Frequently Asked Questions

Handbook for the development of renewable energy in Victoria

1) Why is a Handbook needed?

Climate change poses the greatest single risk to biodiversity and is a critical issue for Victoria and the world.

A rapid expansion of renewable energy capacity is required, so we must ensure that environmental and planning assessment and approval processes are predictable, efficient and support robust decisions.

To meet Victoria's renewable energy targets requires a significant increase in the number of renewable energy projects and an accelerated pace of delivery across the state by 2035.

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that this development takes place with minimal impact on Victoria's unique biodiversity. For this reason, DEECA has prepared and a published a suite of new tools to assist proponents and decision-makers to avoid, minimise, mitigate and where necessary compensate for impact on biodiversity.

These tools include:

- The *Handbook for development of renewable energy in Victoria* to support siting, design and operation of renewable energy projects to better manage biodiversity impacts.
- Improved tools for mapping biodiversity risks including the Habitat Value Map and the Marine Biodiversity Values Map.
- An ambitious research program to fill the most critical knowledge gaps in our understanding of the impacts of wind energy on at-risk bird and bat species and inform development of guidance.

Together these deliver on the Government's commitment to strike the right balance between renewable energy and biodiversity protection.

2) What is the commencement date for guidance in the Handbook?

The Handbook will commence on the day it is published on DEECA's website: 29 May 2025.

However, the Handbook includes transitional arrangements so that it does not impact projects that are already at advanced stages of environmental and/or planning approvals. Proponents will not be required to apply the guidance where they have already referred their project for assessment under the *Environment Effects Act 1978*

(EE Act), an environmental impact assessment under the EE Act is already in progress, a planning permit application has been lodged, or where one of these actions will occur within 12 months after the handbook's commencement. Proponents may choose to apply the handbook regardless of the stage of the project and will need to seek agreement from the Department of Transport and Planning and DEECA to do this.

3) What developments will the Handbook apply to?

The Handbook applies to onshore **renewable energy facilities** as defined in Clause 73.03 of the Victoria Planning Provisions. This includes:

- onshore wind energy facilities
- onshore solar energy facilities.

The Handbook outlines a risk-based approach to identifying, assessing and managing impacts from renewable energy projects on threatened bird and bat species to achieve an acceptable level of impact.

4) Does the Handbook change any existing legislative or policy requirements?

The Handbook outlines a clear and consistent approach to meet requirements within the existing planning and environment framework, which can be applied to any type of renewable energy project while enabling flexibility to adapt to the characteristics and risks of an individual development. This will help to streamline the assessment and approvals processes because proponents and assessors will be working from the same starting point.

5) How will the new guidance impact the renewable energy rollout?

The Handbook aims to assist the renewable energy rollout by reducing time and costs at the pre-application stage. It is also anticipated that the new guidance will help reduce the time taken for decision-makers to assess and advise on information provided and approve applications.

Proponents will have better data and standards to inform required site surveys that identify impacts on threatened species and clearer guidance on appropriate measures under the mitigation hierarchy, to inform siting, design and operation. This should result in developers choosing sites with lower biodiversity impact and preparing more robust planning applications that outline how impacts have been identified and addressed early in the process.

In designing and delivering the Handbook, DEECA has engaged closely with all key stakeholders, including the renewable energy industry. DEECA sought to understand development processes and best practice, as well as what information government assessors need to make effective and robust decisions.

The key aim of the Handbook is to provide a clear process that can be applied in a consistent manner, noting there remain uncertainties about the impacts of renewable energy projects on threatened bird and bat species and the effectiveness of mitigation measures to reduce these impacts. The Handbook is intended to guide consideration of key issues early in the planning process for renewable energy projects and reduce the incidence of late-stage approval conditions or refusals which impact project viability. Having clear guidance for proponents and assessors to apply will support faster and better approvals.

6) What engagement has DEECA undertaken in preparing the Handbook?

DEECA completed an extensive consultation process throughout 2024 and 2025 culminating in the release of a Discussion Paper and a draft version of the Handbook for public review and feedback. Through the Engage Victoria website interested groups and community members were invited to provide written submissions and survey responses from 13 December 2024 to 23 February 2025.

Throughout this process, DEECA conducted targeted stakeholder workshops with representatives from industry, environment, consultants and local government. DEECA used the workshops to work through different options for the guidance in more detail, hear direct feedback and suggestions for improvement and answer questions.

DEECA also worked extensively with Traditional Owners and First Nations groups as the traditional custodians of the land. This including dedicated briefings on the draft guidance, with a focus on how cultural values could be embedded in the policy.

The feedback and input provided by all stakeholders was critical to the finalisation of the Handbook, including species-specific guidance.

A Summary Report of the consultation process can be found on Engage Victoria.

7) What research has DEECA relied on to inform development of the Handbook?

As part of the Joint Ministers' Statement, DEECA committed to conducting targeted research to fill gaps in understanding of the impacts of wind energy on at-risk bird and bat species and inform development of guidance.

These projects are being led by DEECA's Arthur Rylah Institute (ARI). Most projects are now either completed or are in the final stages of completion, and other projects will continue into 2026. The outcomes of the research will be published when available on the ARI website.

8) **The Joint Ministers' Statement committed to developing new spatial tools and maps, how is that progressing?**

DEECA continues to develop interactive spatial tools to improve upfront planning for renewable energy projects and provide clearer requirements for managing biodiversity impacts.

In 2024, two new maps were released:

- The Marine Biodiversity Values map was released in July 2024 on DEECA's CoastKit platform - Marine Biodiversity Values (MBV) (marineandcoasts.vic.gov.au).
- The Habitat Value map was released in October 2024 on DEECA's NatureKit platform - Habitat Value (environment.vic.gov.au).

The maps combine information on thousands of species habitats to show the relative biodiversity values in Victoria. Biodiversity values mapping provides decision-makers with an objective and comprehensive view of the relative biodiversity importance of all parts of Victoria's land and state waters, to help prioritise areas for protection or avoid areas of high biodiversity value in development footprints. The values mapping does not highlight areas that are "no-go" zones for development. Instead, they can be used to help design infrastructure that minimises impacts.

Brolga Guidance

9) **How does the revised approach differ from the draft 2020 Brolga standards?**

DEECA received clear feedback that the 2020 version of the draft Brolga standards contained requirements that were disproportionate to the risk posed to Brolga from renewable development and if applied would unjustifiably restrict future developments. DEECA has taken on board concerns regarding the application of buffer zones and the impact that these might have on the potential for renewable energy development.

The proposed guidance will support protection of important Brolga habitat by:

- requiring flocking areas identified on a flocking areas map to be avoided
- identifying suitable breeding habitat using a new model developed by DEECA's ARI
- buffering all known breeding wetlands and nearby wetlands within a 2km home range (900m buffer with movement corridors)

- buffering other potential breeding wetlands outside the 2km home range, but within a 5km assessment area, with a 300m buffer or delivering mitigation and compensation measures that support enhancement of Brolga conservation.

10) What does this mean for the Brolga in Victoria?

The revised Brolga guidance will ensure that the key habitat for Brolga is Victoria is adequately protected from inappropriate renewable energy development.

DEECA has developed the guidance using the best available scientific information. Ongoing monitoring of the Brolga population and monitoring and reporting from existing wind energy facilities indicates that the number of Brolga mortalities in Victoria because of collision with wind turbines is very low. However, DEECA also acknowledges that there remains a risk to the Brolga from their operation.

DEECA believes that the proposed approach to guidance strikes the right balance between facilitating the development of renewable energy and the protection of this iconic species.

11) What is the status of the draft Brolga Standards (2020)?

The draft Brolga Standards that were consulted on in 2020 will be replaced by the revised Brolga guidance set out in Appendix 2 of the Handbook. The draft 2020 Brolga Standards never progressed beyond draft stage and should not be used or relied upon for any proposed project or its assessment.

Subject to transitional provisions outlined in the Handbook, the new Brolga guidance will replace the *Interim Guidelines for the Assessment, Avoidance, Mitigation and Offsetting of Potential Wind Farm Impacts on the Victorian Brolga Population 2011*.

Proponents who wish to use the Brolga guidance contained in the Handbook during the transition period should consult with the Department of Transport and Planning and DEECA.

Bat Guidance

12) Why is the Government creating new Bat-specific guidance?

Consideration of impacts on bat species from wind farm proposals is emerging more frequently as a key issue in environmental assessments. During DEECA's extensive consultation process, most stakeholders supported the publication of bat-specific guidance to ensure that developments were adequately managing impacts on Victoria's unique bat species.

In addition, the publication of bat-specific guidance mirrors approaches in other jurisdictions and is consistent with the Government's commitment to align with global best practice. Examples include the EUROBATS *Guidelines for consideration of bats in*

wind farm projects in Europe, NatureScot's *Bats and onshore wind turbines - survey, assessment and mitigation* in Scotland, and abundant state or provincial level guidance in North America.

The bat-specific guidance included as Appendix 3 in the Handbook is based on the best available information and data regarding the bat species included on the Species of Concern list. This ensures that the guidance provided addresses the needs of Victoria's unique bat species.