Progress Update – Delivering a better approach to managing biodiversity impacts of renewable energy projects

VICTORIA
State Government

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Joint Ministers' Foreword

Climate change is among the greatest risks to biodiversity and is a critical issue for Victoria and the world.

To help address this risk, Victoria is undergoing a once-in-a-generation electricity transition. As the state's ageing and unreliable coal-fired power plants retire, they are being replaced with cleaner, more reliable renewables. Renewable energy projects also help mitigate a key threat to biodiversity by cutting greenhouse gas emissions and reducing the worst impacts of climate change.

The Victorian Government has legislated targets for renewable energy generation of 65% by 2030 and 95% by 2035. These are critical to achieving our world-leading climate targets to reduce Victoria's emissions by 45–50% below 2005 levels by 2030, 75–80% by 2035 and achieving net zero emissions by 2045.

We've got a strong track record of delivering on our renewable energy targets. We met our 25% goal in 2020, already reached the 40% target by 2025 and our target for 65% by 2030 is absolutely achievable. For 2024/25, renewable energy was 42.4% of Victoria's electricity generation and we have a strong pipeline of projects that put us well on track to meet the next set of targets.

But renewable energy capacity must continue to expand. Meeting our future targets means building even more renewable energy projects. Our aim is to do it quickly and carefully as we accelerate the pace of delivery across the state to meet 2035 targets.

We're making sure this growth doesn't negatively impact on Victoria's unique biodiversity and environment. To support delivery, environmental and planning assessment and approval processes for renewable energy projects must be predictable, efficient and support robust and evidence-based decisions to better manage impacts to at risk biodiversity.

In April 2024, we released the Joint Ministers' Statement – *A better approach to managing biodiversity impacts of renewable energy projects*. We committed to improving upfront planning for renewable energy projects and providing clearer requirements for managing impacts. The Statement outlined key actions that would be undertaken to address critical knowledge gaps and regulatory uncertainties, and to improve the engagement and facilitation processes between government and industry that will support faster and better assessments and approvals.

This Progress Update outlines what we have done so far to deliver against those actions, and how we are continuing to improve the settings required to facilitate renewable energy development while supporting biodiversity values.

Since releasing the Statement, we have:

- completed targeted research that gets us closer to filling biodiversity knowledge gaps that impede efficient assessment and approvals
- released better tools and guidance to support assessment processes and decisions, including publication of the *Handbook for the development of renewable energy in Victoria*
- adopted the first Victorian Transmission Plan to enable implementation of renewable energy zones that coordinate and direct investment, and this has been formally recognised in the Planning Policy Framework of the Victoria Planning Provisions and all planning schemes
- supported energy projects through streamlined planning under the Development Facilitation Program
- committed to speeding up environment effects statements (EES) and using alternative quicker second tier of assessment via environment reports
- implemented digital transformation for EESs and EES reforms, including sharper risk-based scopes, streamlined agency engagement and focused public review
- worked in partnership with the Commonwealth Government to agree a bilateral Renewable Energy Transformation Agreement that allocates capacity to Victorian projects under the Capacity Investment Scheme and to investigate options for initiating bioregional planning in Victoria.

We remain committed to transforming Victoria's energy system. We will continue to prioritise actions that enhance certainty for industry while protecting our unique biodiversity and look forward to continuing to work with you as we progress this important work.

The Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio MP

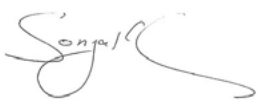
Minister for Energy and Resources
Minister for Climate Action
Minister for the State Electricity Commission.

The Hon. Enver Erdogan MLC

Minister for Environment
Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation
Minister for Outdoor Recreation.

The Hon. Sonya Kilkenny MP

Attorney-General
Minister for Planning
Minister for Violence Reduction
Minister for Finance.



Context – delivering a better approach

Victoria continues to lead the way in transitioning our energy system to 95 per cent renewable energy by 2035 and net zero emissions by 2045. To facilitate this necessary transition, in April 2024 the Victorian Government released the Joint Ministers' Statement – *A better approach to managing biodiversity impacts of renewable energy projects*.

The Statement outlined key actions that support robust, well-informed and consistent assessment and management of biodiversity impacts, including:

- **Improved spatial analysis** that identifies risks and opportunities for biodiversity harm reduction and renewable energy development.
- **Targeted research projects** to fill critical knowledge gaps about impacts on bird and bat species and the effectiveness of mitigation measures, which will inform policy development.
- **Improved guidance** for proponents and decision-makers that reflects a strategic and risk-based approach and aligns with global best practice.

The Statement also outlined a commitment to investigate the options for further streamlining planning and approval functions to increase our ability to anticipate, consider and evaluate risks, impacts and stakeholder concerns.

This Progress Update outlines how the Government has progressed delivery of these actions to facilitate more predictable and efficient planning and assessment processes that support robust decisions based on the best available science. The Government is also pursuing a range of broader initiatives to support the work outlined in the Statement and ensure that Victoria is best placed to deliver our energy transition and meet the challenge of climate change while protecting our unique biodiversity.

Better information, tools and guidance to mitigate biodiversity impacts

Improved spatial analysis to identify risks and opportunities

Action we committed to in the Statement	Status
By July 2024, we will release improved tools for mapping biodiversity risks.	Complete

What we did:

In 2024, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) released two new maps – the Marine Biodiversity Values map and the land-based Habitat Value map.

The maps combine information on thousands of species' habitats to show the relative biodiversity values of different locations across 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 and 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 on the natural environment.

Targeted research projects to fill critical knowledge gaps

Action we committed to in the Statement	Status
By October 2024, we will complete targeted research to fill gaps in our understanding of the impacts of wind energy on at-risk bird and bat species and inform development of standards and mitigation measures.	Complete ✔

What we did:

DEECA's Arthur Rylah Institute for Environmental Research (ARI) has completed several research projects investigating the impacts of renewable energy on biodiversity, in particular the collision risk to bats and birds from wind energy facilities and the potential effectiveness of mitigation options.

Key findings[1] include:

- Developing a new Species of Concern list, identifying the threatened species at most risk of population level impacts from wind energy facilities to enable assessments, approval processes and mitigations to be considered proportionate to the risks.
- Undertaking an extensive, systematic review of international research on the impacts of onshore wind energy facilities on bats and birds, and options to mitigate impacts, to enable learnings to be transferred to the Victorian context where relevant.
- A contemporary understanding of mortality rates for bats and birds at operating wind energy facilities across Victoria, with modelling undertaken to estimate annual mortality rates for all species found during post-construction mortality monitoring, and to document the seasonal patterns of these mortalities.
- Describing wetland characteristics required for Brolga breeding and mapping suitable areas to inform habitat protection and potential restoration options, including a new Brolga Breeding Habitat Suitability Model.
- Investigating the heights at which Southern Bent-wing Bats fly to inform risk assessments.
- Using expert judgements to assess the potential effectiveness of mitigation options to reduce collision risks for bats and birds, with the finding that no one mitigation is likely to reduce all risks and that a combination of mitigations is likely to be necessary. This assessment also highlighted the options where there was high confidence in the level of effectiveness, and those that show potential but require testing and further research.
- Developing the evidence base for guidelines for pre- and post-construction monitoring to improve the data available to enable more robust assessments of risk to birds and bats.
- Developing an approach to consider significant impact thresholds and identifying datasets and methods for improved consistency in estimation of impacts to inform development of guidance and support cumulative impact assessment of wind energy facilities on biodiversity.
- Investigating critical uncertainties in impact assessments including calibrating species' Habitat Distribution Models to better reflect species occupancy; evaluating a suite of metrics for impact assessment and improving our understanding of the relationship between impacts to species' habitat and their overall persistence.

1 Research findings are published on the ARI website at: https://www.ari.vic.gov.au/research/strategic-projects-for-policy/science-for-renewable-energy-policy

Improved guidance – a new Handbook

Actions we committed to in the Statement	Status
By October 2024, we will publish new guidance to support siting, design and operation of renewable energy projects to better manage biodiversity impacts. We will seek input as we develop new support tools and guidance.	Complete

What we did:

DEECA released the *Handbook for the development of renewable energy in Victoria*, which outlines the policies and priorities the Government considers necessary to achieve a balance between facilitating renewable energy development and protecting Victoria's unique biodiversity. It applies to onshore renewable energy facilities that are likely to have an impact on threatened bird and bat species.

The Handbook:

- outlines a risk-based approach for applying the mitigation hierarchy to manage the impacts through existing environmental assessment and planning approval processes
- clarifies the Government's expectations in relation to managing impacts on threatened bird and bat species
- describes the methods that can be used by project proponents to manage the impacts on threatened bird and bat species of their projects using the mitigation hierarchy
- incorporates specific guidance to manage impacts on certain threatened bird and bat species from onshore wind energy facilities.

It is intended to be used by:

- proponents considering developing onshore renewable energy facilities in Victoria
- responsible authorities and stakeholders who provide advice and consider the appropriateness of a renewable energy proposal in any given location.

DEECA completed an extensive consultation and engagement process throughout 2024 and 2025 to develop the Handbook[2]. This included working with Traditional Owners and First Nations groups as the traditional custodians of the land to consider how cultural values could be embedded in the policy. The feedback and input provided through the consultation and engagement process was critical to the finalisation of the Handbook, including species-specific guidance.

The Handbook commenced on the day it was published. However, it includes transitional arrangements so that it does not impact projects that are already at advanced stages of environmental assessment and/or planning approval.

DEECA will continue to work closely with Traditional Owners and First Nations people and industry and environment stakeholders in the implementation of the new guidance to ensure it is effective for managing biodiversity impacts and supports certainty and predictability in decision-making. This includes establishing a new Stakeholder Reference Group that will monitor and review how the guidance is working in practice, and what refinements, improvements or further guidance are needed.

DEECA is also supporting regulators to apply the risk-based approach outlined in the Handbook in a consistent and coordinated way.

2 Further information on the consultation process is available on the Engage Victoria website

Streamlined planning facilitation and assessment

Actions we committed to in the Statement	Status
To better support industry and the renewable energy transition, DTP and DEECA will: • facilitate early and frequent engagement and discussions with proponents, prior to and throughout the operational life of energy infrastructure proposals • work with proponents to develop adaptive mitigation and management measures and strategies that respond to outcomes on the ground • provide accelerated planning pathways for eligible renewable energy projects under the Development Facilitation Program.	Complete

What we did:

Supporting energy projects through streamlined planning

Since April 2024, renewable energy projects have benefitted from accelerated planning processes through Victoria's Development Facilitation Program (DFP). The DFP has cut planning permit timeframes for energy projects to under four months on average, whilst maintaining robust assessment processes and public participation in decision making. Importantly, projects assessed through the DFP must still comply with the requirements of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, planning scheme provisions, applicable policy frameworks, and all other relevant legislation.

With the removal of third-party appeal rights, the DFP has seen previous Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) delays of around nine months fall away. The program continues to undertake public notice of applications and provide opportunities for the community to have a say in projects, with all submissions considered as part of the planning application assessment. Under the DFP, 30 projects have been approved, representing $11.7 billion in investment. These projects could create up to 3,800 new jobs in construction and operations and could generate enough power for 784,000 households annually, with battery storage capacity sufficient to meet peak evening demand for approximately 2,600,000 homes.

Improving and speeding up environment effects statements

Victoria continues to make it simpler to do business.

The Economic Growth Statement announced in December 2024, commits the state to making the EES process more efficient. The EES reforms being implemented target an eighteen-month process for new EESs and a twelve-month process for new environment reports. Informed by independent expert advice and engagement, the EES reforms and process enhancements have been implemented to support proponents as they navigate Victorian environmental assessment requirements. These reform initiatives have been rolled out progressively during 2025 and will continue in 2026.

EES reforms implemented during 2025 included sharper risk-based scoping requirements to focus assessments for new EESs, as well as streamlined agency engagement and advice to assist proponents. New, focused terms of reference were implemented for EES Inquiries (public review) in late 2025 and 2026.

2025 also saw the normalisation of an alternative, formal second tier of assessment via environment reports, a shorter process tailored to focus on quite specific matters and reduce administrative burden.

A comprehensive new digital system for EESs was rolled out in July 2025, with an online portal for proponents to progress and track their projects. This new digital system transforms and modernises EES and environment report processes. It reduces manual work, streamlines communication with partner agencies, and delivers a more consistent and timely experience for proponents and the community. The new digital system is being expanded in 2026 to encompass environment reports, public-facing mapping and more effective reporting. The system helps better management, tracking and reporting of projects to help proponents and agencies reduce delays.

Performance uplift for DEECA case management and advice

DEECA has reformed the way it delivers planning and environmental advice by restructuring its internal teams, reprioritising internal resources and investing in additional case managers and technical experts with engagement capabilities. This targeted approach ensures proponents receive clearer, more timely guidance and continuity in case management, improving consistency and reducing delays in the assessment process.

By strengthening its advisory capacity, DEECA is providing greater certainty to developers, particularly in relation to complex energy and priority projects, while continuing to uphold environmental standards and support efficient decision-making.

As a result of the changes, DEECA has improved the timeliness of the delivery of advice for energy projects from 63 percent in Q4 2023–24 to 94 percent in Q4 2025–26. These results reflect a sustained uplift in operational performance, improved case management, and a strong alignment with government priorities in renewable energy and infrastructure development.

Planning assessment and the Victorian Transmission Plan

In September 2025, the Minister for Planning approved Amendment VC268 to update the Victoria Planning Provisions by incorporating the Victorian Transmission Plan (VTP) into the Planning Policy Framework in all Victorian planning schemes. The amendment strengthens guidance for decision-makers and provides greater certainty for communities, renewable energy proponents and other stakeholders.

A significant number of energy generation, storage and transmission projects will be located within the Renewable Energy Zones (REZs) identified within the VTP, which was published on 29 August 2025.

REZs are supported by proposed new transmission infrastructure that will unlock the potential for renewable energy generation and storage in a coordinated and efficient manner. The zones have been informed by extensive consultation and strategic land use assessments that integrate multiple land use factors and community perspectives to inform the development of new projects.

Other recent planning system improvements to aid delivery of renewable energy infrastructure include Amendment VC271 to provide for subdivision of land containing utility infrastructure, and VC279 to update planning scheme definitions to facilitate neighbourhood batteries and define large-scale systems.

Delivering the energy transition

In August 2024, the Government released ***Cheaper, Cleaner, Renewable: Our Plan for Victoria's Electricity Future***. This Plan lays out the Government's vision for Victoria's future electricity system. It provides a whole-of-system view of the actions the Government is taking to deliver an affordable, reliable and secure electricity transition for Victoria through to 2035.

The Victorian Transmission Plan

The Government, through VicGrid, is changing the way REZs and transmission infrastructure are planned through the Victorian Transmission Investment Framework (VTIF) reforms, which include the development of a long-term strategic VTP.

Developed by VicGrid, the 2025 VTP identifies REZs for Victoria, as well as the transmission projects needed to enable REZ development over the next 15 years.

The VTP will ensure we build the right amount of energy infrastructure in the right places at the right time to keep the lights on and deliver power to Victorian homes and businesses. It will also ensure we don't build more than we need, so we can minimise impacts on landholders, communities and the environment and keep down costs to reduce bill impacts.

Early and meaningful engagement is at the heart of our new approach. We will seek to partner with First Peoples and engage early and often with landholders, communities and industry to develop the plan.

This is a big change to how energy infrastructure has been planned in the past.

Getting this plan right will reduce impacts, avoid unnecessary bill increases and give the energy industry the certainty it needs to invest in the new renewable energy Victoria needs for the future.

On 29 May 2026, the Minister for Energy and Resources issued renewable energy zone orders for 5 onshore renewable energy zones, and a Gippsland shoreline zone. By declaring Victorian REZs, the Government is signalling to developers the areas where energy infrastructure, like transmission lines, will be located and the areas that will be prioritised for renewable generation.

VicGrid's new approach to transmission planning features a strategic land use assessment to identify suitable areas for energy infrastructure development. Unlike previous transmission planning in Victoria, this assessment considers key land use, environmental and community factors early in the transmission planning process, well ahead of projects being identified. This will allow planners to identify the most appropriate geographic areas for generation and transmission development across the state, while avoiding highly sensitive areas.

The assessment process will also see VicGrid seek to partner with First Peoples and engage landholders, local communities and other key stakeholders, to ensure that local and regional views and values help shape the outcomes of the assessment.

Energy market developments

Victoria and the Commonwealth Governments have agreed a bilateral Renewable Energy Transformation Agreement (RETA) that allocates capacity to Victorian projects under the Capacity Investment Scheme (CIS) tenders.

Victoria's total allocation is at least 5.0 GW / 11 TWh of renewable energy generation capacity (post economic and network curtailment) and 1.7 GW of four-hour duration equivalent dispatchable capacity (6.8 GWh).

These capacity allocations provide an important signal to the market of the levels of investment expected to meet Victorian energy transition needs by 2030. This assists the Commonwealth in meeting its target of 82 per cent renewable energy by 2030 but also provides an important contribution to the Victorian 2030 Renewable Energy Target and the 2030 Energy Storage Target.

CIS auctions are expected every six months to, and including, 2026, with a tender schedule of cumulative allocations to Victoria for generation and dispatchable capacity as follows.

CIS Tenders in calendar year	Cumulative allocation generation capacity (GW / TWh)	Cumulative allocation dispatchable capacity (GW / GWh)
2024	2.8 / 6.2	1.0 / 4.0
2025	3.8 / 8.0	1.5 / 6.0
2026	5.0 / 11.0	1.7 / 6.8
Cumulative total	**5.0 / 11.0**	**1.7 / 6.8**

A cap for utility scale solar projects supported via the CIS process will apply to Victorian allocations, with a maximum installation of 1.5GW. This will ensure appropriate opportunities exist for wind projects in CIS tenders, which will be critical in Victoria as our energy system transitions. Having the right mix of generation will ensure Victorian homes and businesses don't pay more than necessary for the renewable energy transition.

Our priorities for 2026 to ensure continuous improvement

The initial actions outlined in the statement were focused on critical issues facing the onshore wind industry. So far, the Government has delivered a number of actions to support the energy transition and better manage the impacts of renewable energy projects on biodiversity, including at risk bird and bat species.

But we knew there would be additional actions required to ensure planning and environmental assessment and approval processes are fit for purpose over the longer term. The Government is committed to continuous improvement to support accelerated and improved planning and environmental assessment and approvals for energy and other priority projects. Our priority actions for 2026, outlined below, will focus on how we continue to build upon and improve the actions completed to date.

Continued improvements to spatial tools

By December 2026, DEECA will update priority Habitat Distribution Models, web-based spatial tools and Victoria's Land Cover Time series.

DEECA continues to develop and test interactive spatial tools to improve upfront planning for renewable energy projects and provide clearer requirements for managing biodiversity impacts. This includes developing and testing web-based tools to calculate the modelled species' habitats that contribute to the Habitat Value ranking in any part of the State.

Habitat Distribution Models for birds and bats on the Species of Concern List are currently being refined with new input datasets of species observations covering south-eastern Australia. These models will be included in future upgrades to the Habitat Value map and the web tools that analyse species within user-defined areas.

An important input to habitat modelling is the Victoria's Land Cover Time series spatial product. This dataset will be improved to cover the period of 2019 to 2024 which will allow future habitat modelling efforts to more accurately represent remaining native habitats and account for the cumulative impacts of more recent habitat loss on Victoria's biodiversity.

Continued research to improve our understanding

By December 2026, DEECA will complete further research to better understand impacts on bird and bat species and the effectiveness of mitigation measures, such as buffers and curtailment.

Further research is underway to:

- Determine factors influencing where and when mortalities are most likely to occur, by modelling drivers of mortality at different spatial (regional, landscape, site and turbine) and temporal scales.
- Improve our understanding of collision risk and disturbance impacts to Brolga.
- Investigate bat activity in relation to wind speed and other weather variables to inform development of smart curtailment options.
- Quantify bat activity at different distances from suitable habitats to inform decisions on appropriate buffer distances.

The Government is committed to continuing to reevaluate and refine our approach in the light of new data and knowledge generated through this critical research.

Continuous improvement of DEECA's role in planning and environmental assessments and approvals

In August 2025, DEECA completed a review of its role in environment and planning assessment and approval processes for large-scale renewable energy projects in Victoria. As part of this review, we sought feedback from industry and environmental stakeholders on how DEECA can improve the way it carries out its role. We are also working with the Stakeholder Reference Group to identify what supplementary guidance is needed to support effective implementation of the Handbook.

Drawing on the outcomes of the review and feedback from stakeholders, DEECA has identified further priority actions that we will implement in 2026.

By August 2026, DEECA will develop guidance to support effective discussions between DEECA and proponents during pre-application stages.

This guidance will support clear and efficient engagement between proponents and DEECA during pre-application stages for renewable energy projects, providing greater certainty on how and when to engage DEECA for advice and clear expectations for information requirements and timing of responses.

By August 2026, DEECA will develop supplementary guidance to support effective implementation of the Handbook.

The intent of this guidance is to provide additional information on what processes or actions are required to apply the Handbook. So far, key areas identified for supplementary guidance include:

- identifying and assessing risk factors under the Handbook, which helps to inform what measures under the mitigation hierarchy should be used to manage impacts
- developing and agreeing monitoring, reporting and adaptive management approaches and compensation plans, including more information on identifying and implementing effective compensation actions
- approaches to identify unmapped Brolga flocking areas and bat roosting sites
- protocols for engaging with landowners and the community when conducting site assessments and using the data collected.

We will continue to engage with First Nations people, stakeholders and the community as we develop and finalise this supplementary guidance.

By August 2026, DEECA will explore options for implementing bioregional planning in Victoria, including establishing a strategic offsets framework and data sharing mechanisms to support better impact assessment.

DEECA has begun investigating options for strategic planning approaches and a new strategic offsetting and compensation framework that will support renewable energy development. As part of this, DEECA worked closely with the Commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water to identify opportunities for alignment and coordination between our regulatory frameworks through bioregional planning. This includes investigating options for establishing bioregional planning pilots in priority areas in Victoria for renewable energy and critical mineral development that will support faster and better approvals at both state and national levels.

The goal of bioregional planning is to speed up environmental assessments and approvals while improving protection for biodiversity by identifying in advance areas for prioritising development or conservation and enable strategic offsetting. DEECA will engage with key stakeholders and utilise expert advice to identify solutions that will enable faster and more certain decisions for renewable energy projects, while supporting regional approaches to managing local and cumulative impacts of such development.

DEECA will also continue to engage with proponents to identify if there are better mechanisms for sharing important data from pre and post construction surveys to improve impact assessments, particularly for cumulative impacts. Noting this will need to factor in privacy and confidentiality requirements for sensitive information.

As we continue to identify and implement priority actions, we will provide updates on our progress.

By October 2026, DTP will develop operational reforms to the Victoria Planning Provisions to provide decision-makers with better tools and guidance to support project assessments and decisions.

DTP undertakes continuous review of planning frameworks and assessment processes to ensure Victoria's planning system remains current and fit for purpose. Potential operational improvements to the planning system currently under investigation relate to:

- updating planning scheme definitions to provide clarity on assessment processes for long-duration energy storage projects, such as pumped hydro or compressed air energy storage
- enabling whole-of-project assessment processes to allow integrated consideration of energy generation facilities and construction transport route impacts
- formalising the role of fire authorities in planning permit applications for energy facilities to strengthen environmental risk assessments.

By October 2026, DTP will have rolled out the complete suite of tools and reforms to support proponents and stakeholders, speeding up assessments, targeting 18-months for new EESs and 12-months for new environment reports:

Building on the EES reforms implemented already during 2025, the following reform initiatives will be progressed and completed in 2026.

- The new EES digital system will be expanded to encompass all environment reports and all pre-referrals and referrals processing, including a new on-line form for EES referrals.
- A range of guidance and technical advisory notes will be published either online or through the new digital system, covering all aspects of reforms and process improvements to support proponents and stakeholders, including: risk-based scoping and EES study programs, environment report processes, streamlined agency engagement and review, EES preparation guidance, public review guidance and alternative forms of Inquiry.

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