

DRAFT YARRA RANGES NATURE PLAN: PROTECTING OUR BIODIVERSITY ASSETS 2022-2032

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Responsible Officer: Director Environment and Infrastructure
Ward(s) affected: (All Wards)

The author(s) of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

SUMMARY

In 2021 a Council Plan Major Initiative was endorsed for the development of a Biodiversity Plan. A Biodiversity Plan is critical for the organisation to deliver on the community vision for Yarra Ranges and the Council Plan objective of a Protected and Enhanced Natural Environment. The Biodiversity Plan is subordinate to the Environment Strategy 2015 – 2025 and delivers on all the goals of this Strategy.

The Biodiversity Plan title is proposed as the Yarra Ranges Nature Plan: Protecting Our Biodiversity Assets 2022-2032 (Yarra Ranges Nature Plan).

The Yarra Ranges Nature Plan will provide clear direction for prioritisation and investment in our natural environment and importantly is an essential advocacy tool. Our community rely on a healthy environment, from tourism and agricultural businesses to health and wellbeing outcomes for our residents.

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan contains a vision, guiding principles, targets framed around four key themes linked to outcomes and an action plan. The key themes relate to where Council has the greatest impact and influence on biodiversity conservation through its roles as land manager, Responsible Authority for the Planning Scheme, support for works on private land, and a conduit for state and federal funding into the region.

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan contains 18 foundation actions pivotal for success in enabling the delivery of further operational based actions. The draft Plan has been costed at \$15.8 million, for delivery over 10 years. The opportunity for external leveraged funding is estimated at \$8 million. Delivery of the actions will be staggered over 10 years and investment in the actions will be determined through Council's annual budget processes.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council

- 1. Approve the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan; Protecting Our Biodiversity Assets 2022-2032 to be released for public consultation, commencing 25 August; and**
- 2. Following consultation, the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan; Protecting Our Biodiversity Assets 2022-2032 be referred to Council Forum for consideration of submissions, prior to formal endorsement at a subsequent Council meeting.**

RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

As part of the Council Plan 2021-25, Council endorsed a major initiative to *'prepare and implement a Biodiversity Plan to support and retain our unique flora, fauna and ecologies alongside us in healthy landscapes'*. A Protected and Enhanced Natural Environment is also defined as one of five Council Plan objectives.

The Environment Strategy 2015-25 which sets the framework for protection and enhancement of the natural environment in Yarra Ranges, provides the Tier 1 strategic framework for the development of a Nature (Biodiversity) Plan.

DISCUSSION

Purpose and Background

1. The Context

Council invests significantly in natural resource management through:

- weed control programs;
- incentive programs for private land;
- undertaking statutory functions as required by the planning scheme; and
- education and partnership with community volunteers focussed on environmental protection.

Council's Biodiversity and Bushlands teams have a demonstrated history of achievement in natural resource management, including securing over \$5 million worth of external funding into environmental projects over the last decade. These funds have been used to support on-ground operational projects like Peri-Urban Weed Management Partnerships and Biodiversity Response Planning, through to the Birds to Butterfields program. The team also work on water quality outcomes, however this is covered through the Integrated Water Management Plan.

The development of a draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan (attachment 1) seeks to fulfill a Council Plan major initiative and meet the organisational objective of a 'Protected and Enhanced Natural Environment'. More specifically, this Plan seeks to embed a framework of utilising quality scientific data to underpin evidence-based decisions for natural resource management.

2. The Drafting Papers

To thoroughly examine the complex and intricate topic of 'biodiversity' (essentially the variety of life found on Earth, or in a prescribed area) in the context of local government, a series of drafting papers were prepared. These papers explored the themes of Land, Water, People & Nature, Pest Plants & Animals, and Climate Change & Land Use. The drafting papers provided a review of relevant policies, strategic links, legislation, advocacy priorities, program delivery and best practice for the local government sector.

3. The Reference Document

A Reference Document was developed utilising the information gathered from the drafting papers and provided a comprehensive analysis of issues and opportunities with relevance to action in biodiversity protection and enhancement within Yarra Ranges. The Reference Document provided a detailed basis for the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan.

The threats to the natural environment of Yarra Ranges are extensive and are broadly categorised into habitat loss and fragmentation, invasive species, and impacts of climate change. A legacy of housing development, agricultural and commercial activities, and the construction of roads have contributed to altered landscapes through vegetation clearance and fragmentation.

Invasive species have increased in both abundance and diversity, with pest plants threatening critical ecosystems across the municipality and impacting the agricultural sector and community.

Similarly, pest animals threaten wildlife and their habitats, along with impacting productivity for primary producers and damaging community assets. This has become particularly apparent with feral deer in Yarra Ranges over the last decade.

These key threats are amplified with Climate Change; extreme weather events are predicted to increase in frequency and severity, increasing the risk of localised extinctions of native flora and fauna.

4. The Vision

A vision for the draft Plan was co-designed with teams across the organisation to inspire a future state for the Yarra Ranges' landscape and community:

'Yarra Ranges is a place of healthy, resilient and connected natural living landscapes, thriving alongside us. Our community actively care for and feel a deep connection to nature.'

5. The Targets

1. Yarra Ranges achieves an overall 'net gain' in native vegetation cover by 2032;
2. Triple restoration and revegetation works on private and Council managed land each year;
3. Increase the conservation value across our bushland reserve network over the next 10 years; and
4. Enable at least 200 land stewards to improve the biodiversity on their land each year

These four targets are linked with the themes of Landscapes & Ecosystems, Land Use & Changing Climate, Pest Plants & Animals and People & Nature.

- Target 1 seeks to achieve 'net gain', which is defined by an overall increase in native vegetation cover across the municipality in the 10 years of the plan implementation;
- Target 2 seeks to increase revegetation (replanting) of native plants and restore landscapes, through pest plant and animal control across private and public land. This target will be closely linked with delivery of a Biolinks Plan for Council;
- Target 3 seeks to continue our monitoring of Bushland Reserves, with a goal of increasing the value of our reserve network. This will be measured by visible reduction in threats, such as pest plants and animals, and health of conservation dependent flora and fauna species; and
- Target 4 recognises the significant value of our community in biodiversity protection and enhancement. Through our programs, we seek to enable landowners, managers and stewards to take action for nature on their land.

6. The Guiding Principles

Considering the threats to biodiversity within Yarra Ranges the guiding principles were drafted to prioritise and inform evidence-based decisions:

- (a) Our natural environment is valued intrinsically, and we foster a shared deep connection to nature;
- (b) We protect biodiversity assets through evidence-based decisions, enabling ecosystem resilience in a changing climate; and
- (c) We collaborate across tenures and integrate Traditional Owner knowledge and cultural practices.

7. The Themes

Following on from the drafting papers, the concept of themes was continued into the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan. Within each theme, specific visions were developed to shape the implementation of the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan. Each theme was connected to a target, to ensure accountability and transparency:

Landscapes & Ecosystems

- Habitats and all biodiversity assets are holistically understood to enhance the resilience of native flora and fauna populations, enabling our ecosystems from land and water to flourish; and
- Rare and threatened species and ecosystems are protected and restored across the landscape, ensuring thriving species and connected habitats.

Pest Plants & Animals

- Native flora, fauna and their habitats are more resilient to threats of pest plants and animals; and
- Collaboration and partnerships underpin successful landscape scale pest plant and animal programs across the municipality.

Land Use & Changing Climate

- Engage statutory and strategic planning processes to enable best practice land management through integrated planning; and
- Deeply engage with our townships and rural communities to build ecosystem resilience for a climate ready future.

People and Nature

- Traditional owners are empowered to engage in cultural land management practices on Country within Yarra Ranges; and
- Our community has access and a deep connection to nature; inspired to take action to actively care for the environment and create a legacy for our future generations.

8. The Actions

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan contains 18 Foundation Actions and enables 34 additional Operational Actions to deliver on the vision for Yarra Ranges which have been identified through the Reference Document.

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan focuses on the foundation actions pivotal for achieving tangible benefit and measurable change in biodiversity within the municipality over the 10 years. These actions set up the successful delivery of the other operational actions, which will work to improve levels of service across the natural environment sector. Foundation actions include, but not limited to:

- Development and implementation of a Biolinks Plan;
- Expansion of the Ribbons of Green program;
- Embedding Indigenous land management into Bushland programs;
- Collaboration to reduce impacts of feral deer;
- Increasing urban biodiversity; and
- Support for community to learn more about and do more for their local environment.

Whilst the Operational actions are not published in the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan the intention is to make them available during the public consultation period as supporting information through Shaping Yarra Ranges.

Options considered

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan was assessed to be either a tier 2 or tier 3 document, subordinate to the Environment Strategy. The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan provides direction and action primarily for the Biodiversity and Bushland teams and replaces both the Flora and Fauna and Weed Management Plans. The consideration of tier 2 or 3 relates to the operational nature of the draft Plan along with the level of community consultation.

Consideration was given to releasing all 52 actions (not just the 18 foundation actions) for public consultation. The 18 foundation actions are pivotal for achieving tangible benefit and measurable change to biodiversity over the 10 years.

Consideration was given to the scale of likelihood of investment on the 52 actions through external funding. A number of actions listed in the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan are listed as 'seeking investment'. These are identified as having a high probability of leveraging external funding due to their alignment with state agency strategies and priorities.

Council's Sustainable Environment Advisory Committee (SEAC) was consulted throughout the development of the Plan and their feedback has helped shape the draft YR Nature. Recent feedback sought to increase the ambitiousness of Council proposed actions and targets, however it should be noted that the current proposal is a substantial step forward for Council and comparative with the sector. After consideration it is proposed to release the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan as attached to gather broader community input and consult on these matters.

Consideration was given to alignment with the Tree Canopy Strategy, with a desire to engage the community on both these topics simultaneously. This will enable a community centred and collaborative approach to consultation.

Consideration was given to the duration, style and context of the communications and engagement plan, inclusive of in person targeted events.

Recommended option and justification

The Yarra Ranges Nature Plan is a tier 2 document as it responds to all six goals of the Environment Strategy and provides direction on investment through actions primarily assigned to both the Biodiversity and Bushland teams.

It is proposed to release the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan for community consultation as attached, with the 18 foundation actions. The consultation process will be utilised to consolidate and further consider the recent feedback from Council's Sustainable Environment Advisory Committee (SEAC), mindful of the potential of SEAC members to provide a further submission on the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan.

Consultation with the community will occur concurrently with the Tree Canopy Strategy. In the context of the current health advice, online engagement including webinars, newsletters and targeted advertising will be a focus. An engagement period of 8 weeks has been nominated, inclusive of attendance of at least 4 in person events (e.g. Wandin-Silvan Field Day, Kilsyth Festival, Farmers Markets)

Feedback on the draft targets was considered and the following targets were amended from:

- Enhance 20 hectares of habitat per annum through Council funded restoration and revegetation works on private and Council managed land;
- Bushland monitoring demonstrates an increase in conservation value across our bushland reserve network of 4% over the next 10 years; and
- Support at least 200 land stewards (property managers) to undertake biodiversity improvement activities on their land per annum

To the following;

- Triple restoration and revegetation works on private and Council managed land per annum;
- Increase the conservation value across our bushland reserve network over the next 10 years; and
- Enable at least 200 land stewards to improve the biodiversity on their land each year

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan contains 18 foundation actions to set Council up for success and enable the delivery of the remaining 34 operational actions. The draft Plan has been costed at a total of \$15.8 million for an investment period of 10 years.

The delivery of the draft Nature Plan comes with budget consideration and augmentation of roles across the organisation. The actions are staggered over the 10 years and will be subject to Council's annual budget bidding process.

Leveraged funding will be sought from government and philanthropic organisations to offset investment of Council funds. The external investment opportunity is estimated at \$8 million over 10 years.

The actions per theme are spread as follows:

- Landscapes & Ecosystems;
 - Target: Yarra Ranges achieves an overall 'net gain' of native vegetation cover by 2032;
 - Six Actions – \$1.1 million over ten years;
 - Year 1 highest funding sought; \$240,000; and
 - External investment / leveraged funds (estimated \$50,000)
- Land Use & Changing Climate;
 - Target: Enhance 20 hectares of habitat per annum through Council funded restoration and revegetation works on private and Council managed land;
 - Four Actions – \$5.16 million over ten years;
 - Year 3 highest funding sought \$660,000; and
 - External investment / leveraged funds (estimated \$2 million).
- Pest Plants & Animals; and
 - Target: Bushland monitoring demonstrates an increase in conservation value across our bushland reserve network by 4% over the next 10 years;
 - Three Actions – \$2.92 million over ten years;
 - Year 2 highest funding sought; \$350,000; and
 - External investment / leveraged funds, (estimated \$2.5 million).
- People & Nature;
 - Target: Support at least 200 land stewards to undertake biodiversity improvement activities on their land per annum;
 - Five Actions – \$2.36 million over ten years;
 - Year 2 highest funding sought; \$165,000; and
 - External investment / leveraged funds (estimated \$700,000).

Many of the 18 foundation actions require advocacy to attract funding. Due consideration was given to external agency strategic priorities, which are likely to provide the greatest leveraging opportunities, such as DELWP's Biodiversity 2037 strategy and Melbourne Water's Healthy Waterway Strategy. The remaining 34 actions, provide opportunities to improve environmental outcomes across a suite of programs and initiatives within established organisational structures and systems such as the Biodiversity Conservation and Bushland units.

The estimated investment to realise the 18 foundation actions is \$11.54 million while the total estimated investment across all 52 actions is \$15.8 million over 10 years. This equates to approximately \$300,000 in year 1, \$1.2 million in year 2 and on average \$1.9 million each year for the remaining years.

The financial analysis indicates the delivery of the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan actions will form a combination of both existing and new resources and enhance Councils ability to service these areas.

The combined current budget allocation for the Biodiversity and Bushland units was estimated at approximately \$4 million per annum. The additional funding sought is 30% above this annual operational budget.

APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES

This report contributes to the following strategic objective(s) in the Council Plan: Protected and Enhanced Natural Environment. The Council Plan also outlines as a major initiative for the development of a 'Biodiversity Plan'.

The Council Vision reflects the high value of the natural environment;

'Whether you live here or visit, you will see how much we value our natural beauty, how connected our communities are, and how balanced growth makes this the best place in the world.'

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan is subordinate to the Environment Strategy 2015-2025 and responds to the vision of the Environment Strategy which states;

'We are dedicated to making Yarra Ranges a place of thriving communities, at home in healthy landscapes'.

The 6 goals of the Environment Strategy directly relate to the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan.

Other strategic links include:

- Health and Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025;
- Reconciliation Framework for Action 2013-2023;
- Liveable Climate Plan 2020 – 2030;
- Municipal Emergency Management Plan 2021;

- Recreation and Open Space Strategy 2013-2021;
- Economic Development Strategy 2022 - 2027 (in prep); and
- Gender Equality Act (2020).

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan will position Council within a broader context, by referencing appropriate Federal and State strategic and legislated documents including:

- Australia's Strategy for Nature 2019-2030;
- Protecting Victoria's Environment - Biodiversity 2037;
- Yarra Strategic Plan (*Burndap Birrarung burndap umarkoo*) 2021-31;
- Port Phillip and Westernport Regional Catchment Strategy 2021-27;
- Victorian Deer Control Strategy 2020; and
- Healthy Waterways Strategy 2018-28.

RELEVANT LAW

A number of actions within the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan are directed by legislative obligations and delegated authorities of Council, including;

- *The Planning and Environment Act 1987;*
- *The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999;*
- *The Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 2021; and*
- *Environment Protection Act 2017.*

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Climate change has resulted in an increased rate of extinctions of flora and fauna species. The natural environment has intrinsic value which warrants protection and the risks to community health and wellbeing from a declining natural environment are significant.

The environmental considerations are forefront in the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan. The actions seek to deliver benefit to the natural environment with many actions enabling Council to build resilience for the projected changes in local climatic conditions. Projects which address urban heat island effect, Indigenous connections to country, equitable access to natural open space for community, education programs for building capacity and knowledge of biodiversity contribute to community wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

Actions focussed on regenerative land management practices and collaborative threat management on private land support a strong agricultural sector, which benefits the productivity of the land and environmental values. The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan will support improved program delivery and the ability to ensure cost effective action is prioritised. The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan will also provide a solid platform for attracting funding opportunities for investment in biodiversity protection. Additionally, supporting the health of Yarra Ranges biodiversity will have a positive economic impact on local, largely tourism-based economies which rely on the natural environment for their business and income.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A Community Consultation Plan was prepared with the support of the Communication team. A consultation period of 8 weeks is proposed with key elements of;

- Publishing project on 'Shaping Yarra Ranges' online portal with relevant documents, FAQs and short form or open submission options;
- Combination of online webinars and in-person 'pop up' engagement sessions (for example Festivals, local Farmers Markets) to general community, with links to provide online feedback;
- Council appointed Advisory Groups presentations (for example Rural Advisory Committee, Sustainable Environment Advisory Committee, etc.); and
- Special Interest Group presentations (such as Township Groups, Agribusiness Yarra Valley, Youth Forum and Environmental Volunteer network) at in-person venues, or online, across the municipality.

COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Council appointed Advisory Committees were consulted in late 2021 to introduce the biodiversity topic and intent to develop a Yarra Ranges Nature Plan. Feedback on key areas of interest to each committee were shared and considered in the drafting of the Yarra Ranges Nature Plan.

The Sustainable Environment Advisory Committee (SEAC) played a key advisory role on this topic, with a special interest Biodiversity sub-committee formed to provide feedback on the development of the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan. The Sub-committee met several times over the past year to discuss the content of draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan and key actions.

Councillor consultation has incorporated three rounds of small group meetings, split into the 'Urban, Hills & Valley' wards. Key feedback on issues relevant to wards and community sentiment regarding biodiversity was received.

A project Steering Committee met regularly in the development of the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan. The membership of the Committee represented a cross-section of the organisation.

Extensive consultation within Council reached a broad cross-section of the organisation, which delivered meaningful engagement and critical feedback. This has been particularly valuable, as many of these business units will be instrumental in delivering actions embedded within the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan.

Consultation with external agencies including Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), Melbourne Water, Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority (now incorporated into Melbourne Water), Parks Victoria and the Country Fire Authority occurred. This consultation was important to shape the content and maximise leverage opportunities. Further direct engagement with these agencies is planned to ensure strong alignment.

The Yarra Ranges Nature Plan contains an annual review and monitoring process, to report on progress towards the identified targets. A process of adaptive management is embedded into the annual review, to allow agility in our program design and delivery to maximise biodiversity benefit and progress towards the vision.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Federal and State Government legislation and policy dictates and directs Council action in biodiversity conservation, with opportunity for localised action often influenced by higher order policy. The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan seeks to set priorities to ensure Council's legislative obligations are met and for Council to advocate for greater resourcing for biodiversity action within the municipality by other tiers of government.

Council reputational risk is also a consideration. The community has articulated a strong vision of a protected and enhanced natural environment, which the draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan will deliver on. Council is also afforded the unique position of a highly valued biodiversity status, especially given the peri-urban context of Yarra Ranges.

The draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan identifies a suite of actions which are currently listed as seeking investment. This is primarily identified as seeking funding through state government agencies including DELWP and Melbourne Water, however does not guarantee the level of investment identified in the draft Plan. Ensuring close alignment with strategic documents will increase the likelihood of success with funding applications. Council's Advocacy Officer will also promote the key priorities within this draft Plan at appropriate levels of government.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT

1. Draft Yarra Ranges Nature Plan: Protecting our Biodiversity Assets 2022-2032