra Strategic Plan. Delivered side-by-side, the Yarra Strategic Plan and State of the Yarra and its Parklands reporting will ensure science and the community are directly influencing environmental policy, programs and outcomes.

I thank the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability for her work to begin the evidence-based illustration of the Yarra. I look forward to the benefits of further alignment of future State of the Yarra and its Parklands reporting with the developing Yarra Strategic Plan, to support the community's long-term vision. Working together puts us in a strong position to deliver better outcomes for our iconic Yarra River, Birrarung and precious parklands.

Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP

Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change
Minister for Solar Homes



Introduction

THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE STATE OF THE YARRA AND ITS PARKLANDS 2018 REPORT

The State of the Yarra and its Parklands 2018 report (the Report) is the first of its kind from the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability (the Commissioner). The Report was tabled in Parliament by the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change on 19 March 2019.

The Report provides an assessment of the environmental condition of the Yarra River corridor through analysis of a set of 36 biophysical and socio-economic indicators. The Commissioner makes seven recommendations within the Report which are largely focussed on improving the acquisition, quality, access and management of data, or enhancing work in specific policy or programs areas.

The Victorian Government's formal response to the seven recommendations is presented within this document. The Government acknowledges the preparation of the Report was difficult ahead of the finalisation of the Yarra Strategic Plan (YSP), the plan that will form a critical component of the delivery of the *Yarra River Protection Act (Wilip-gin Birrarung murron) Act 2017* (the Act). As outlined in the response, the Government's priorities for the Yarra River, Birrarung are driven by understanding what matters most to the community and by focusing work on delivering these community outcomes.

USING DATA TO SUPPORT THE DELIVERY OF ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES

The bulk of the recommendations in the Report aim to strengthen the science that will support and influence government and delivery agencies by improving data on the condition of the Yarra River lands. The Government supports cost effective efforts that build the evidence base for policy development and targeted investment.

Five of the seven recommendations within the Report are focussed on data and are aligned with recommendations in the State of the Environment 2018 report. These are broadly supported in principle or in part. Some recommendations align with existing policy initiatives and directions and others would require further work, engagement with public agencies, funding and partnership with Traditional Owners to understand their implications and benefits. As such, some cannot yet be committed to or completed in full within this reporting cycle. Two of the recommendations are policy ideas that were further explored with the community in the making of the YSP.

The Government will ask the Lead Agency for the YSP to work with the Office of the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability to propose indicators of environmental condition for future State of the Yarra and its Parklands reports that align with YSP performance objectives.



ACHIEVING OUTCOMES THROUGH ENGAGING AND EMPOWERING TRADITIONAL OWNERS AND COMMUNITIES

The Report highlights the importance of access to information, communication of information and involvement by the community in monitoring and caring for the Yarra River, Birrarung. It also talks to the need to deliver on Aboriginal cultural indicators to inform future environmental reporting.

The Government has consulted and engaged extensively with the community on development of the 50-year Community Vision for the Yarra River, Birrarung (Community Vision). The Community Vision was launched by the Minister for Water, Minister for Planning and Minister for Environment in 2018, along with the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation's, *Nhanbu narrun ba ngargunin twarn Birrarung* (Ancient Spirit and Lore of the Yarra). It is important to note that the YSP uses the Community Vision and Wurundjeri Woi wurrung's aspirational policy to focus the efforts of 15 public entities, working in partnership with Wurundjeri Woi wurrung, to deliver improved outcomes for the benefit of all who live, work, play or visit the Yarra River, Birrarung.

Through legislated reporting requirements, both the Birrarung Council and the Commissioner provide government, Traditional Owners and the community with information about action along the river, and how this contributes to achieving the community's vision. The reporting roles of the Commissioner and the Birrarung Council are intended to be complementary. Where the Birrarung Council advocates for the preservation and protection of the Yarra River, Birrarung and its social, cultural, economic and environmental values, the Commissioner reports on the environmental condition of Yarra River land.

The Government appreciates the Commissioner's aim to leverage effort and investment, build on current initiatives, and target improvement. The Government will continue to work with the Commissioner to support environmental reporting, utilising the advice provided to the Minister for the Environment and aligning it with the 50-year Community Vision and the YSP, once it is finalised.

Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government, in consultation with Traditional Owners and relevant agencies, develop contemporary cultural indicators to inform future environmental reporting. These indicators must reflect the priorities of Traditional Owners, have practical and cost-effective data-collection methods, be meaningful, and demonstrate change within a five-year reporting period.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT IN PRINCIPLE

The Victorian Government is committed to supporting Aboriginal self-determination and Traditional Owner aspirations for culture and Country. The Government will support Traditional Owners to identify cultural indicators for biocultural landscape health within the principles of self-determination, as outlined in the *Victorian Government's Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023*.

Responding to the Government's new *Self-Determination Reform Framework*, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is developing a strategy for transforming its systems and structures to support self-determination. DELWP is currently working to support Traditional Owners' capacity to actively pursue their natural resource interests. This support includes:

- **Wurundjeri Woi wurrung's participation in the Yarra Collaboration Committee and Birrarung Council:** In the development of the Yarra Strategic Plan (YSP), and in planning for its implementation, the Government has been working in partnership with Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation. *Nhanbu narrun ba ngargunin twarn Birrarung* (Ancient Spirit and Lore of the Yarra) is the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung's articulation of their ambitions for planning, policy and decision-making for the Yarra River, Birrarung. Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Elders sit as members on the Yarra Collaboration Committee and the Birrarung Council. The Elders' ongoing participation is enabling culturally appropriate use of this important document to inform the development of the YSP and the Birrarung Council's reporting.
- **Cultural mapping project on the Yarra:** DELWP is partnering with the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation to deliver a cultural mapping pilot project for the Yarra River, Birrarung, focusing on the highly significant Bulleen to Banyule Flats reach of the river. The project is part of the Government's delivery of the *Yarra River Action Plan (2017)*, which committed to work with Traditional Owners to map tangible and intangible cultural values along the Yarra River, Birrarung. Cultural mapping is used to record connections between places and people. The Bulleen-Banyule Flats Cultural Values Study aims to document the tangible and intangible significance of the Yarra River, Birrarung, and its lands – including historic and contemporary Wurundjeri Woi wurrung use and occupancy – providing a basis for the protection and enrichment of cultural values and informing future land management and planning processes. The study involves the collection and analysis of data from historical records, archaeological surveys and field visits to shed light on traditional on-Country activities (including plant cultivation, harvesting, hunting, aquaculture and resource use) together with cultural knowledge (language, place names, stories and legends, ecology, settlement and social customs). A final report will be completed in 2020.
- **Returning environmental watering to the Bolin Bolin wetlands:** Melbourne Water is partnering with Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation to return environmental water to the Bolin Bolin wetlands. Bolin Bolin Billabong, located next to the Yarra River, Birrarung in Bulleen, is one of the few remaining billabongs in Melbourne. In October 2017, Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation held a ceremony to realise the long-held goal of delivering water into the billabong – the first time it had received water in many years. Monitoring of water levels and vegetation response is currently underway and a long-term solution is being finalised.

Recommendation 2

That DELWP, in coordination with research partners, conduct further analysis to improve climate projections for the Yarra River corridor. These findings should inform the system of environmental-economic accounts and how these values change under climate change. These projections would aim to reduce the uncertainties associated with rainfall projections as a minimum.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT

The Victorian Government supports the development of science, including improved projections and guidance to improve the useability of projections, to support decision-making across all regions of Victoria. The Government acknowledges the value of localised climate projections, noting however that localised projections do not reduce the large uncertainty in rainfall projections, because the large uncertainty in rainfall projections is a feature of the source global climate models.

The Government has made a significant investment in improved climate projections, and in improved understanding of Victoria's climate variability through the following work streams:

- The Victorian Climate Initiative (VicCI), was a collaboration between the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM), and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) that produced a set of climate and streamflow projections based on 42 global climate models, which have been used by all water corporations across Victoria when assessing the impacts of climate change on water availability.
- The Victorian Water and Climate Initiative (VicWaCI) is a collaboration between DELWP, BOM, CSIRO and the University of Melbourne, which builds on the VicCI by looking at the changes in catchment runoff response across Victoria, and better understanding how changes in Victorian rainfall over recent decades fit with projections of future rainfall declines. Like VicCI, the findings will support many actions including the development of guidelines, issued by DELWP to water corporations, for the application of VicWaCI findings to long-term climate change adaptation planning within the water sector.
- The Victorian Climate Projections project (VCP19) is a collaboration between DELWP and CSIRO that has produced new local-scale climate projections for the entire state of Victoria for medium and high emissions pathways, including rainfall. VCP19 has made a significant contribution to improved understanding of rainfall in Victoria through localised scaled models that improve the simulation of rainfall, in part due to better representation of topography such as mountain

ranges and coastlines. Key to this program is support by CSIRO climate scientists to assist users in understanding and applying the new data to different situations, which aids with the integration of data into decision-making.

These are user-driven, collaborative research programs that focus on improving scientific understanding of changes in climate and increasing the capacity of users to apply the research outputs, which supports environmental decision-making informed by data and evidence. The existing research activities and products provide improved localised projections, along with supporting science that assists stakeholders to understand the range of uncertainties in projections so that they are able to make robust decisions.

The work that DELWP has already undertaken fulfils this recommendation. Continued efforts will be required to further improve the understanding of the physical impacts of climate change on Victoria, including better understanding of the uncertainties associated with projections of future climate. Any investment in additional research and product development will be subject to stakeholder needs including through the application of the next round of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change global climate models.

The Government response to the recommendations relating to environmental-economic accounts is provided under Recommendation 6. The combination of environmental-economic accounts and climate change projections will improve the future evidence base for evaluating the impact of a changing climate on the benefits natural assets provide to communities and will help inform priorities for adaptation planning.

Recommendation 3

That DELWP, in collaboration with investment in the science and data capability of all government biodiversity programs and improve the coherence and impact of the publicly-funded, scientific endeavour. Further, that DELWP establish the position of the chief biodiversity scientist to oversee this coordinated effort and provide esteemed counsel to the DELWP Secretary and the Minister for Environment to improve the impact of investment in biodiversity research across the Victorian environment portfolio.

That DELWP improve biodiversity outcomes on public land by streamlining and coordinating governance arrangements.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT IN PART

Science and data capability

As an evidence driven organisation, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) invests strategically across its portfolio to ensure that decisions are made based on the best available science. DELWP recognises the need for continual improvement in the way data and knowledge are used across its portfolio areas. The Department has recently commenced several initiatives to progress the coordination and impact of biodiversity science, research, data collection/use and analysis. Key initiatives include the review of all DELWP Science Programs by the DELWP Science Leadership Group, initiation of a new project to develop a unifying small set of biodiversity indicators to be used across DELWP and the establishment of the DELWP Scientific Reference Panel. In combination this work is seen as an essential enabler to resolving the broader issues covered by this recommendation, including more efficient, transparent and more fit-for-purpose evidence-based decision making and reporting, to maximise desired biodiversity outcomes. It is considered that this will deal with the fundamental problem that is the lack of alignment across DELWP and its portfolio agencies in dealing with biodiversity data and science.

Chief Biodiversity Scientist

DELWP has implemented a range of activities since the *State of the Environment 2018* report was prepared, that respond to the requirement to establish a Chief Biodiversity Scientist.

The opportunity for the Victorian Government of achieving the intent of the Chief Biodiversity Scientist recommendation is through the recent establishment of a new mix of key entities, including the newly formed DELWP Science Reference Panel, the recently formed DELWP Science Leadership Group, the VicEnvironments Forum (VEF) and supporting VEF Science Committee, as well as more targeted use of the existing Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act Scientific Advisory Committee and DELWP's biodiversity research centre of excellence, the Arthur Rylah Institute.

Improved oversight of this coordinated effort can be realised by using these entities in a more cohesive, interdependent and collaborative manner than was previously possible. These arrangements are now in place and this will provide esteemed counsel to the DELWP Secretary and the Minister for Environment to improve the impact of investment in biodiversity research across the Victorian environment portfolio.

Implementation of this approach and its effectiveness in meeting the intent of the recommendation will be reviewed and evaluated within 12 months of establishment of the Science Reference Panel to inform future implementation.

Recommendation 4

That DELWP streamline the governance and coordination of That DELWP, in collaboration with local government and private property owners, maintains and improves threatened species populations, and their habitats, by connecting Crown land in the upper and lower Yarra rural reaches, through a system of parks, reserves and private protected areas.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT IN PRINCIPLE

Maintaining and improving threatened species populations and their habitats is a significant and critical challenge. The Victorian Government recognises the importance of the Yarra, its parklands, and its biodiversity to Victoria and is invested in supporting a long-term, collaborative approach to management of the Yarra, through the *Yarra Strategic Plan* (YSP).

The Government recognises the shift in conservation management towards considering whole ecosystems and landscapes, rather than focussing on a single threatened species. The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) acts on behalf of the Government to support this approach. Current programs to improve biodiversity in the Yarra River, Birrarung catchment include:

- Collaborative biodiversity response planning and on-ground projects enabling all stakeholders within a landscape to work together to identify priority outcomes for biodiversity, including management and protection of private land. River corridor habitat enhancement has occurred through implementation of the Sugarloaf Link and the Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve projects.
- The Victorian Landcare Program, a community-based volunteer program that facilitates and coordinates conservation management actions on both private and public land.
- The River to Ranges project, funded through the Peri-urban Weed Management Partnership Program, to reduce weed threats along the Yarra River, Birrarung.

The mechanisms being utilised by the Victorian Government to expand and connect existing protected areas along the Yarra River, Birrarung include:

- Increasing the permanent protection of private land through Trust for Nature covenants and other on-title mechanisms. *Biodiversity 2037* includes a target to permanently protect 200,000 hectares of private land by 2037. The primary mechanism for this is through the establishment of conservation covenants registered on the title of private landholdings by Trust for Nature via the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972*.

- Improving the quality of habitat of existing public parks and reserves and suitable private land along the Yarra by identifying priority ecosystems and landscapes for biodiversity management and protection. This is achieved through modern conservation approaches such as DELWP's Strategic Management Prospects Tool.
- Increasing existing public parklands along the Yarra River, Birrarung through the purchase and addition of private land to the Crown for reservation and permanent protection as public parkland. DELWP administers a program to purchase private land parcels with a Public Acquisition Overlay along the Yarra River, Birrarung. Existing parklands along the upper and lower Yarra require over 100 private land parcels to be purchased for completion. Land has already been purchased in the upper reaches of the Yarra at Yellingbo to create the Yellingbo Conservation Area, which is made up of around 3,000 hectares of existing public land reserves and Crown land water frontages (including the Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve).
- Strengthening planning controls on private and Crown land within the Yarra Corridor (outlined in the response to Recommendation 5).

The YSP which is under development, will provide guidance on the long-term protection of the Yarra River, Birrarung and its parklands. DELWP will carefully consider directions arising from the YSP statutory consultation for incorporation into the final YSP.

Recommendation 5

That DELWP, in collaboration with Melbourne Water and local governments, extend the geographic scope of the current interim Yarra River Protection Planning Controls (Amendment GC48) along the Yarra River corridor ranging from Warrandyte to the boundary of the Yarra Ranges National Park in support of appropriate urban development.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT IN PRINCIPLE

The Victorian Government supports the intent of this recommendation, noting that a detailed assessment of the Yarra River's landscape characteristics – and consideration of development pressures that need to be managed – will inform the type and extent planning control/s to apply along the Yarra River corridor.

The interim controls delivered through GC48 were developed in response to pressures related to urban development. A landscape assessment approach was undertaken to inform the drafting and implementation of a consistent Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO) and Design and Development Overlay (DDO) from Punt Road upstream to the urban growth boundary in Warrandyte. While the recommendation to expand the geographic scope is supported in principle, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) notes that any new or amended controls should be developed with specific reference to geographic context.

Consideration should be given to whether the DDO and SLO are the most effective planning controls to support appropriate urban development along the Yarra River corridor beyond the urban growth boundary.

DELWP notes that the delivery of this recommendation could be aligned with implementation of the Yarra Strategic Plan. Local councils and Melbourne Water will be closely engaged as project partners.

Recommendation 6

That DELWP, in collaboration with Melbourne Water, establishes an environmental-economic account for the Yarra River corridor that is consistent with the SEEA guidelines and the DELWP Valuing and Accounting for Victoria's Environment strategy and is aligned with the agreed common national approach. Further, that the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change include in the Statement of Expectations to the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability a requirement to incorporate an environmental-economic account in the State of the Yarra and its Parklands reporting from 2023.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT IN PART

The Victorian Government supports the overall intent of this recommendation. The recommendation to deliver an environmental-economic account for the Yarra River, Birrarung corridor is not supported at this time. The production of comprehensive state-wide environmental-economic accounts by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) to support all environmental reporting is not currently feasible.

DELWP will continue to build on its capabilities in environmental-economic accounting and produce accounts to improve the evidence base available for future policy development, planning and decision making in Victoria. This work will be consistent with the current experimental United Nations System of Environmental Economic Accounting (UN SEEA) guidance and the revision process due to be completed by December 2020, DELWP's *Valuing and Accounting for Victoria's Environment Strategic Plan 2015-2020* and the common national approach. The scope and depth of DELWP's program on environmental-economic accounting will be driven by policy needs, focusing on areas where there is greatest need for building the evidence base on connections between the environment and economy to tackle future challenges facing Victoria. The work will be progressed with relevant portfolio partners, including Melbourne Water.

The recommendation for a requirement for an environmental-economic account in the State of the Yarra and its Parklands reporting in the Ministerial Statement of Expectations to the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability is also not supported at this time. DELWP will continue to provide the Commissioner with products from its environmental-economic accounting program to support future reporting and contribute to the development of a comprehensive state-wide environmental-economic accounting framework in the future.

Recommendation 7

That the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change include in the Statement of Expectations to the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability a requirement to adopt the SDGs as an operating framework for State of the Yarra and its Parklands reporting in Victoria from 2023. This will require that DELWP and Melbourne Water support the Commissioner by leading a portfolio review of the data requirements to assess Victoria's progress against the selected SDG targets, which will include a complementary analysis of current legislation, policy and programs against SDG targets, including the Yarra Strategic Plan, and the development of a plan to improve data-acquisition processes for socio-economic indicators by 2021.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: SUPPORT IN PART

The Victorian Government supports the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and supports the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability utilising the SDG framework to enhance Victoria's environmental reporting. This will be reflected by the Minister for Environment in the Statement of Expectations to the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability.

The Government supports this recommendation in part as it is only one of a substantial number of Yarra Strategic Plan (YSP) partners and therefore cannot commit YSP partners to a particular approach to the SDGs. The Government notes the YSP, its monitoring, evaluation, reporting and improvement (MERI) framework and governance arrangements are still in development. Should YSP partners choose to engage with SDGs at an appropriate point in the future, the Government will offer support through the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP).

The SDGs and their objectives feature in important government initiatives including *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050*, *Water for Victoria and Biodiversity 2037*. As the Government's leader of sustainability policy and programs, DELWP embarked on a whole-of-department approach to the SDGs in 2019. Key activities included releasing a statement of support for the SDGs in the Department's Corporate Plan and aligning the Department's Outcomes Framework to the SDG framework. As part of DELWP's ongoing support of the SDG framework, DELWP will take a portfolio-wide approach to engaging with the SDGs in the future. This will involve engaging with portfolio agencies to understand where they are on their SDG journey and providing tailored advice and looking for opportunities to align with DELWP's approach.

There is awareness across Government and DELWP that both socio-economic and biophysical indicators are important to provide an easy to understand and meaningful narrative for the Victorian community. This is particularly so for the management of the Yarra. YSP partners will consider appropriate socio-economic indicators for inclusion in the Yarra Strategic Plan MERI Framework and as part of annual reporting processes. The agreed indicators and their accompanying data will provide a foundation for engagement with the SDG framework at an appropriate time and as agreed by YSP partners.

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

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