VICTORIAN NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION
Be part of nature

Grassy Plains Network

Grassy Plains Network submission regarding

South Morang Data Centre, EPBC 2026/10668



29 October 2026

Contact:
Adrian Marshall
Facilitator, Grassy Plains Network
adrian@vnpa.org.au
0413 757 173
grassyplains.net.au

1. Executive summary

1.1. Who we are

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) is one of Victoria's leading nature conservation organisations. It is an independent, non-profit, membership-based group, which for 70 years has existed to protect Victoria's unique natural environment and biodiversity through the establishment and effective management of national parks, conservation reserves and other measures.

The Grassy Plains Network represents land management professionals, academics, ecologists and community members concerned about the ongoing decline of grassy ecosystems across Victoria. We advocate for improved grassland protection and management. We are part of the VNPA

1.2. Key messages

1.2.1. This should be a controlled action

- The proposal poses unacceptable impacts to Matters of National Environmental Significance, including Seasonal herbaceous Wetlands, Grassy Eucalypt Woodland, Matted Flax-lily and Striped Legless Lizard.

1.2.2. Undermining the significance of site for EPBC listed communities

- The proposal undermines the significance of the site, 4.51 ha of EPBC Critically Endangered Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain. What will remain on-site, the 1.72 ha to be "avoided" in development, is still subject to substantial indirect impact including fragmentation, altered hydrology, dust, construction disruption, hazardous waste management and degradation.

- There is a poorly described impact to the recorded presence of the vegetation of EPBC listed Seasonal Herbaceous Wetlands (Freshwater) of the Temperate Lowland Plains (SHWFTLP) located in Habitat Zone 4. This is an ephemeral community. As such it is easily overlooked, especially by consultants wishing to advance a proponent's position. Eastern Common Froglets and Spotted Marsh Frogs were found during surveying; the site is across the road from the Henderson Road Drain and Henderson's Creek Wetlands – a tributary to the Darebin Creek. The site is also within 5km of the section of Darebin Creek that forms part of Conservation Area 34, one of the Areas of Strategic Importance outlined for the Melbourne Strategic Assessment.

- The proponent claims that road drainage may already have impacted the SHWFTLP present, though that is no excuse for further impacts. The Biodiversity Assessment Report indicates the EPBC listed community could reappear with appropriate hydrology, and the seed bank indicates historical presence. The proponent argues that weed presence is a reason to not investigate further, which is a very poor argument given we have an EPBC critically endangered community present. Weed invasion is exactly the reason we should investigate further, to limit further damage to this Critically Endangered ecosystem.

- There has been no analysis of the impacts of development of the likely presence of Seasonal Herbaceous Wetlands. Further impacts are likely from altered drainage, hydrology, compaction and disturbance through the trenching and drainage outlined in the project, as well as the construction of sealed roads and carparks. The planned no-go zone will not mitigate the fact that construction will have an effect on drainage beyond the building's perimeter.

- Populations of Seasonal Herbaceous Wetlands when unable to be avoided in development (as in this case with the construction fundamentally altering the drainage of the site) should undergo salvage operations, as per the Salvage and Translocation Protocol for Melbourne's Growth Corridors outlined by DEECA.

1.2.3. Insufficient surveying for EPBC listed species

- The site also provides the unique habitat needed for at least 14 plants of the EPBC listed Matted Flax Lily to persist, and consultants recommended further surveys in the 2026/27 season due to an inability to survey to the full extent due to a lack of flowering. The difficulty is accurately surveying for Matted Flax-lily is well documented, with plants remaining dormant and thus not being able to be identified. These surveys are yet to be done, and thus the Critically Endangered species has not been adequately accounted for.

- The project plan does nothing to avoid removal of these plants, citing their scattered distribution as a reason, and instead relies on a Salvage and Translocation plan.

- Striped Legless Lizard habitat was found onsite in 2014 in a previously withdrawn EPBC referral for a development of warehouses. It is surprising that surveys failed to locate the presence of this population. Surveys should continue, it is likely that this highly cryptic species is still present on site.

- The report describes much of this habitat is also suitable for the EPBC Act-listed Striped Legless Lizard *Delma impar* and Victorian Grassland Earless Dragon *Tympanocryptis pinguicolla,* yet absence during surveys prevents any protection of potential habitat.

- The EPBC endangered Gang-gang Cockatoos have also been spotted using the site, albeit through data not used in the survey including iNaturalist, E-bird and Atlas of Living Australia. There are also over 30 instances of Gang-gang Cockatoos within 5 km of the site, and the site is listed as a Low to Moderate habitat for the EPBC endangered species as per Appendix 5 of the Biodiversity Assessment.

1.2.4. Relative quality of grassland downplayed

- Floristic surveys found high native grass diversity, coverage and several large indigenous trees. The dominant grasses were predominantly *Themeda triandra* (Kangaroo Grass) and in wetter areas *Poa labillardierei* (Common Tussock Grass), known in the literature to indicate relatively intact sites. Though the site has had a history of grazing, the embedded surface rock indicates a lack of ploughing, meaning a potential high ecological value through a lack of soil mechanical disturbance. Yet the report incorrectly describes the site as degraded and a poorer quality example of this threatened community. This undermining of the importance of EPBC listing is a shameful practice commonly used by some ecological consultants.

- Due to long-term lack of biomass management of the site, it is likely that the flora surveys failed to find many other species present. There is a description of a moderate level of weeds and a general lack of bare ground between grass tussocks.

1.2.5. 2020 Cultural heritage assessment

- The cultural heritage assessment is not being made to the current plan but is rather a signed-off copy of a 2020 plan made for warehouse development proposal. There is a distinct need for revisiting the assessment in light of the current proposal.

- Importantly, the plan only assessed the northern section of the stony rise, thus further investigation is required. The 2020 assessment stated that *"Further assessment is required to determine whether the stony rise within the Activity Area has Aboriginal cultural material on its south side and whether any mature native trees with cultural scarring still exist in the Activity Area."*

- The assessment found two cultural artefacts, and there is an artefact scatter located approximately 85 metres south-west of the Activity Area on the crest of a stony rise.

1.2.6. Proximity to valuable habitat within 5km

- The consultants overlook areas of important biodiversity within the landscape context. The site is within 5km of Plenty Gorge parklands yet is described as having "No outstanding natural features or unique values occur either within the proposed project area or within 10 km of the proposed project area". Endangered orchids are found within this 5km radius, as are 4 EPBC species. Also within 5km of the site is the Darebin Creek, and the associated MSA Conservation Area 34, providing an essential corridor for the Growling Grass Frog.

- The Melbourne Strategic Assessment Investigation Area for the proposed Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Protection Area is also within close proximity, emphasising the importance of the area for the survival of this ecological community.

- As development in the area increases the site will become a last resort habitat for some species, with the powerline easement connecting it to Plenty river. That last resort will be lost if this vegetation removal is approved. It is vitally important to retain whatever habitat we can in the urban context.

1.2.7. Offsetting insufficient

- No suitable offset is available. In fact, no offsets for Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain exist on the offsets register at all. The proposed offset is not suitable as a direct offset. If it is to be considered at all, then it can only be as an indirect offset. There should be substantial additional compensation to account for the lack of a direct offset.

- The proposed offset is over 200km away. The Moyston site within the Wimmera catchment is by no means an equivalent habitat. Being over 200km away it has different ecological communities, evident as it is dominated by Rytidosperma rather than Kangaroo Grass. There is also no potential for the equivalent vegetation and seedbank of the Seasonal Herbaceous Wetlands (Freshwater) of the Temperate Lowland Plains on this site. The site has been grazed continuing to present day, has few retained logs after firewood collection and has red deer

present. The prescribed 10 years of active management would not be enough for revegetation to establish to a similar level of seed bank and habitat present in the previous site.

- The offsetting site is subject to a Specific Controls Overlay Schedule 2 (SCO2), permitting construction of infrastructure onsite, disqualifying it as an offset. Thus, the EPBC listed community is not adequately protected on the site.
- The fact that there is no offset available is indicative of the Critically Endangered status of this ecological community and is a strong argument for the project not to proceed.
- Tree #43 was also not considered as part of the offset calculations, a large and important habitat tree on the site that is not accounted for.

1.2.8. Insufficient avoidance of lost tree habitat

- At least 2 large, scattered trees and 4 large patch trees are to be lost, with just one large indigenous patch tree remaining. This tree known as tree #43 on the north-east boundary is a significant large tree with hollows with used by Red-rumped Parrot *Psephotus haematonotus* (observed breeding over many years), Striated Pardalote *Pardalotus striatus* and Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus moluccanus,* and a likely home to microbats. There are inconsistencies in the plan about tree retention and removal. If retained, this tree will be wedged in a 20-metre buffer between the road and construction, likely reducing its function as a habitat tree.
- These trees also provide a corridor potential between Plenty River and Darebin Creek, with the powerline easement and some of the remaining unpaved surface in the area. The ecological surveys found that the remaining trees provided some of the only large tree habitat in the area, otherwise largely cleared of trees. There is little avoidance done to prevent loss of mature trees, described by the ecological consultants as “vital resource for local or transitory fauna and as such are considered of high local habitat value”.

1.2.9. Potential habitat for significant species

- Several species listed in the Flora and Fauna guarantee act are present, including Austral Crane’s-bill *Geranium solander*i var. *solanderi s.s*. This species was recorded in high numbers (estimated >200 plants). The plants proposed to be left from the 2026 surveys will be trapped in a 20-metre buffer between the road and the direct impact areas and will suffer considerable indirect impacts. FFG listed Tussock skinks were also found in the most recent survey.
- Habitat is met onsite for Fat-tailed Dunnart *Sminthopsis crassicaudata* (near threatened), Brown Toadlet *Pseudophryne bibronii* (FFG Act listed and endangered) and Southern Toadlet *Pseudophryne semimarmorata* (Vulnerable). There is insufficient assessment on the potential presence and impact on the potential habitat for these species.

1.2.10. Residential concerns

- With the data centre building only 65m away from homes in some places, this is well below the incoming restrictions for 150m distance. While the federal government is seeking public feedback before policy implementation, local residents are organising against the development. Stop the South Morang Data Centre community group has expressed concerns

over fire risk with incorrect dangerous-goods reporting, diesel emission data lacking and cumulative acoustic effects with another nearby data centre operated by the same company.

1.2.11. Historic vegetation removal

- The study area was subject to illegal clearing approximately fifteen years ago and the proponent faced an enforcement order through VCAT on 8 November 2014 (P1683/2003). It has already faced unnecessary habitat destruction, and this does not need to compound historic damage.
- Were the proposal to proceed, the proponent would be benefitting from the previous illegal clearing. This should not occur.

1.2.12. Awaiting on too many pending plans

- The implementation of the project is awaiting a construction environmental management plan, a Kangaroo Management Plan, a Weed Management Plan, a permit to the City of Whittlesea and the referral to DEECA. There is yet to be outlined sufficient protection of grassland communities throughout the process as a result.
- The City of Whittlesea has called for a moratorium on data centre approvals, including an *"immediate hold on the determination of further data centre applications in the City of Whittlesea, including the current application for a proposed data centre at 165 Williamsons Road, South Morang".*

1.3. This submission calls for:

- Immediate halting of the project, in line with the City of Whittlesea council's calls for a moratorium until adequate regulation is in place. This will allow time for the following appropriate due process:
    - Reengagement with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Cooperation for a Cultural Heritage Assessment that considers the current plan for a datacentre with a basement carpark, rather than the pre-existing 2020 warehouse plan.
    - Repeated surveying for EPBC listed Matted-Flax Lily. This is in line with the recommendations outlined in the Biodiversity Assessment Report, due to the identified survey limitations with lack of flowering during surveys. This EPBC listed species then needs an appropriate "avoid" consideration, not currently present in the plan.
    - Reassessment of the quality of the EPBC listed Critically Endangered Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain, with consideration for described quality and extent of native grass cover, presence of embedded rocks, and potential habitat for endangered species such as the EPBC listed Striped Legless Lizard.
    - Detailed zoological survey, as this was recommended but not conducted during the 2025 survey.
    - Weed management in Habitat Zone 4 where the EPBC listed SHWFTLP community has been present, and repeated surveys to properly document presence in the seed bank and landscape.
    - Wider biomass and weed management on the site to fully understand species present and habitat potential for EPBC listed species.

- Assessment of Tree #43 as a habitat tree and proper protections to avoid impacts to ongoing health and connectivity throughout development, mitigate such impacts, or at the very least inclusion in the offsetting plan.
- A revised offset plan that adequately addresses all impacts to Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain. This means substantial further compensation. The offset plan must support equivalent habitat, adequately manage threats, as well as protect from future construction without the disqualifying overlay SCO2 present at the current offset site.