

Green Wedges Coalition

– a vision for Melbourne

PARLIAMENT VOTES ON GOVERNMENT PLAN TO BULLDOZE GREEN WEDGES FOR SUBURBAN SPRAWL NEXT WEEK

Background

The green wedges are, as successive premiers and planning ministers have said, the lungs of Melbourne. With a city already gasping for breath, Melbourne's lungs are about to be choked with urban sprawl. This government land grab will be a cancer, not just in the proposed new growth corridors but in surrounding areas, where developers will buy up environmentally and agriculturally significant grasslands.

The Bracks Government was elected three times on a pledge to protect and provide certainty for Green Wedges. The Brumby Government has broken that pledge and has embarked on this plan for gross unnecessary destruction of the environment and of fertile farmland which provides food close to Melbourne.

The plans will expand the UGB around new growth areas and a freeway reservation which include:

- up to 5000 ha of high quality western basalt plains grassland, whose biodiversity rivals Kakadu
- grassy woodlands in the Darebin, Jackson & Merri Creek valleys, with 400 year-old red gums
- prime market garden land in the Casey foodbowl; grazing and arable farmland in the north and west.
- Southern Brown Bandicoot habitat near the Cranbourne Royal Botanic Gardens
- An estimated 200 homes and family farms, blighting the future of hard-working farming families who will be forced off their land by escalating rates and encroaching urban development on land that may not be developed for two or three decades.

As well as moving the UGB, Planning Scheme Amendment VC67 includes :

- reservations for the Outer Metropolitan Ring Road & E6 freeway routes & railway lines
- the Beveridge Rail terminal (as well as an existing reservation at nearby Somerton);
- Two new grassland reserves totalling 15,000 ha;
- six new Central Activity Districts (Box Hill, Ringwood etc.) and
- Locating more intense housing development along tram and orbital bus routes on the Principal Public Transport Network.

The Green Wedges Coalition supports grassland reserves, but we don't think landowners should be forced off their land, but should be able to stay and manage the reserve land for conservation and for compatible farming activities. We are also concerned that the grasslands in the proposed reserves cannot replace the diversity of species and habitat in the grasslands to be destroyed.

The 22,000 ha of remnant grasslands currently in the green wedges is about 30% of the five per cent left of the western plains basalt grasslands that once stretched from Portland to Melbourne. The Government plans to destroy almost a quarter and to protect almost three quarters in developer-funded reserves, exposing the hollowness of its Net Gain policy. This is an appalling way to protect an endangered vegetation community.

Particular concerns:

1. This land is not needed for development:

Analysis of the Government's land supply figures demonstrates that there is enough land within the current UGB to last until 2030. Increasing the development density in urban growth areas would also make housing more affordable. Instead, the Government is prepared to hand the green wedge land that makes Melbourne a liveable city to developers for McMansions and suburban sprawl. (see details below)

Premier Brumby has woken up to the fact that the population boom he has created is threatening Melbourne's liveability and last week announced spending of \$59 million to promote regional development as a more acceptable alternative to overloading the city.

Surely this means has even less need to push urban development out into the green wedges and could comfortably withdraw Planning Scheme Amendment VC67.

2. The destruction of the Western Plains grasslands

Magnificent wildflower grassland plains once stretched from Melbourne nearly to the South Australian border, across Victoria's Volcanic Plains. These were home to diverse fauna such as marsupial hopping mice (Fat-tailed Dunnarts), Striped Legless Lizard, grassland birds, and a suite of rare plants like Spiny Rice-flower, Large-fruit Groundsel and grassland orchids.

State and Federal Governments have allowed these grasslands to be cleared at a rate of nearly four football fields per day over the past 10 years and we have lost over half of Melbourne's grasslands over the past 20 years. This is an international disgrace on a par with biodiversity loss from the widely condemned clearing of rainforest for palm oil.

Some of the best grasslands with rare and diverse species survive on the urban fringe in the western and northern green wedges. Like temperate grasslands around the world they are nationally endangered – listed under Australia's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act).

Now with massive urban growth boundary expansion plans, State Government proposes to wipe-out most of what remains of Melbourne's urban fringe grasslands, covering them with housing, roads and industrial estates, or digging them up for quarries. Up to 5000ha is proposed to be cleared: about three quarters of remnant grassland in undeveloped parts of the existing and proposed UGB, and at least 8% of what is left of the Volcanic Plains Grassland state-wide. In the International Year of Biodiversity, this is unacceptable.

State Government is proposing a major environmental trade-off deal, whereby developers who destroy grassland for urban sprawl will pay for two substantial grassland reserves further out in the green wedge. These reserves are important to protect the largest patches of Volcanic Plains grasslands, but they won't replace the important populations of rare grassland flora and fauna at Melbourne's fringe. These sites are important not only for biodiversity, but for the liveability of Melbourne and as a connection to nature. A few well-known grassland sites have been identified for protection inside the proposed UGB.

The most effective way to save Melbourne's urban-fringe grasslands is to protect the existing green wedges, and establish a conservation network across private and public land. If this is not possible, we call on MPs to at least seek a compromise to protect some of these high quality grasslands.

*For more information, contact **Andrew Booth** 9381 0182; asbooth@vicnet.net.au; or **Frances Overmars**, 9748 1294; rudifran@tpg.com.au; or **Giorgio De Nola** Western Plains North Green Wedge Group, 9626 8405; 0404 085 517; dante001@aapt.net.au*

3. The destruction of productive, sustainable agriculture

The report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into Sustainable Development of Agribusiness in Outer Suburban Melbourne describes the wider Melbourne area as "a diverse and dynamic farming region.... vegetables in Bacchus Marsh, barramundi in Werribee, mushrooms in Mernda, gourmet sheep cheese in Epping, asparagus in Cardinia, fruit in the Yarra Valley and poultry and premium wines in the Mornington Peninsula.

"From less than four per cent of Victoria's farmland, agriculture in this region produces 16 per cent of the state' agricultural wealth." The report's 84 recommendations mostly protect and facilitate farming in the green wedges and adjacent rural shires. Recommendation 11 is "That Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary be stabilised to provide certainty to land-holders and agribusiness."

Government should heed this report, which was released only last month. It should move to stabilise the UGB as recommended and withdraw PSA VC67 and the UGB expansion plans to clear for development for thousands of hectares of grazing land in the Western Basalt Plains Grasslands, the grassy woodlands of the Maribyrnong River, Darebin and Merri Creek Catchments, where stock shelter under ancient red gums; and the fertile market gardens of the south eastern foodbowl.

This amendment will be like cancer in the lungs of Melbourne. It will bring tragedy to the thousands of green wedge landowners to be forced off their rezoned land by rising rates and the

pressure of impending development, or by Public Acquisition Overlays for new, unnecessary freeways and freight terminals.

4. The Government has ignored the Green Wedges Coalition's call to rethink this disastrous plan and to:

- Hold the line on the Urban Growth Boundary, or if as we expected, Government proceeded, to
- Protect from urban development:
 - all land around the existing boundaries of Sunbury and the Diggers Rest township
 - all significant grasslands and current or extinct wetlands in the Western Volcanic Plains
 - all significant grasslands, red gum woodlands, wetlands and habitat corridor along the Merri Creek
 - essential farmland and fauna habitat in the Westernport Green Wedge
 - riparian strips at least 100m wide along creeks and watercourses
 - all other environmentally significant land identified in Environment Victoria's submission to GAA.
- Provide further protection to environmentally significant grasslands and grassy woodlands in the investigation areas by:
 - using the estimated \$90 million annual Melbourne Water parks levy to acquire highly significant areas for national parks;
 - providing incentives to landholders, via Bushbroker, Bush Tender and Grow West schemes;
 - funding Trust for Nature for rolling purchases in the green wedges, for on-selling with covenants.
 - Encourage Councils to provide conservation rate rebates for at least TfN covenanted properties.
- * Set a levy on developers to cover the actual costs of infrastructure development (estimated at \$13-100 billion more than the infrastructure cost of development in existing urban areas: the \$2b to be raised by the Growth Areas Infrastructure Contribution will cover only 15% of the official \$13b figure).

5.. LOCAL ISSUES:

Western Plains Green Wedges:

A. Once known as brown wedges, the work of ecologists including Sarah Bekessy and Ascelin Gordon of RMIT has shown that the biodiversity of the western basalt plains grasslands rivals Kakadu. The Werribee and Melton Plains support the largest remaining areas of Victoria's Basalt Plains Grasslands and are one of Australia's 15 Biodiversity Hotspots.

Much of the 15,000 ha grassland reserves to be provided over 10 years as a developer-funded trade-off is of poorer quality than the kangaroo (*themedra*) grasslands to be destroyed. As State Government has not in the past implemented its own clearing controls on grasslands, there are concerns whether it can be trusted to protect the proposed reserves, which may degrade and be forgotten before Government has to acquire them

Grassland remnants are scattered across the plains but many of the higher quality remnants around the urban areas of Werribee, Laverton, Deer Park and Caroline Springs will be destroyed.



The proposed extensions to the western growth boundary will cut off and flatten the western green wedges in breach of the basic Melbourne 2030 principle that growth should be channelled along growth corridors and green wedges in between protected.

(Pic, left, Western plains grasslands)

The Western Plains North Green Wedge Group is calling on State Government to protect environmentally significant grasslands in reserves and to protect all remnant grasslands and fertile farmland by keeping it in the green wedge and by implementing stricter measures to protect remnant grasslands from illegal clearing.

Contact: **Giorgio De Nola** Western Plains North Green Wedge Group, 9626 8405; 0404 085 517;

B. Putting more houses at risk of bushfires:

The development of this land could also put many hundreds of new houses at risk of bushfire: we can provide photos showing timber framed houses under construction in the forest at Eynesbury, near Melton in early 2009.

The Eynesbury subdivision approval in 2002 by the then State Planning Director, under delegation was the last residential development approved in the green wedge before the State Government green wedge protection package prohibited subdivision in 2002. It was the last straw that convinced the Bracks Government of the need for green wedge protection. Approved plans had the forest buffered by a golf course, but the developer wanted 800 more houses and in 2006 Melton Council and VCAT amended their plans to allow houses to edge into the forest, despite the evident bushfire risk. Department of Sustainability and Environment objections were over-ridden and environmentalist third parties were prevented from being heard by a Development Protection Overlay approved by the Planning Department. This land grab will put more houses at risk of a bushfire disaster like Black Saturday.

Contact **Harry van Moorst**, coordinator, Western Region Environment Centre: 9731 0288 or 0431 121 218. harryvm@envirowest.org.au. Available on request: pics of houses now under construction in environmentally significant grey-box woodland at Eynesbury.

Sunbury Maribyrnong Valley Green Wedge:

After repeated assurances by three planning ministers (including Minister Madden in mid-November) that the Urban Growth Boundary around Sunbury would remain intact, the Sunbury Maribyrnong Valley Green Wedge Defenders were shocked to find that Sunbury would double in size as a result of the proposed green wedge land grab. This is also a substantial contradiction to Melbourne 2030, which stated that urban growth should occur only in growth corridors and which did not designate Calder Highway as a growth corridor.

Separate submissions from Arnie Azaris (to Minister Madden expressing local shock and disappointment) and from the Jacksons Creek Environment Network are available. Arnie points out that substantial parts of the investigation area are covered by a Airports Overlay and that residential development in this area could lead to calls for an airport curfew.

Contact: **Arnie Azaris**, coordinator, SMVGW Defenders on 0419 547 807, aazaris1@bigpond.net.au; **Trevor Dance**, spokesman for SMVGW Defenders; 0413 822 214,

Whittlesea Merri Creek Green Wedge

The Merri Creek is a crucial life-line for native flora and fauna, extending into the northern suburbs of Melbourne. Along its length lies a chain of state and nationally significant grasslands, two of which have been reserved at Craigieburn and Campbellfield, whilst others remained on private land in the green wedge until now. A further 35 per cent of the Merri Creek catchment has been included in the proposed urban growth area, hence development will threaten its priceless biodiversity, including several populations of endangered Growling Grass Frogs.

The Friends of Merri Creek, like the Western Plains, Sunbury Maribyrnong Valley and Western Port Green Wedge groups report that profitable grazing activities can fit well with the conservation of grasslands and grassy woodlands. Many Landcare group members in the Merri Creek valley are aware that retaining native pastures and regenerating woodland trees improves their farm production values as well as biodiversity

Melbourne's northern plains, extending westwards from Plenty Valley to Merri Creek and Mt Ridley, contain fine examples of Victoria's endangered Red Gum Woodlands. This ecosystem once extended across much of the western plains, but now only a tiny percentage remains. The majestic Red Gum trees are often up to 400 years old or more, and form a park-like landscape over native grasses and herbs.

They provide many hollows and important habitat for woodland birds such as the endangered Barking Owl and rare parrots and



many species of bats. Grey Kangaroos loaf in their shadows during the day.



(views of Mt Ridley Red-gum grassy woodlands) Important stands of Red Gum woodland habitat survive near Mt Ridley to the west of Craigieburn, in the Merri catchment, and scattered across the Whittlesea green wedge, extending into some of the new suburbs. Some traditional grazing properties have kept both their Red Gum trees and the native grass layer into the present day through generations of sensitive grazing practices.

The Friends of Merri Creek called on State Government to secure a Merri Creek Biodiversity Network to extend from the upper catchment south into Melbourne's northern suburbs. Some of the area sought for reserves include

- **nationally significant Bald Hill grasslands,**
- **the grassy woodlands south east of Donnybrook,**
- **a 400m habitat corridor along Merri Creek (Merri Creek Park)**
- **all grassland contiguous with Kalkallo Common**
- **Camoola Swamp biosite and**
- **the Craigieburn East Grasslands and Mt Ridley grassy woodlands.**

Major problems include:

- a Boral Quarry is proposed for part of the Bald Hill Grasslands and bisects a critical part of the Merri Creek corridor.
- Grassland contiguous with Kalkallo Common is slated for development.
- The E6 will bisect and destroy Merri Creek environs and associated grasslands
- Corridor along Merri Creek needs to be widened, in places it is only 200m wide, as well the issue of Red Gum woodland noted below
- all of the Craigieburn Grasslands and Mt Ridley grassy woodlands have been identified as "significantly constrained land," but with no explicit commitment to protection for conservation. A Boral Quarry is proposed for the constrained part of the Bald Hill Grasslands.
- The Kalkallo West grasslands and Camoola Swamp biosite are slated for development.

The proposed urban growth areas cut deeply into the Red Gum woodlands of the Whittlesea green wedge. This threatens centuries-old trees, with many hollows and fallen branches for fauna habitat, and patches of native grasses and wildflowers such as Milky Beauty Heads and the nationally endangered Matted Flax-lily. Suburban development will clear many of these woodlands, or retain the trees as isolated museum pieces in pocket parks and roundabouts – as seen already in new suburbs at South Morang and Epping North.

The only area to have escaped the devastation seems to be the historic Wollert district, where residents banded together in a campaign to stop the E6 freeway, which was originally planned to take the homes, fire station and township of Wollert. The new plans show the E6 freeway moved to the east, away from homes and township, and the UGB dog-legged around the township so as to leave Wollert, with its ancient red gums, in the green wedge. However, it will still take many Wollert properties and cut the township off from the Whittlesea Green Wedge. (More details available on request.)

Contact: Friends of Merri Creek, **Ray Radford** 0422 989 166 ; Wollert Protect Our Heritage group: **Wendy Campbell**, 0417 511 061; wendy.campbell10@yahoo.com.au

South Eastern Investigation Area (WesternPort green wedge)

The proposed south-eastern investigation growth area was once part of the vast Kooweerup Swamp and has some of the most fertile agricultural land in the state. This land is very important in supplying fresh vegetables to Melburnians. The heaths and woodlands of this landscape, including Cranbourne Botanic Gardens and remnants on private land, support the largest surviving population of Southern Brown Bandicoot near the City. The land has recycled water from the Eastern Treatment Plant.

Casey Council has made strong submissions against the UGB expansion and wants the area protected within the green wedge as an essential farming area close to Melbourne. As a compromise, Casey suggested it would accept 1600 ha being taken for development but wanted the remaining 4000 ha of the Bunyip Foodbowl to remain in the green wedge. However VC67 takes more Casey land than planned in the June 2009 draft.

Environment and Landcare Groups wanted:

- Conservation agreements with private landholders to secure effective **bandicoot habitat links extending both south and east from Cranbourne Botanic Gardens.**
- **significant (>200m either side) riparian and drainage buffers** and links to other habitat and landscapes.

The proposed new urban growth areas, together with growth corridor land added in 2005, now threaten to remove large areas of prime farmland and to encircle Cranbourne Botanic Gardens with suburbs. They also threaten the health of Westernport Bay and its remaining seagrass. It is now acknowledged that siltation resulting from the construction of Cardinia dam caused the death of much WesternPort seagrass. The current UGB was designed to follow the ridge-lines to avoid more siltation damage, but the proposed UGB pushes down into the Westernport Catchment and will increase pressure on the health of the ecology of WesternPort Bay. Casey Council has opposed the extension of the Urban Growth Boundary in this area as its strategic planning supports the preservation of this highly productive farmland.

Contact: **Kelly Brooks-Macmillan** Cardinia Environment Coalition and Westernport Green Wedge, brooks-macmillan@bigpond.com; 0428 427 005;

Analysis of serious flaws in UGB expansion plans,

*This destruction is unnecessary: an analysis by the late **Jenni Bundy** of the Green Wedge Protection Group demonstrates that the Government has miscalculated its land supply figures and that there is enough land within the current UGB to last until 2030. Increasing the development density in urban growth areas would also make housing more affordable. Instead, the Government is prepared to hand the green wedge land that makes Melbourne a liveable city to developers for McMansions and suburban sprawl. Jenni's analysis is summarised as follows:*

The Melbourne @ 5 Million plan to expand the UGB to provide further green-field residential land from Green Wedges are based on incorrect and deeply flawed land supply estimates. These invalid figures are the basis upon which the Government has deemed it necessary to move the UGB.

The full lot yield analysis in the UDP 2007 Report (which is the basis for the land supply estimates) is based on projections of a reduced lot yield per hectare over time in existing Growth Areas, down to 8-10 in some areas.

These figures should be recalculated to yield a minimum of 15 dwellings per hectare (gross), with a target of 20 dwellings/ha from 2010. A yield of 15 lots per gross hectare would provide enough development land within the UGB to last for nearly 19 years . A density of 20 lots/ha would provide enough for 25 years.

This would make this latest green wedge land grab unnecessary and would keep new houses safely inside the UGB, instead of allowing them to sprawl over a fire-prone urban fringe. The Brumby Government has totally missed the point of Melbourne 2030, to contain outward growth instead of pandering to it. (More details in the analysis by the late Jenni Bundy, who died on Black Saturday 2009.)

Available documents on request or on our website:

1. *Green Wedges Charter (with a brief green wedge history and summary of current concerns.)*

2. *Green Wedges Coalition constituent membership contact list (for each green wedge).*
3. *“Reasons why the UGB Expansion Plans are seriously flawed,” Analysis of land supply figures by Jenni Bundy of the Green Wedge Protection Group (Feb 2009)*
4. *“Nature on our Doorstep,” Friends of Merri Creek Submission to Growth Areas Authority on Melbourne @ 5 million.(including plan of proposed conservation network and pic of Merri Creek).*
5. *Urban growth boundary expansion: threat to Melbourne’s endangered grasslands.*

Available photographs:

6. *Houses under construction at time of Black Saturday in environmentally significant grey-box woodland at Eynesbury.*
7. *Maps & pics of grasslands under threat.*

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