

VICTORIA'S NATIVE VEGETATION RETENTION PROGRAM: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What's the problem?

An average of 15,000 ha of native vegetation was cleared each year between 1972 and 1987. Only 6% of freehold land is now forested. Overclearing has contributed to Victoria's significant land degradation problems, particularly salinity, which is expected to increase fourfold in the next 50 years. Loss of native vegetation has meant loss of habitat for fauna -- nearly one-third of Victoria's vertebrates are extinct or threatened.

Native vegetation also makes an important contribution to stabilising streams, providing shade and shelter for agriculture, landscape quality, limiting greenhouse impacts and maintaining gene pools.

Government and the community are spending millions on replanting, yet this has not been able to keep up with the loss.

2. What does the independent Panel say?

The Panel found a general consensus that some control over broadscale clearing is necessary, even among those opposed to the controls. They confirm that the retention of long-term, viable and sustainable farming practices is essential for the Victorian economy; and that the way to achieve this is to consider vegetation management within the context of long-term farm planning, through the preparation of land management plans.

The Panel recommends that amendment S5 be adopted, with changes to encourage landholders to prepare land management plans. Once such a plan is approved by the Departments of Conservation and Environment and Agriculture, no further applications would be necessary for clearing consistent with the plan. The panel recommends phasing out most of the current exemptions after five years as an incentive to prepare plans.

The Panel concluded that, while further large scale clearing for agriculture should not occur, some clearing may be justified to improve long-term productivity of existing farms, provided that a net community benefit can be demonstrated. Assistance and advice should be provided for those who bought land in the last 10 years with a demonstrable intention to clear for agriculture.

3. What has the Government decided?

The Government has adopted the panel's recommendations, with two minor variations. The Government strongly supports the consideration of vegetation management within the context of whole farm planning. Individuals or groups will have the flexibility to prepare their own land management plans, taking account of local circumstances. This new approach recognises the need for goodwill and co-operation from landholders and puts the emphasis on preventative action to minimise land degradation and habitat loss.

An assistance package including advice, and assistance with fencing and plan preparation will be provided.

4. When don't I need a permit?

No permit is required for minor clearing incidental to normal farm and domestic activities, including construction of fences, buildings and ancillary structures, maintenance of existing utilities, and fire prevention works. After five years this will change, as exemptions are removed to provide an incentive for development of land management plans and works programs.

5. How do I get a permit?

Choose whether to apply for a permit to clear or whether to prepare a land management plan or works program considering the vegetation in the broader land context.

Applications for both plans and permits should be made on the standard form, and forwarded to the local council with accompanying information and any required fee. Plan applications will be referred to the Departments of Conservation and Environment and Agriculture; clearing permit applications are referred to DCE, if over 10 ha.

6. What is a land management plan or a works program?

A land management plan can be a Whole Farm Plan, a Catchment Plan, a Roadsides Plan, a Fire Prevention Plan, or any other plan which considers the total management of the land and vegetation as a whole. It can cover a small or a large area. It considers matters such as land capability, ways of improving productivity, existing and potential land degradation, management and replacement of existing vegetation. It does not need to be a complex document. A works program is generally prepared by authorities such as councils, the SEC and the VicRoads.

7. What assistance is available?

The Panel recommends that landowners who have bought land within the last ten years with a demonstrable intention to clear for agriculture, should be provided with assistance. This may be in the form of vegetation management funds, exploring alternative land uses, advice on improving productivity, or assistance through the Rural Adjustment Scheme. Guidelines are being prepared for providing assistance under this program.

In addition, the Departments of Conservation and Environment and Agriculture can give general advice on the preparation of land management plans. Other forms of financial assistance and advice are available for a range of purposes including fencing, vermin and weed control and fauna protection. Contact your nearest Department of Conservation and Environment regional office.

8. What about regional differences?

Land management plans can be at any scale, and could cover a local area or region. They will provide an opportunity to develop local controls which will take into account local circumstances. They will be prepared through consultation with the local community.

9. How does the new amendment differ from the temporary controls?

The preparation of land management plans and works programs is strongly encouraged. An approved plan may form the basis for any further clearing. The approval of both the Departments of Conservation and Environment and Agriculture may be required. Most exemptions will be phased out after 5 years.

10. How do the controls relate to Landcare, Salinity Management Plans, property plans done for tax purposes, etc.?

Preparation of land management plans is encouraged for many different purposes. Whole farm plans are now required to obtain some tax deductions. Any of these could form the basis for an application under these controls.

11. What about compensation?

The Panel recommends against compensation. This recommendation, together with the personal assistance package, has been accepted by the Government.