



Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

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River Red Gum Forests Investigation Final Report Released

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's (VEAC) River Red Gum Forests Investigation Final Report has been provided to the Minister for Environment and will be released on Friday, July 25 at 12.30pm. The Victorian Government then has to table the report and has six months after that to provide its response.

The River Red Gum Forests Investigation Final Report contains recommendations for the use of around 270,000 hectares of public land along the River Murray in northern Victoria from Lake Hume to the South Australian border and includes the lower reaches of the Avoca, Loddon, Campaspe, Goulburn, King, Ovens and Kiewa Rivers. The investigation area is habitat to more than 300 threatened or near-threatened animal and plant species and features Barmah and Gunbower forests, two of the world's largest River Red Gum Forests.

The Final Report is the culmination of more than three-years of extensive investigation by VEAC, which included public meetings and forums, consultative groups, analysis of approximately 9000 written submissions as well as the use of independent scientific and socio-economic research and studies.

As a result of VEAC's lengthy consultation process, a number of recommendations made in the Draft Proposals Paper have been changed in the Final Report.

One of the Final Report's key recommendations is a substantial increase in the size of the parks and reserves system, including the creation of five new national parks, that will provide long-term protection to threatened riverine forests and wetlands and provide a basis for economically significant recreation and tourism. There are many ecosystems in the area poorly represented in the current conservation reserve system, and there are numerous threatened species reliant on these habitats for survival.

Along with making recommendations to provide protection to this region's natural values and biodiversity, the Final Report also breaks new ground in Victoria by recommending significant changes to the way that Aboriginal Traditional Owners may increase their involvement in public land management and decision-making. VEAC is recommending co-management of a new Barmah National Park and a new Nyah-Vinifera Park through Boards of Management with majority Aboriginal membership, as well as encouraging opportunities for increased employment and training for local Aboriginal people in the new parks and reserves.

"The River Red Gum forests are much loved and enjoyed by the community, a passion clearly reflected in the thousands of thoughtful and often detailed submissions received - as well as through individuals VEAC members spoke directly to over the course of the Investigation," said Duncan Malcolm, Chairperson, VEAC.

According to Mr Malcolm, while there was a lot of support for the draft proposals there were three key concerns raised during the periods of public consultation, including: the amount of environmental water required to maintain the floodplain ecosystems; concerns about the continuation of traditional recreation activities, and impacts to the timber industry.

VEAC has altered its earlier environmental water recommendation that focused on an estimated water volume required to achieve adequate flooding (in the order of 4000 gigalitres every five years) via over bank flooding. The Final Report now focuses on the identification and mapping of natural values that need flooding to be sustained, thereby enabling strategic decisions to be made in accordance with the availability of water.

“Environmental watering remains a critical issue for healthy red gums, their associated floodplains and riverine communities,” explains Mr Malcolm. “VEAC is now recommending that environmental watering of the floodplain, through relevant existing state and national water programs, takes into account newly compiled information on water requirements, including the approximate frequency and extent of flooding to sustain this area.”

According to Mr Malcolm, these recommendations provide flexibility to allow for the impacts of climate change that are in keeping with State and Commonwealth Government announcements regarding water savings, water to be purchased and water allocated for the environment.

In terms of recreational activities, dispersed camping (independent camping at self selected sites, without facilities) will remain the main form of camping in riverine national parks, regional parks, the Murray River Park and state forests.

“We listened to the public’s concerns, especially in relation to dispersed camping along river frontages, and have changed our recommendation to enable this use to continue across national parks, other parks and state forests,” said Mr Malcolm.

Camping with dogs is permitted in the Murray River Park and regional parks, covering more than 80 per cent of the currently available River Murray frontage. VEAC has changed its draft proposals to provide additional areas for camping with dogs. Campfires are also now recommended to be permitted in all parks except during the high fire danger period.

In response to concerns about the adequacy of its domestic firewood recommendations, VEAC is now recommending 8 zones for firewood collection be provided, in addition to areas recommended to remain as state forest.

“To ensure that the biodiversity and indigenous values of this region’s unique and internationally significant forests are protected VEAC has made a number of recommendations, which have resulted in reducing the amount of areas of productive forest available for timber harvesting from 37,390 hectares to 9880 hectares,” said Mr Malcolm. The total area of State forest is larger than this, but approximately 65 percent is currently not used for commercial timber harvesting.

While it is recommended that the timber industry will continue in Gunbower, Benwell and Guttram State forests, VEAC is recommending that it cease in other areas, including Barmah state forest to enable the creation of the Barmah National Park. Whilst acknowledging the importance of the Barmah state forest for River Red Gum timber harvesting, VEAC firmly believes that the biodiversity and indigenous values are such that it is time for the whole of this unique and internationally significant forest to be protected in a world-class national park.

“VEAC is very conscious of the consequences of its recommendations for the timber industry and dependent communities and families,” said Mr Malcolm. “We have recommended that government examine a restructure of the industry that could provide assistance for affected businesses and communities, as previously provided in the Otways, East Gippsland and Bendigo State forests.

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.

For more information, or to download a copy of the Final Report, visit www.veac.vic.gov.au

For media enquiries phone Lisa Bowman, Communications Manager, VEAC 0419 386 729.

Photos and video of the River Red Gum Forests and associated ecosystems are available upon request