

Dear State Member of Parliament,

This is a Letter of Concern regarding the cancellation of my Crown Land Water Frontage Licence on the Little Yarra River to accommodate the State Emblems Conservation area. Firstly let me make a few basic points:

This letter is **not** about the core areas/Nature Reserves of the State Emblems Conservation Area

My concern is with the inclusion of the **Streamside reserves** of the **Little Yarra river, Britannia Creek, Yarra River and the Badger Creek** into the State Emblems Conservation Area. These reserves are through the centre of the prime farming land of the Yarra Ranges Shire, interconnecting many of the main towns and residential area's of the region.

It must be noted that these Streamside Reserves are often more than just the basic 20/30 metre setback from the riverbank. Because of historic survey work the setbacks can be up to 100 metres from the riverbank, accounting for anywhere between 5 to 50 acres. This is a very significant loss of prime farmland in the heart of the Yarra Valley.

The first I knew of this proposal was when I received my cancellation notice on 15th may 2015. The public notices and letters did not headline "Cancellation of Water Frontage Licences", they highlighted the Yellingbo Area and the three state emblems, the only mention of streamside reserves was in fine print at the bottom of the notice

After receiving the **Letter of Cancellation** I have thoroughly researched the Yellingbo Investigation on the VEAC's website and the public notices put out advertising this investigation. I submit the following comments and observations:-

Historical context

I note in two of the VEAC reports they include an **Acknowledgement to Country**, basically recognising the contribution of Aboriginal people, past and present to the investigation area. The Wurundjeri people who history tells where the past **Custodians** of the stream sides of the Yarra system, using them extensively in their daily lives. White settlement basically pushed the Wurundjeri back out of the stream sides, disenfranchising them, with little if any regard for the effect on these people. The present **Custodians and Carers** of these reserves, being the Steam Frontage Licence Holders and the non- Licenced landowners, who's history of looking after these streamside areas goes back over 100 years, are now also being pushed out of these streamside area's with little if any regard for the effects on us.

As a present Custodian of the stream side land I know how the Wurundjeri felt.

I note in the "**TERMS of REFERENCE**" issued by the government to the VEAC for the Yellingbo Investigation there is no mention of the **Present Custodians**.

Biological Diversity and Ecological Values

There is a focus in the reports on bio-diversity and ecological values, it is almost implied that the current landowners/licence

holders have downgraded the biological diversity and ecological values of the investigation area. Let me give an example of my own small area of River Frontage. It is a relatively small frontage of about 600 mts long by the standard 20 mtrs wide, have planted over 300 tree ferns including the two rare and threatened local species, many ground ferns, have maintained the remnant large manna and swamp gums, planted many young manna, swamp and the locally threatened Green Scentbark gums, planted many non-indigenous natives such as grevillea's, bottlebrushes, hakeas(to provide nectar for the abundant bird life when the indigenous natives aren't flowering). In small billabongs have planted many native aquatics. There is a rich diversity of flora and fauna, too long to list ,in this small streamside reserve. **The landscaping and maintenance of all the above has been done in such a way as to not create a fire hazard.**

It must be noted that modern farming practices have changed greatly in recent years, the trend away from harmful chemical use to more environmentally friendly farming methods, organic farming, Bio-dynamic farming, Integrated pest management systems, strict chemical registration for pest control, all of this is now part of the farming scene in the investigation area. A biologically active soil under pasture for instance has a diverse microflora of bacteria, worms, fungi, etc all capable of containing nutrient in colloidal humus, sequencing carbon, greater water retention, etc. The soil under a stand of native vegetation is different, is less diverse and achieves less of the above outcomes. I would contend the present harmonious mixture of land use eg, different types of grazing, vineyards, stands of re-vegetated indigenous plantings, remnant stands of vegetation, life style use, agi-tourism, all or some of which extends into the current River Reserves—**increase the biological diversity and ecological values** in the River reserves. The focus in the investigation to just Indigenous Native Vegetation in respect to bio-diversity and ecological values, in my view is a very narrow focus indeed.

Continuous Corridors for Habitat

The proposal in the reports to have continuous corridors of indigenous native vegetation for native flora and fauna is flawed in it's objectives and likely to be self-defeating in it's likely outcomes in my view. Let me explain, firstly I am only referring to the above mentioned river reserves, I am not referring to the core areas around Yellingbo etc. The reality on the ground when these river reserves have been densely re-vegetated, and a lot already have under Melbourne Water's Stream frontage scheme, is they become havens for feral cats (because of the closeness of residential areas), foxes and now the more recent threat -the movement of feral deer. Feral cats which have already populated the older areas of re-vegetation, are very damaging to the native bird life and also the small marsupials (small possums, antechinus, river rats, etc.) . Foxes which are in large numbers in our whole region, and are very much favoured by dense re-vegetation, impact badly on water birds and marsupials. Feral deer are now in huge numbers in our surrounding state forest, immense damage has already been done to the lower story vegetation and the

habitat of the likes of the ring tail possum in our forests, they are now starting to move down any native vegetated corridors into farmland. They require specialised high fencing to keep them out. The proposed corridors of indigenous native vegetation will be ideal highways for these deer. Now to the main self-defeating aspect of this proposal, wildfire risk, to densely re-vegetate with no cleaning out of the understory which is the present policy. Fire will travel these corridors at breath taking speed wiping out all flora and fauna- then move into surrounding state forest and do untold damage.

Economic and Social consequences

I see as part of the VEAC charter they should have regard of economic and social consequences of any proposal. Some of the economic fall-out to this proposal will be as a direct result of loss of considerable prime farming land on some properties (as indicated above). There will also be a loss of property value- a property with river frontage access has always attracted a premium. The impact of a 'highway for feral animals' particularly deer could be considerable. And of course the impact of wildfire—these "Corridors of Fuel" could have serious economic ramifications. Social consequences will result from the above, also recreation and tourism will be impacted from the present policy of densely re-vegetating the river reserves. It will become difficult to access the area for walking, fishing, canoeing, etc. Access both visual and physical is important to attract tourists, under the present policy this will disappear. I don't think the economic and social ramifications have been fully considered.

Wildfire Threat

Yarra Ranges is ranked 2nd in the world for Wildfire Risk, the shire is made up of 77% native forest and this investigation proposes to densely re-vegetate the river reserves interconnecting the main towns, residential areas and state forests of the Upper Yarra Region.

In the investigation reports there is reference for the need for Fire Management Plans and the need for funding for these studies. In respect to the area I am referring to – the reserves of the Yarra and it's immediate tributaries.

I might be able to save some time and money, having experienced the bushfires of 1983 and 2009 firsthand, when its 40+ degrees and the north winds howling, there is only one effective Fire Management Plan for these river reserves:- **Do not have continuous interconnecting corridors of dense indigenous native bush for the fire to travel along.** The present situation or what exist at the moment, with sections of bush, then sections cleared grazing land interspersed with wineries and cropping land is the perfect fire plan for these river reserves.

Conclusion

I respectfully request that the inclusion of the Crown land reserves of the Yarra River, Little Yarra River, Britannia Creek and Badger Creek in the State Emblems Conservation Area be reviewed, I believe the investigation that took place was far too narrow in its considerations.

My considered opinion is the above reserves should not be part of State Emblems Conservation Area.

Yours Respectfully

Geoff Cochrane—long- time water frontage licence holder.

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