

Position Statement - Waterways of the West Action Plan

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association (YRKA) welcomes that the Victorian Government has acknowledged the significance of the Werribee River, Maribyrnong River, and Moonee Ponds Creek for the health and well-being of local communities and the environment. The Waterways of the West Action Plan, released last December, aims to “protect and enhance the waterways and their surrounding lands” in the face of population growth and climate change.

While the Action Plan is well intended, it fails to provide concrete measures and legal protections to safeguard the health of the waterways and surrounding parklands, and by extension, the well-being of communities. As Melbourne’s iconic river, the Yarra River enjoys significantly stronger legal protections from inappropriate development. Stakeholders of the waterways of the Western region had participated in three-year consultation processes preceding the Waterway of the West Action Plan in the hope of securing equal protections for Victoria’s western rivers and creeks and have expressed disappointment at the much weaker outcomes.

The YRKA notes the following key short-comings:

- Failure to include protections for the upper watersheds of rivers outside of the urban growth boundary and network of creeks of the West
- Lack of funding commitment for vital restoration of riparian health in the Western waterways, thereby undermining intergenerational equity through failure to safeguard community assets for future generations
- Absence of concrete and enforceable legal protections equal to those enacted for the Yarra River

The Action Plan on its own lacks the urgency to stop the degradation of the single largest system of green space in Victoria’s West. If the Action Plan is to be a foundation for meaningful protection, it must be complemented with enforceable measures, an operational plan and budget.

The Victorian Government is proposing Significant Landscape Overlays as the main tool in relation to planning controls. Given the focus on the planning controls in the short term, as immediate steps, the YRKA calls on the Planning Minister to

1. Schedule consultations on the detailed nature of the Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO) for April 2022.

2. Make publicly available the planning analysis and landscape assessment and any other relevant documents underpinning the SLO, prepared by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

In the context of the upcoming state election, the Victorian Government has the opportunity to make the resourcing and implementation of the Action Plan a key pillar of its election commitment by

3. Providing an operational budget in the 2021 - 2022 state budget to fund short-term (2022) and long-term (2023 - 2025) actions outlined in the Action Plan in subsequent annual state budgets. Project and staff resources should be outlined in a publicly available operational plan with time-bound actions.
 - Regarding planning, these funded actions should include establishing planning controls and policies that apply to the upper catchment streams.
 - The long-term actions should include a funded program that puts into practice the concept of the waterways as living entities. This program should include ecological river, stream, and wetland restoration.

QUOTE: Maribyrnong Officer: “Population pressure and environmental pressures from climate change are eating away our green spaces and riparian buffers of Melbourne’s western waterways. On its own, the Action Plan of the Waterways of the West will not safeguard the rivers and green spaces for the enjoyment and well-being of communities. If, as the Action Plan states, the waterways are to be considered as living entities, the Victorian government must honour the rights of the waterways and their communities accordingly”.