

# Westernport Bay and the planned expansion of the Port of Hastings

The undersigned groups call on the Brumby Government and Baillieu Coalition Opposition to commit to:

1. Halting plans to expand the Port of Hastings due to the unacceptable risk it would pose to the environmental, health and recreational values of Westernport.
2. Conducting, as a stand-alone process or as part of a broader state-wide review, a comprehensive, independent, science-based assessment. The review would update information on the ecological values of Westernport, the threats to these values and the way in which those values can be protected and the bay and its catchment used in an ecologically sustainable way.
3. Including in this assessment comprehensive modelling of oil spill risk and dispersal following and extending on earlier studies.

The following statement outlines background evidence to our two requests:

## The values of Westernport

Westernport is a large, diverse marine and coastal ecosystem – a ‘wetland’ – that covers 270 square kilometres and supports at least 1350 species of marine animals. Supporting this biodiversity is the diversity of habitats, comprising extensive seagrass beds, Victoria’s most extensive tracts of mangrove and saltmarsh habitats, unique channel habitats, sandy beaches and rocky platforms.

Westernport is an internationally significant wetland under the International Ramsar Convention. The bay is listed on the National Estate and contains three Marine National Parks supporting the maintenance of its biodiversity.

The Victorian Government’s comprehensive ‘Westernport Bay Environmental Study 1973-1974’, directed by Professor Maurice Shapiro, presented a comprehensive basic understanding of the bay’s major features, establishing the complexity and the high ecological values of the ecosystem, and modelling the hydrodynamics of the tidal flows and other circulation patterns which distribute pollutants rapidly to all parts of the bay.

Tidal seagrass meadows and their associated mangrove-saltmarsh vegetation rank with tropical rainforests in supplying an effective set of services to the environment and to people, and contributing a buffer to climate change effects. They are also important nurseries for fish species, and important foraging, breeding and roosting habitat for many shorebird and wader species listed in the CAMBA, JAMBA and ROKAMBA bilateral treaties. To build the resilience of the bay to withstand the impacts of climate change and other environmental pressures, it is essential to maintain the integrity of the ecological system.

Unlike the large, deep, cold ports of the Northern Hemisphere, Westernport is warm and shallow - so shallow that 42% of it is exposed at low tide. At low tide the bottom of the bay therefore becomes mudflats covered in a green carpet of seagrass. These seagrasses play vital roles in maintaining the bay’s health. Historical seagrass mapping studies have shown up to 70% of the original seagrass cover was lost in the 1970s when the channels were deepened by dredging for development of the port.

The ecological values of Westernport also underpin its immense health and recreational values, which include swimming, boating, education, tourism and fishing for locals and

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Phillip Island Conservation Society



# Joint Environment & Community Group Statement

the broader public, and the rare opportunity to experience a sense of wilderness close to a great city. Phillip Island Nature Park within the bay is Victoria's recognised Premier Tourist Facility.

## The threats to Westernport

The proposed expansion of the Port of Hastings is a major risk to Westernport's environmental and recreational values. The proposed container storage, port, road and rail development make this one of the most significant proposed infrastructure projects in Victoria.

Government's Port of Hastings Land Use & Transport Strategy includes proposals for major new and upgraded road and rail access corridors through the Peninsula and Gippsland regions. If implemented, these transport corridors would pose a major threat to biodiversity and social amenity, and would further contribute to the impacts of climate change. The strategy also proposes reclamation of significant mangrove areas and dredging in Westernport.

Associated threatening processes with the Port of Hastings expansion plans include oil spills and oil leaks, dredging and disposal of spoil, introduction of marine pests, release of toxic antifouling substances, ship groundings due to navigation errors, and air emissions from ships and trucks.

Plans to expand the Port of Hastings would significantly increase the risk of accidents and hence of oil spills. The extent of its exposed mudflats at low tide makes Westernport particularly vulnerable to the ecological impacts of oil spills. Even a moderate oil spill (say 500 tonnes of bunker fuel) could cause catastrophic damage to the area's environmental values, and further damage would occur during attempted removals of oil from mangrove-saltmarsh, seagrass and reef habitats.

An oil spill could have a serious economic impact on coastal activities such as tourism and the fishing industry. The grounding in 1995 of the small ore ship Iron Baron at the mouth of the Tamar estuary in Tasmania, directly south of Westernport, demonstrated how ineffective the National Oil Spill Plan can be, and is even more likely to be within the bay of Westernport. Only 2% of the oil was recovered from the ship and the sea, with an investigation by the Tasmanian Department of Primary Resources finding that an estimated 7000 - 17000 Little Penguins were killed. Such an outcome is common for the spills that occur with high frequency around the world.

Port expansion plans would also require major channel dredging to accommodate larger ships, as revealed in Port of Hastings planning documents. The principal impacts of dredging not only seriously damage the seabed, but result in re-suspension of fine sediments, affecting water clarity and smothering sensitive bay habitats, including seagrass meadows.

The port expansion plans poses a number of unacceptable risks to Westernport and reinforces the need for a comprehensive assessment of the bay's habitats, values and threats.

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Merricks-Coolart  
Catchment Group

**S**outhern  
**P**eninsula  
**I**ndigenous  
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**F**auna  
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