



Crown frontage licence review

An unacceptably long proposed timeline to implement the Victorian Government's land and biodiversity White Paper would see biodiversity, water quality and river health decline for another 20 years. Changes to the way we manage public riparian land should be rapidly accelerated over the next five years.

Riparian land abuts waterways such as creeks, rivers and wetlands. It is critically important to the health of our rivers (for example, by improving water quality and providing shade and organic inputs) and for terrestrial biodiversity (for example, by providing ecological connectivity).

Governments recognise the importance of riparian land. Victoria's 2008 *State of the Environment Report* highlighted problems associated with current management arrangements of public riparian land, known as crown water frontages (CWF), and recommended phasing out cattle grazing licences.

A Monash University report identified serious human health impacts from giving stock access to rivers and streams that must be addressed as a priority. However, the Victorian land and biodiversity White Paper, *Securing Our Natural Future*, contains long timelines for action and change, setting 2029 as a goal. This significant water, health and conservation problem could be largely addressed over the next five years by increased resourcing and action from the Victorian Government.

VNPA proposal

The VNPA proposes a five-pronged approach, which would deliver large scale and clear improvements to river health, while engaging landholders in varying degrees of active conservation management.

1) Additions to the National Reserve System:

Identify conservation significance of riparian land based on:

- JANIS criteria and national commitments.
- Connectivity.
- Management integrity (eg adjacent to existing conservation reserves).

Land identified as suitable for addition to the reserve estate should be re-classified as protected areas e.g Nature Conservation Reserve, or State Park, and reserved accordingly to help Victoria meet national commitments for reservation.

2) Conservation Licences

For areas identified as not suitable for addition to the reserve system but that are in moderate to good condition, a conservation licence on that Crown Water Frontage should be implemented:

- The conservation licence should specify minimum management actions, such as fencing, stock removal/grazing regimes, weed control, and would be offered at a peppercorn rent based on delivery of conservation activities.
- Priority should be given to identified priority river reaches, Heritage Rivers and river reaches where other riparian improvements are taking place.

3) Voluntary program for licence holders

Voluntary uptake in first three years where government offers a 'special offer' for boundary fencing /off river watering in return for improved management and environmental outcomes.

Once this period has expired, fencing of unfenced crown land boundaries would revert to landholder responsibility. If the new rules are not adhered to, the grazing licence would be cancelled and the landholder would be responsible for boundary fencing.

Where licences are cancelled, a committee of management could be appointed. This may consist of any of the following: DSE, Parks Victoria, Catchment Management Authorities, local government, NGOs or adjacent landholders.

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Victorian National Parks Association

VNPA policy brief – Crown frontage licence review



2008 State of the Environment report Recommendations

IW3.2 The Victorian Government should consider progressively extending VEAC recommendations on phasing out uncontrolled grazing of domestic stock on Crown land water frontages to the rest of Victoria, beginning with the 2009 licence renewal process.

IW3.3 The Victorian Government should update and streamline governance arrangements to facilitate protection and restoration of Crown Land water frontages.

IW3.4 The Victorian Government and catchment management authorities should consider regional-scale connectivity of riparian vegetation in the prioritisation of rehabilitation projects, as part of forming an integrated habitat network across the State.

4) Unlicensed frontages

- Consistent with Victorian legislation, all unauthorised activities on any piece of riparian public land should cease immediately.

5) Waterway guardian/stewardship program

A program should be established for landholders with significant conservation assets adjacent to crown river frontages and incentives provided for complimentary conservation management. For example, in other areas new agreements could be established with adjoining landholders to improve the condition of river frontages and landholders could nominate either to:

- Fence the frontage and manage their grazing regime in accordance with ecological outcomes, via a management plan.
- Transfer the grazing licence to a 'conservation' licence with a reduced cost and management in accordance with ecological objectives.

The VNPA recommends in cases where there is evidence of no improvement or action to improve condition, licences should be permanently cancelled.

Resourcing

A significant increase in resourcing for riparian land management over the next four years should occur. This requires a doubling of current expenditure to \$20 million a year and include ten new full time riparian land officers be created between DSE and Catchment Management Authorities (CMA) per current CMA region to assess, monitor and enforce these new arrangements.

Background

As part of the 5-year licences renewal process for

grazing licences on crown water frontages in Victoria, all licences were renewed in October 2009. This renewal was contrary to all available scientific and expert advice, including recommendations from the 2008 *State of the Environment Report*.

Publicly-owned riparian land, known as crown water frontages, are well recognised and accepted as critical to biodiversity and river health by land managers, CMAs and a range of government policies.

Riparian land is valued for many human uses and recreation, but as a result riparian vegetation has been degraded. Uncontrolled stock access to riparian zones continues to be the major pressure on riparian vegetation throughout Victoria. In 2004, just 14% of river reaches assessed across Victoria were found to have riparian vegetation in good condition. Protection and restoration of riparian vegetation has been promoted through a number of means. There are about 30,000km of crown water frontages along rivers in Victoria, but so far the conservation intent of policy for these frontages has not translated into on-ground conservation outcomes.

From an ecological perspective, riparian land is any land that adjoins, regularly influences, or is influenced by a body of water. In good condition, riparian vegetation supports the resilience of both aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, allows recovery from disturbance and maintains biodiversity.

Why action is needed

A key recommendation in the 2008 *State of the Environment Report* is:

The Victorian Government should consider progressively extending VEAC recommendations on phasing out uncontrolled grazing of domestic stock on crown land water frontages to the rest of Victoria,

beginning with the 2009 licence renewal process.

A Monash University report published in 2009 – *Human Health Risk from Crown Water Frontage Licences* – identified serious human health impacts resulting from stock access to rivers and streams that must be addressed as a priority.

However, the Victorian land and biodiversity White Paper contains artificially long timelines for action and change with 2029 as a goal. This significant water, health and conservation problem could be largely addressed over the next five years by increased resourcing and action by the Victorian Government

Investigations by Victorian government agencies indicate that fenced stream frontages were in significantly better condition than those left unfenced, reflecting the impact of stock access.

The endorsements of the Land Conservation Council recommendations for rivers and streams 17 years ago have never been implemented. As a result, there has not been a shift from the default use of crown land water frontages abutting private property for grazing, to a conservation focus. The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC), recommended in 2008 stronger protection for crown land water frontages in its River Red Gum Forests Investigation by phasing out domestic stock grazing from crown land water frontages over a five year period.

Environmental significance of crown water frontages

The 2008 Victorian *State of the Environment Report*, from the Commissioner of Environmental Sustainability (Victoria) has highlighted threats and values of riparian zones including crown water frontages:

Values

- Healthy riparian zones are widely recognised as critical to river health.
- Riparian zones are species-rich systems.
- They are critical to the maintenance of in-stream biota and ecosystems.
- They provide bioregional and local habitat links.
- Riparian zones harbour distinctive species pools, so protecting riparian vegetation within terrestrial reserves is an effective means of increasing the number of species protected on a regional basis.
- In some landscapes, crown frontages represent significant proportions of all remaining remnant vegetation.
- Riparian vegetation in good condition supports the resilience of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, allowing recovery from disturbance and maintaining biodiversity.
- Intact riparian vegetation is a source of wood for in-stream habitat.

- Loss of connectivity or fragmentation of riparian vegetation reduces the capacity of species to disperse through the landscape, and this may be of fundamental importance in maintaining viable populations.
- Riparian vegetation provides habitat for platypus, water rats, frogs and waterbirds, as well as the terrestrial adult stages of macro-invertebrates. In some ecosystems, riparian vegetation forms a large proportion of remnant vegetation, so it is locally significant.
- Further, a well-managed riparian frontage can add significant market value to a rural property.

Threats

- Domestic stock, particularly cattle, favour riparian frontages and if uncontrolled prefer to spend much of their time along streambanks and in the water. The pressure uncontrolled domestic stock grazing places on riparian zones has been well documented, but persists on both public and private land throughout Victoria.
- Uncontrolled stock access to riparian zones results in erosion and loss of riparian vegetation.
- Trampling and grazing of river and wetland banks destabilises banks, as bare soil on streambanks and compacted walking tracks are prone to erosion.
- Other pressures caused by uncontrolled stock access to streams are the introduction and spread of exotic plants, inhibition of native vegetation, soil compaction, lack of regeneration of native vegetation, loss of the buffering effect of riparian vegetation, and the addition of nutrients through dung and urine.
- Degraded riparian vegetation reduces the amount of habitat available for insect eating birds and insect parasites that protect agricultural land and crops from damage.
- In-stream pressures on water quality include stock access to streams, suspension of sediments and release of nutrients, river regulation and extraction of water, and the impact of invasive species such as carp and willow.
- Stock effluent pollutes fresh water, destroys fish breeding cycles and encourages the proliferation of disease organisms and algae. Water quality is impaired for downstream users and stock.
- Stream degradation additionally has implications for human health in terms of algae abundance and abundance of faecal coliforms.

Current environmental condition

- The 2004 Index of Stream Condition assessment reported that only 21% of major rivers and tributaries in Victoria were in good or excellent condition. Almost half the basins in Victoria have less than 10% of major rivers and tributaries in good or excellent condition.

