

# River Red Gum Forests Investigation

## INFORMATION SHEET

### Summary of major recommendations

VEAC has provided its final report to the Victorian government on the River Red Gum Forests Investigation after an extensive investigation, including public meetings and forums, consultative groups and analysis of approximately 9000 written submissions. The views and comments of the community were carefully considered in formulating the final recommendations.

#### ***Parks and conservation reserves***

VEAC has recommended a parks and reserves system that will give long-term protection to threatened riverine forests and wetlands and provide for economically significant recreation and tourism:

- five new and three expanded national parks along the Murray, Ovens and Goulburn Rivers
- the Murray River Park, which extends along the River Murray frontage from Wodonga to beyond Mildura, and provides for the continuation of a wide range of traditional recreational activities
- three new regional parks and three new and expanded other parks
- 29 substantially new and 21 expanded or retained nature conservation reserves to improve the protection of depleted and fragmented ecosystems.

The new parks and reserves represent a substantial increase in the size of the parks and conservation reserve system from 5.7 percent (69,640 hectares) to 14.2 percent (173,240 hectares) of the original extent of native vegetation.

#### ***Recreation***

VEAC has listened to the public's concerns in the draft proposals about recreation uses and has changed the final recommendations:

- Dispersed camping - the most popular form of camping on bush sites along the river frontages - is to continue in all recommended riverine parks and state forests
- Campfires and associated collection of firewood are to continue in all riverine parks and state forests except during the high fire danger period. This brings Victoria into alignment with fire restrictions along the River Murray in New South Wales and South Australia
- Camping with dogs in seven parks - the Murray River Park, three regional parks and three other parks. Dog camping areas have been increased and now cover more than 80 percent of the currently available River Murray frontage
- Recreational hunting will continue on 23 wildlife areas (state game reserves), as well as recommended state forest, water frontage areas and some water storages.

#### ***Environmental water***

Healthy River Red Gum forest and wetland ecosystems depend on environmental water. Riverine ecosystems in the investigation area cover approx 190 000 hectares of public land and many areas are under immediate threat due to inadequate watering. Recent surveys by Monash University scientists indicate that 75 percent of River Red Gum stands on the lower Murray floodplain are under stress.

VEAC has changed its earlier proposals and has not specified a volume of water that ecosystems may require as overbank flows. In its place, VEAC has identified and mapped ecosystems and natural values that need water to be sustained thereby enabling strategic decisions to be made in accordance with the availability of environmental water.

VEAC has recommended that environmental watering of the floodplain, conducted through relevant state and national programs, identify appropriate allocations of water to maintain the flood-dependent natural ecosystems. VEAC's approach dovetails with recent announcements from the State Government regarding water savings to be diverted to the environment and the Commonwealth Government's \$3 billion program to buy back water for the environment.

### ***Timber harvesting***

The timber harvesting industry will continue in Gunbower, Benwell and Guttram state forests. It will cease in other state forests to enable creation of parks such as the recommended Barmah National Park and Lower Goulburn River National Park.

### ***Domestic firewood***

VEAC has identified additional sites for domestic firewood collection, particularly for communities that don't have access to natural gas for heating and cooking. In response to concerns from residents, VEAC has recommended firewood zones in regional parks, particularly near Mildura, Barmah/Nathalia, Shepparton and Rutherglen. Also there will be continued access to firewood for the Echuca paddlesteamers.

### ***Indigenous involvement***

Recommendations for enhanced involvement of Indigenous people and Traditional Owners include co-management of Barmah National Park and Nyah-Vinifera Park through Boards of Management, and Aboriginal Advisory Committees for a number of other park and reserve areas.

### ***Domestic stock grazing***

Domestic stock grazing is recommended to cease immediately across most public land, however, a five year phase-out is proposed for water frontage land. Land managers may use grazing under contract for management purposes such as weed control or maintaining habitat structure.

### ***Economic analysis***

The benefit cost analysis shows a net economic benefit to Victoria of \$107m/year based on achieving adequate environmental water for flood-dependent ecosystems (excluding the costs of the environmental water), and \$37m/year even if there is no additional environmental water beyond existing commitments.

Benefits arise due to increased valuation based on the environmental attributes in new parks, increased protection of wetlands, cessation of grazing on streambanks, and increased tourism and recreation. The costs are due to reductions in timber harvesting, cessation of grazing, reduced hunting, fencing of streams, additional park management activities, and supporting affected rural communities.

The economic analysis has identified a potential impact on certain small towns along the River Murray. VEAC has recommended that government examine industry restructure packages for affected businesses, as previously provided in the Otways, East Gippsland and Bendigo regions.