



Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

MEDIA RELEASE

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VEAC report highlights serious and urgent environmental problem along River Murray

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) today released its River Red Gum Forests Investigation Draft Proposals Paper. The paper contains draft proposals for public land use in a 1600 kilometre corridor of land along the River Murray in northern Victoria, and includes the significant River Red Gum forests at Barmah, Gunbower and Lindsay-Wallpolla.

VEAC is an independent body that makes public land recommendations to the State Government. It began this Investigation in 2005 at the request of the Minister for Environment. In carrying out its Investigation the Council has taken into account the protection of biodiversity and other natural values, access to public land resources and the full range of social and economic implications.

According to VEAC Chairperson, Duncan Malcolm, the health of the River Red Gum forests along the River Murray, which includes the world's two largest River Red Gum forests, was far worse than expected. "There are significant areas of riverine forests with severely stressed and dying trees and nearly 400 threatened and near-threatened plant and animal species," said Mr Malcolm. "If we don't do something soon tens of thousands of hectares of forests, woodlands and wetlands may be totally lost or severely degraded. This is a big wake up call for anyone who cares about the future of the River Murray and the River Red Gum forests and protecting this unique biodiversity for future generations.

Insufficient water, demographic changes and changing land use have placed serious pressures on the environment. Climate change is expected to place additional pressures on the area. According to VEAC, 60 per cent of the native vegetation in the Investigation area has been cleared since pre-European settlement. "If we don't do something about the pressures leading to the demise of these forests, including the chronic lack of water, we risk losing this valuable part of our heritage," he said

"In formulating our draft proposals, we were conscious of the need to protect the unique ecology of the region as well as identifying the social and economic implications for individuals and particular groups," said Mr Malcolm.

VEAC commissioned an independent assessment of the social and economic implications of its draft proposals. “Where any costs are incurred by individuals or particular groups, VEAC is recommending that the government provide assistance to those affected.”

In developing the Draft Proposals Paper, VEAC carried out a lengthy and extensive public consultation process which included two formal submission periods. More than 2000 submissions were received. “These submissions contained an enormous amount of valuable information and contributed substantially to the Draft Proposals Paper,” said Mr Malcolm.

“The process of selecting specific areas of public land for high levels of protection is often controversial. However, despite the differing views expressed by members of the communities about the future management of public land in the region, it is clear that all groups and individuals are concerned about the future of the River Red Gum forests.”

Members of the public have until 21 September 2007 to provide a submission on the draft proposals. “We would like to hear responses from any interested parties and will consider them in full detail before making our final report to the Minister in February 2008,” said Mr Malcolm.

VEAC will also be conducting a number of Community Forums in the Investigation area including Shepparton (August 6), Cohuna (August 7), Echuca (August 8), Nathalia (August 13), Mildura (August 14), Swan Hill (August 15) and Wangaratta (August 16).

Details about the community forums and further information about the Investigation, including downloadable versions of the Draft Proposals Paper, summary brochure, socio-economic assessment and terms of reference are available online at www.veac.vic.gov.au.

Copies of the Draft Proposals Paper can be viewed at regional DSE offices and public libraries in the Investigation area. The Paper is also available from Information Victoria (www.bookshop.vic.gov.au, 1800 366 356), the Planning Information Centre, Ground Floor, 8 Nicholson St, East Melbourne and from regional DSE offices in the Investigation area.

Summary of River Red Gum Forests Investigation Draft Proposals draft proposals

- Environmental watering proposals recommend replicating a natural over bank flood of around 4000 gigalitres of water at least once every five years to provide critical water to the River Red Gum forests and floodplains along the River Murray.
- Establishing a number of new national parks and nature conservation reserves. The amount of public land in the investigation area currently in the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System (a system of reserves to help conserve forest environments) comprises 6%, well below the state wide figure of almost 17%. Some of the proposed major new and additional areas of national park include Barmah National Park, Gunbower National Park, Lower Goulburn River National Park, Warby Range-Ovens River National Park, Leaghur-Koorangie National Park and Murray-Sunset National Park. Horse riding, four wheel driving and trail biking will still be permitted on existing roads and tracks within National Parks.
- Co-management of the proposed Barmah National Park and the Nyah-Vinifera Park, with a majority Aboriginal Board of Management. VEAC is also recommending that provision for hand-back lease-back of national parks be legislated. The need for resourcing and capacity building to support increased involvement in Traditional Owner groups in public land management and decision-making is highlighted.
- Creating a Murray River Park, a significant parkland which allows for a wide variety of recreational activities in a natural setting while protecting the environment.
- Protecting some additional internationally recognised wetlands. This will reduce some opportunities for duck hunting, but some key game reserves will remain available for hunting.
- The exclusion of stock grazing across public land and a five year phase out of grazing on public land water frontages.
- A reduction in the area of state forest of some 106,000 hectares to approximately 12,000 hectares. The area available for timber harvesting (not counting the areas in which harvesting is uneconomic, non-viable or prohibited) would reduce from about 25,000 to some 10,000 hectares.
- Increased diversity of camping experiences with more regulated camping in some areas to ensure the sustainability of this immensely popular activity.

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For further information please contact:

Lisa Bowman

Communications Manager

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

Phone 0419 386 729

