



Landcare
Victoria Inc.

Building a Strong Future for **Victorian** **Landcare**

VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION **2022**



Building a strong future for Victorian Landcare

VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION, NOVEMBER 2022

Emerging in Victoria more than three decades ago, landcare mobilises and supports communities and land managers to undertake practical action in support of landscape restoration and agricultural production.

 **600+**
member groups

 **17,000+**
households

 **60,000**
individuals

With around 600 active landcare groups and 17,000 members, supporting up to 60,000 volunteers, landcare is one of Victoria's best inventions. Emulated throughout Australia and internationally, landcare recognises that progress in large scale landscape restoration and ongoing sustainable management depends on the voluntary contribution of thousands of land managers supporting each other.

OUR STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Landcare Victoria Inc., the State's peak body for the landcare community, urges all of Victoria's political parties and politicians to **consider the following key principles** that underpin our 2022 State election proposals:



Recognise

that the task of protecting and restoring the condition of our agricultural landscapes depends on the management decisions and voluntary contributions of thousands of farmers and other land managers – and that landcare is a proven model of engaging and supporting them in that change.



Respect

the thousands of farmers, other land managers and their volunteer community supporters who are engaged in the vital work of landcare. Work with the landcare community as partners in the urgent, collective need to address the multiple crises we face as a community.



Support

landcare with community-friendly grant programs and policies that build capacity, resilience and renewal of the vital work of the landcare community.



Engage

the landcare community in more community-based and effective environmental and sustainable agriculture programs from conception to implementation.

Landcare focuses on the 60% of Victoria that is used for agricultural production. This landscape is a mosaic of public and private land uses. It is the foundation of Victoria's \$17.8 Bn¹ agriculture industry. It is a landscape under severe pressure, with many ecosystems in decline as evidenced in the Victoria's Biodiversity2037 strategy²:

Victoria [has] become a powerhouse of agricultural production, with huge benefits to the state economy. But it has also left a legacy of loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitats that is evident across the state.

At its foundation, landcare builds a voluntary, mutually beneficial partnership between agricultural and environmental protection goals. Through its networks, landcare builds community capacity, and promotes social cohesion and inclusion. Importantly, landcare builds community resilience when challenged by drought, floods, bushfires and climate change. The community wellbeing benefits of Landcare were detailed by KPMG³ which found that avoided healthcare costs associated with landcare volunteering are \$403/ volunteer, which totals more than \$18M in Victoria. These findings are backed by recently published Australian National University research⁴.

Landcare delivers results for biodiversity, pest and weed control, river health and soil health and erosion control. While many landcare projects directly mitigate

and help landscapes adapt to climate change as well as supporting sustainable food and fibre production, our members are aware that there is so much more that needs to be done. By sharing knowledge and experience among land managers, landcare promotes innovation and builds confidence in improved management practice and links valuable landscapes to support threatened species.

The power of the landcare idea has spread from the bush to our cities and towns. Hundreds of landcare groups organise volunteers to care for the bushland reserves, streamsides and urban parklands that provide vital environmental infrastructure. Landcare groups play an important role in the management and protection of these areas – a community activity that yields additional benefits of inclusion and community capacity⁵. The volunteer landcare community delivers results that Government agencies are not resourced to achieve.

Faced as we are by a changing climate that is creating new pressures on our environment and agricultural systems, there is no better time than now to invest in the people and communities that must lead the practical task of reversing the decline in Victoria's ecosystems and mitigating the worst impacts of climate change, while maintaining the prosperity of our agricultural industries and the resilience of our rural and regional communities.

PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT TERM OF PARLIAMENT

On behalf of, and after consultation with its members, Landcare Victoria **proposes these four priority initiatives** for the next term of the Victorian Parliament (with four-year funding estimates):



Support and expand the landcare facilitator program to better support the landcare community (\$40M)



Back our landcare volunteers with the grant funding they need to achieve government and community goals (\$30M)



Unlock community resources to achieve our biodiversity goals (\$3.6M)



Partner with Landcare to achieve sustainable land management and resilient community goals (\$9.2M)

These priorities are developed in the following pages...



Support and expand the landcare facilitator program to better support the landcare community

Successive Victorian Governments over many years have provided support for the Victorian landcare community through funding to support around 80 local landcare facilitators (all part time). The Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations found that:

Volunteers, particularly in the form of community groups, play an invaluable role in securing and maintaining Victoria's environmental infrastructure and in contributing to community cohesion. However, both the Victorian Government and local governments have yet to unlock the full potential of the volunteer sector with respect to the provision and maintenance of environmental infrastructure (Finding 27)⁶.

Unlocking the potential of the volunteer sector is exactly what landcare facilitators do. They organise and mobilise community action and are accountable to the local landcare community throughout regional Victoria.

The established landcare facilitator program underpins the success of Victorian landcare, generating a 7:1 return on investment⁷.

Essential though it is, funding for the program remains highly constrained. As costs increase, the funding support for facilitators has become inadequate. Additional program requirements on volunteer committees mean that more volunteer hours go to administration and fewer hours towards delivering outcomes.

The landcare facilitator program must be enlarged to support the landcare community to develop and implement projects that adequately address the multiple environmental crises we face. It needs to be reformed to streamline administration and place a better focus on landcare outcomes. Funding should also support more hours per position at fair rates of pay and the program should be reviewed to ensure the community leadership of landcare is properly recognised and supported.

Landcare Victoria calls on the next Government to:



Commit to the continuation of the vital landcare facilitator program which has been a foundation of the success of landcare for three decades.



Increase funding for the program to support at least 100 positions (an increase of about 20 over current funding). We propose that a four-year commitment of at least \$40 million plus program administration costs. This could be expected to generate a return on public investment of \$280 million.



Ensure that funding grants are sufficient to cover all reasonable overhead and operating costs and to support a fair wage for the positions – and that landcare staff have career development opportunities in the sector.



Review the administration of the program in close consultation with the landcare community to further strengthen and streamline the partnership between government and the landcare community – this should include consideration of landcare community management of the program.



Back our landcare volunteers with the grant funding they need to achieve government and community goals

Each year thousands of landcare members volunteer their time and expertise in organising, managing, and delivering projects that yield great benefit to the wider community.

We need to back their efforts with funding to ensure volunteers have the materials and other resources they need to bring their initiatives to life.

Well-designed grant programs motivate and mobilise landcare volunteers. Landcare grants need to support activities that integrate activities addressing environmental, agricultural and other goals to engage a wide cross section of community interest. Narrowly focussed grant programs designed only to meet government agency program goals can do more harm than good.

Grant programs must respect the capacity and time input of volunteers. Complex application processes for small grants makes no sense. Governments need to find ways to streamline these processes to avoid wasting thousands of volunteer hours in preparing grant applications in competitive rounds.

Landcare volunteers understand that they must be accountable for any grant funding they receive but the level of accountability must be proportional to the funding provided. Small grants that might allow the purchase of seedlings, fencing, herbicides and other inputs can be very valuable but not if the grants administration process drowns volunteers in paperwork.

Grant programs need to recognise that so-called overheads are an essential element of any project funding. The Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal's Heartbeat Report⁸ recognised the desperate problem many community groups, including landcare, have in meeting the basic operational costs of their organisations – insurance, rent, utilities and other costs not immediately attributable to project funding. Arbitrary caps on project administration expenditure are no help. **Governments need to recognise that expenditure on administrative costs is a necessary to ensure the survival and health of volunteer organisations.**

Landcare Victoria calls on the next Government to:



Maintain and expand the Victorian Landcare Grants program to ensure our volunteers are backed and supported for the great work they do. We propose an investment of at least \$30M over four years.



Consolidate community grant programs to ease the burden on volunteers of applying for funds under multiple programs each year.



Design grant programs to support integrated community led landcare activities. We need to respect and support the voluntary co-contribution of the landcare community and balance this with government policy goals.



Review grant administration processes to consolidate, streamline and simplify administrative processes, while ensuring proper accountability for public funds in proportion to funding allocated.



Ensure that grant funding guidelines provide support for volunteer capacity and capability development, as well as on ground outcomes.



Unlock community resources to achieve our biodiversity goals

Victoria's biodiversity continues to decline under the pressure of climate change, inappropriate management practices and habitat loss. Stopping and reversing this loss depends on collaborative action involving government, scientists, industry and, very importantly, an active and informed community.

The State Government's Biodiversity 2037 Strategy recognises this:

Private landholders manage two-thirds of the Victorian landscape, and therefore have a critical role to play in conserving biodiversity. Private land hosts some of the state's most threatened species and some of its most important and irreplaceable native vegetation (p. 36)⁹.

The critical role of landcare in confronting these challenges was recognised in the Victorian Legislative Council Planning and Environment Committee Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria¹⁰. It found that:

Victorian Landcare groups undertake critical biodiversity protection, conservation and restoration activities that provide significant value to Victoria, including on private land. (p. 339).

We need to recognise and respect the fact that many land managers are in the business of farming – of making a living from the land they manage. Programs seeking to achieve biodiversity outcomes need to respectfully work with farmers on their terms, integrating production and biodiversity outcomes in a way that makes sense on a farm-by-farm and community-by-community basis. A premium must be placed on engagement and knowledge sharing as a foundation for improved management practices that endure through time.

Achieving our biodiversity goals demands good science and high-quality projects but achieving results at the scale required is a social and economic challenge as well.

By supporting a strong landcare sector, government can amplify the effectiveness of its investments and achieve enduring change in landscape management practices.

Landcare Victoria calls on the next Government review the approach it takes to achieving biodiversity outcomes. It should:



Invest in community landcare as the best available and proven means to unlock voluntary community contributions which is the foundation for reversing biodiversity decline.



Reform delivery of biodiversity programs to place greater value on landholder capacity, mobilisation and motivation – respecting grass roots action.



Better balance statewide priorities and targets with the grassroots needs and interests of landholder communities.



Build capacity in the landcare community by supporting a network of specialist community biodiversity facilitators that will work with the landcare groups and networks to develop high quality projects that achieve biodiversity outcomes in ways relevant to the needs and interests of the community. We propose six positions over four years costing \$3.6M.



Partner with Landcare to achieve sustainable land management and resilient community goals

Victoria must confront the urgent need to arrest and reverse the widespread decline of ecosystems in Victoria. At the same time, it must work with the farming community to improve the sustainability of agricultural systems that underpin our food security and economic prosperity.

To achieve lasting gains, it is critical that governments properly integrate the needs and interests of the farmers and other land managers that must implement the practice changes needed to address the multiple crises we face.

Regulation of land management practices has a role to play but the Victorian Government needs to better engage farmers and land managers through landcare. Government must recognise and support the landcare community as a partner in the task of achieving environmental and agricultural sustainability.

Land managers are being forced by climate change to adapt production systems and environmental management programs. Landcare already plays an important role in building and sharing knowledge about adaptation strategies, although its contribution is often unrecognised and undervalued.

The volunteers that join our landcare groups and committees are mostly not policy or technical specialists. They need trusted advisors who will work with them to support their engagement in policy design and implementation. **The only advice that is useful is trusted advice and the best way to build trust is that advisors, however funded, are clearly accountable to and embedded in the landcare community.**

Landcare Victoria calls on the next Government to support landcare as a partner by building capacity in the landcare community. Key areas of improved community capacity include:



Climate change – assisting the landcare community to work towards carbon neutrality and to support climate change adaptation. Well-designed climate projects will also achieve positive biodiversity and agricultural benefits. We propose four community-based specialist positions be established, costing \$2.4M over four years.



Biosecurity – there are enormous gains to be made in biosecurity policy by better engaging the landcare community in surveillance, monitoring and management. We propose that the existing landcare facilitator program be enlarged to allow a further two days per week on biosecurity matters, costing \$5M over four years.



Ecosystem Services Markets – increase landcare's capacity to engage in emerging markets for ecosystem services. We propose the establishment of two specialist positions to support landcare engagement in these markets costing \$1.2M over four years.



Disaster Resilience – establish a landcare disaster recovery coordinator to facilitate liaison with government recovery agencies during the post disaster recovery phase, and support resilient, disaster-prepared communities. We propose establishment of one state-wide specialist, costing \$600,000 over four years.



ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/about/agriculture-in-victoria/victorias-agriculture-and-food-industries#:~:text=Victoria's%20gross%20value%20of%20agricultural,per%20cent%20of%20Australia's%20GVAP.>
- 2 <https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/biodiversity/biodiversity-plan>
- 3 <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/wellbeing-report/>
- 4 <https://www.sustainablefarms.org.au/news/new-research-highlights-wellbeing-impacts-of-natural-asset-management/>
- 5 <https://parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-la/inquiries/article/4213>
- 6 <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-la/inquiries/article/4213>
- 7 <https://www.landcarevic.org.au/assets/Uploads/NetworkPage/ddd36c7f-75bc-42aa-964e-e34dbc085078landcare-victoria---return-on-investment---final--28002-29.pdf>
- 8 <https://frrr.org.au/heartbeat/>
- 9 https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/51259/Protecting-Victorias-Environment-Biodiversity-2037.pdf
- 10 <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-lc/inquiries/article/4455>

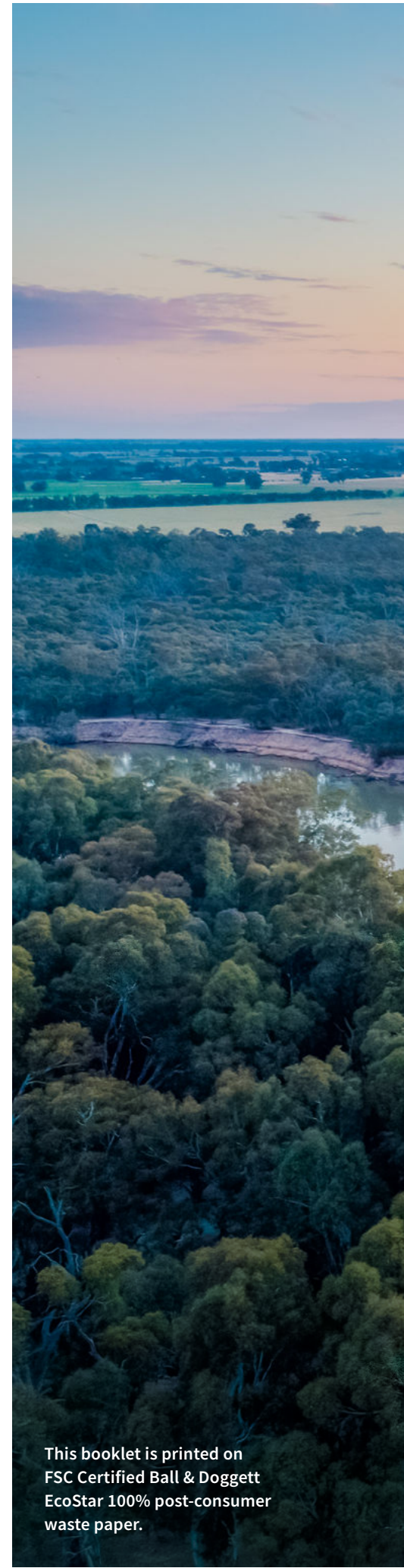
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