

This document provides a response to the findings of the independent evaluation of Biodiversity Response Planning Phase 1 and acknowledges the issues raised. It has been prepared by DELWP in consultation with the BRP Steering Committee¹.

Statement from the BRP steering Committee:

“The BRP Steering Committee represents the heads of key agencies from across the environmental portfolio, together with the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation as equal partner. As representatives of key agencies, we stand united in our commitment to improve Traditional Owner engagement in biodiversity planning, to improve the use and sharing of knowledge and to work together in such a way that biodiversity is the winner and the Biodiversity 2037 outcomes and targets are achieved. We therefore take the learnings from this evaluation of BRP Phase 1 seriously and will play our part in acting on the findings of the evaluation.”

Background

Biodiversity Response Planning (BRP) is a new area-based planning approach to biodiversity conservation in Victoria and a key reform of Victoria’s 20-year biodiversity plan Protecting Victoria’s Environment – Biodiversity 2037. It is designed to strengthen alignment to Biodiversity 2037 outcomes and targets through improved collaboration and participation between government agencies, Traditional Owners, non-government agencies (NGOs) and the community.

The first activity of BRP was an investment process which occurred from January to June 2018. An evaluation of this first Biodiversity Response Planning activity has been completed, led by an independent evaluation expert. The evaluation provided an opportunity for participants to have their say on what has worked well and what has not. The evaluation report documenting this process is available with this response on the BRP website (<https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/biodiversity/biodiversity-response-planning>).

DELWP welcomes the results of this evaluation and is committed to acting on the findings. Some of these will be more relevant to biodiversity investment processes, and some are relevant to broader strategic planning and engagement in BRP. DELWP will consider and act on all the ‘Ideas for the way forward’ in future planning for BRP to enhance the collaboration, participation and knowledge use and sharing in BRP and fulfil the aspirations of the co-design report and *Biodiversity 2037*.

While BRP Phase 1 delivered valuable outcomes for biodiversity and marks a significant step forward in the delivery of Biodiversity 2037, the evaluation has highlighted several areas to work on with all stakeholders involved to

¹ The BRP Steering Committee comprised a senior executive from Parks Victoria, CEOs from 2xCMA’s, the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and Trust for Nature, a CMA Board member and 2xDELWP Regional Directors. It was chaired by the Executive Director of Biodiversity Division, DELWP

strengthen the engagement and collaboration in future delivery, and to improve consideration of cost-effective biodiversity outcomes. The evaluation has also highlighted the importance of enhancing community capacity and supporting stakeholders to confidently use and contribute to the improvement of the decision-support tool Strategic Management Prospects.

BRP is about a way of working and is a central component of *Biodiversity 2037*. DELWP is committed to improving the engagement, collaboration and knowledge use elements of this process to ensure it achieves its biodiversity conservation aims and considers diverse stakeholders needs and expectations over the life of the plan.

BRP Phase 2 will commence in 2019. BRP Phase 2 will have a focus on data collection and strategic planning for each Area, to assess the level of activities that are taking place in relation to the targets in *Biodiversity 2037*. This will identify potential gaps and opportunities for making progress. The design and implementation of Phase 2 is the opportunity to implement the improvements identified through the evaluation of Phase 1.

Traditional Owners

The BRP co-design report aspired to “partnering with Traditional Owners” to deliver Biodiversity Response Planning, consistent with *Biodiversity 2037*. DELWP is committed to putting Traditional Owner Corporations at the centre of Biodiversity Planning and further work needs to be done to fulfil these aspirations.

DELWP acknowledges that Traditional Owners were not engaged effectively in this first investment phase of BRP overall. Despite an effort by DELWP to engage with Traditional Owners before the start of the BRP co-design process, and to ask them how they wanted to be engaged, there was insufficient time during this first phase of the BRP process to implement this properly. This was compounded by capacity and other issues within many organisations across the biodiversity sector to properly engage with Traditional Owners.

DELWP also acknowledges that there was a lack of culturally safe environments for some participants, something that will have to change if BRP is to move forward and be successful.

DELWP also recognises that the investment criteria in this first phase of BRP, focussed on maximising on ground biodiversity outcomes using best available western science but did not include Traditional Owner-based healthy country objectives nor approaches to achieve these based on traditional ecological knowledge and practices. The inclusion of healthy country objectives and use of traditional ecological knowledge in managing biodiversity is an area of work that is actively underway in partnership with TOs, as part of the *Biodiversity 2037* MER Framework implementation. It is intended that this will change how we do things in BRP and in other contexts moving forward.

Action: DELWP will work with Traditional Owners to understand what an appropriate BRP governance model looks like, from their perspective, and implement this in BRP Phase 2.

Action: DELWP will continue to work with Traditional Owners to ensure that the goals of TO Country Plans and other biodiversity aspirations are included in BRP objectives including how to incorporate, recognise and reflect Traditional Owner values, ecological knowledge and practices in biodiversity planning, decision-making and management.

Engagement

DELWP recognises and appreciates the significant time that stakeholders contributed to delivering BRP and achieving significant outcomes for biodiversity. Overall, DELWP is pleased that there was some positive engagement and recognition that there was an increased diversity of voices in some parts of the BRP Phase 1 process. However, DELWP acknowledges that the timelines for this first phase of BRP were inadequate to undertake the level of engagement intended, and that this was sometimes compounded by a lack of clear communication from DELWP about what was intended or expected.

The nature of this process, which used concepts like cost-effectiveness and prioritisation to maximise the biodiversity outcomes of the investment (as intended by Biodiversity 2037), meant that not all willing groups and individuals were able to participate or were successful in the process. This was borne out early in the BRP process when the Working Groups were asked to identify priority landscapes or themes within which projects could be further developed.

However, DELWP acknowledges that we need a better way to include a broader array of stakeholders in the planning and engagement phases of BRP and that the short timelines and landscape prioritisation approach applied in BRP Phase 1 undermined this objective. Other programs (Landcare, Land for Wildlife, various forms of Community Grants) are available to support the efforts of the many groups and individuals across Victoria who contribute to biodiversity conservation. It is known that DELWP and Working Groups took slightly different approaches to engagement in individual BRP areas and we will endeavour to delve further into these regional differences to better understand which approaches worked better.

It is also recognised that building capability, capacity and basic understanding of key concepts, systems and tools under Biodiversity 2037 is a challenge for smaller organisations and community groups, given the time and other resourcing constraints small groups typically face. Biodiversity 2037 commits to “*Support and enable community groups, Traditional Owners, non-government organisations and sections of government to participate in biodiversity response planning*” (Priority 13) and although there have been some positive steps in this direction, starting with the Co-design process itself, there is much work still to do to enable relevant groups to participate.

The next phase of BRP will be a strategic planning process without a project investment phase and provides an opportunity to improve the level and quality of engagement in creating a shared vision for biodiversity in different areas (consistent with the Co-design report).

Action: DELWP will design future processes to streamline the time commitment for stakeholders.

Action: DELWP and partners will design and implement BRP in a way that better assists other relevant planning and investment processes and improves alignment of these processes with Biodiversity 2037 in the future.

Action: DELWP and partners will develop and disseminate communication products to assist stakeholders understand where BRP fits in within the broader place-based landscape planning context and the various biodiversity investment processes, to assist them to engage with BRP and related processes efficiently and effectively.

Collaboration

Increasing collaboration is one of the aims of BRP. DELWP is encouraged by the extent of collaboration that was able to occur in this early “investment” stage of BRP and recognises that this was built on a strong but variable existing base. However, DELWP acknowledges the difficulties that timelines, process changes or unclear communications created during this phase and will focus on improving these aspects going forward.

DELWP recognises the inherent challenge of trying to collaborate when there is competition for funding. Although it was expected that all organisations would be able to put aside organisational interests and focus on “what’s best for biodiversity” it is acknowledged that there was insufficient time to create a shared vision and plan for biodiversity protection and management in each area, and develop a common understanding of how Strategic Management Prospects could be used to assist in the delivery of this. Hence when the grants process opened there were competing views of what should be funded and concern amongst some participants about the use of SMP as a guide to where good biodiversity opportunities existed. An independent probity adviser provided advice throughout the process about avoiding or managing conflicts of interest, however DELWP acknowledges that more needs to be done to manage competing interests through future processes.

Action: DELWP will make time available in the next period of BRP to create a shared vision and plan for biodiversity protection and management in each area.

Action: DELWP will better separate BRP strategic planning from investment rounds in the future, to facilitate improved collaboration.

Action: DELWP will better separate project development and assessment roles in future investment rounds.

Knowledge

Biodiversity 2037 signals a move away from only planning for species one at a time and instead consider all species. It has an increased focus on taking preventative action across the landscape, with an emphasis on cost-effectiveness, to secure the greatest benefit for the most species (and prevent the most extinctions) over the longer term. The use of the SMP decision support tool is designed to assist people to consider biodiversity actions that are focussed on the key directions of *Biodiversity 2037*.

The first major use of SMP in this investment phase of BRP has demonstrated its applicability as a tool to guide strategic planning and project locations and actions. However, equally importantly, it has highlighted many areas for improvement to build understanding and confidence among stakeholders about the use of this tool and in using some of the new concepts in *Biodiversity 2037*.

There is an enormous amount of data and many different concepts brought together in SMP that make it challenging to comprehend and to “trust” without a reasonable opportunity for familiarisation. DELWP is aware of this and is continuing a program of engagement and training to build awareness and understanding amongst users, including the process to continually improve the datasets and models on which SMP is based including incorporation of local knowledge.

DELWP has developed several products to explain and support users to start using SMP in a range of real-life user situations. However, DELWP acknowledges that the communications around how SMP was to be used in this first phase of the BRP process could have been better, and its implementation by Working Groups in the process appears to have been inconsistent. DELWP also acknowledges that there were limited opportunities to change project details once entered on-line (due to system limitations) and this reduced the opportunity to adjust how the balance of SMP and other information was applied. Improving communications about our processes, ensuring systems are better integrated and fit for purpose for stakeholders and upskilling stakeholders will all be essential for the next phase of BRP and our future investment processes.

Action: DELWP will expand its program of engagement and training to build awareness and understanding amongst users about SMP, including the use of champions within partner organisations.

Action: DELWP will progressively publish the models that underpin SMP including their assumptions and uncertainties to assist with better understanding and targeted data collection to continuously improve these over time.

Action: DELWP will continually improve the datasets and models on which SMP is based by incorporating local and other knowledge.

Action: DELWP will better integrate spatial data and other key requirements of *Biodiversity 2037* into relevant systems to meet user needs.