



23rd April 2024

Victorian Environmental Assessment Council
Level 39, 2 Lonsdale St
PO Box 500
Melbourne Vic 3000

Dear Sir / Madam,

Re: Submission – Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands

Four Wheel Drive Victoria has a longstanding and proud relationship with Parks Victoria and Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and in October 2015 the Ministerial Four Wheel Drive Advisory Committee was formed.

In addition, an existing 'Memorandum of Understanding' (MOU) between Parks Victoria, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and Four Wheel Drive Victoria provides a framework for the ongoing relationship between users and land managers in Victoria. The Association holds this MOU in extremely high regard and the work done by Parks Victoria and DEECA is recognized by Four Wheel Drive Victoria in the effective management of the Forests and Parks in the central highlands' region for a large and diverse user group.

FOUR WHEEL DRIVE VICTORIA

Victoria Association of Four Wheel Drive Clubs Inc.

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ABN 40 891 301 368 ASSN No: A0013539S RTO 21605

Driving in a sustainable environment

Our Principal Objectives

The Association has the following principal objectives when it comes to the management of public land in Victoria:

1. Maintaining **access to all four wheel drive tracks** to support the four wheel drive experience of our members
2. Respecting the cultural heritage and environmental values of the land in which we tour
3. Supporting the principals of **dispersed vehicle based camping**
4. Supporting the communities in which we travel, in turn contributing to the State's economic health.
5. We recognize that our members enjoy the many and varied recreational activities that use the areas under review
6. The Association clearly supports sustainable vehicle road and track networks for recreational use in conjunction with management and maintenance for emergency response access.
7. To ensure the Association is included in the consultation process as per the existing 'Memorandum of Understanding' between Parks Victoria, Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and Four Wheel Drive Victoria (2009 to 2019) regarding any proposed road and track closures.

Comments to the Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands

Please note Four Wheel Drive Victoria sought feedback from our member clubs and the following comments and opinions expressed are without prejudice and are offered in a constructive light.

Proposed changes to Park and Forest status.

Regarding the proposed changes to the status of the parks and forests in the Central Highlands Investigation area, the Association and its members have a view that the region is well managed with the resources available to both DEECA and Parks Victoria. Both land managers have invested funding into existing recreational facilities, projects and infrastructure and to best protect and conserve the sensitive areas they manage. Is it prudent to make extensive changes incurring major financial expenditure and managerial placements?

Logging of Forests

Four Wheel Drive Victoria does not advocate a particular view on the issues of logging however, we do recognize that the changing of State Forest to National, regional and Conservation Parks may have a detrimental impact on forestry workers in local communities, user groups and recreational activities.

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Recommendation Concerns

Some of our members have concerns that the recommendations in the assessment favour the creation of more / larger National Park area thereby restricting and reducing the ability of some popular recreational activities. We trust the recommendations will not be a forgone conclusion and that this investigation will provide a fair and unbiased report with alternate plans to be considered if deemed necessary.

Environmental, Fauna and Flora

Four Wheel Drive Victoria understands the requirement to protect the environment, but this could easily and effectively be done with adequate funding provided to existing structures and management bodies such as DEECA and Parks Victoria. Endangered species would be better protected with more effective funding of existing programs.

Indigenous and Cultural Heritage

Four Wheel Drive Victoria acknowledges Gunaikurnai, Bunurong, Taungurung and Wurundjeri people past and present who have lived on and managed their country for thousands of years. We will welcome and value the opportunity to build even stronger relationships and work with them in the future. Our Association in the past, has been in consultation with the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board in Gippsland regarding planning for a joint management future, the Gunditjmara Traditional Owners regarding the Ngootyoong Gunditj Ngootyoong Mara Southwest Management Plan, and we are currently a part of the Mt Stirling Stakeholders Group together with the Taungurung Clans working on the Mt Stirling 2030 Plan. We respect their issues and concerns around their sacred, cultural and spiritual land and we will continue to look to form appropriate relationships with Traditional Owners across the State.

Recreational Activities

As well as Four Wheel Driving and car touring in this region many of our members are involved in the variety of other recreational activities which often require a 4WD vehicle to access these areas. Our members can be involved in most of the recreations pursued such as prospecting and fossicking, hunting, bushwalking, trail bike riding, fishing, dispersed vehicle based camping, mountain bike riding, horse riding, and dog walking. Any changes that impact our member's recreational activities are of major concern to the Association.

Tourism and Local Communities

As already stated in your executive summary "Population growth in nearby Melbourne with inevitable increases in visitation will also place pressure on these areas". Tourism will continue to be a key engine in the economic growth in the region and it is highly likely that these trends will last and extend further from Melbourne over coming years, particularly as public land in the investigation area becomes more accessible". Any restrictions or reduction in recreational activities will have a large negative impact on tourism for these local communities as people visit other areas for their recreation. Whilst we understand the importance of nature conservation, we do question whether granting National Park status will increase tourism as opposed to leaving the regions in their current form. Not all recreational users live local to the investigation area and a large proportion travel from Melbourne, other regional areas and even from interstate. Many local communities such as Toolangi, Marysville, Warburton, Powelltown, Noojee, Erica, Walhalla, Matlock, Woods Point and Jamieson would all feel the impact of a loss of visitations from these recreational users. It is important to recognise that our members and other 4wd users, spend large amounts of money on fuel, food, general merchandise and accommodation in these areas.

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Impacts of any Proposed Changes of Park/Forest Status for Four Wheel Drivers

The Four Wheel Drive community is vast and varied and hold their access to 4WD tracks dearly. As the peak body we have a strong focus on maintaining access to the large network of 4WD tracks throughout the state.

1. Regarding **Access To 4WD Tracks** the Association and its members hold the view that no change to any 4WD track access is made in any State Forest, National, Conservation or Regional Park.
2. Whilst there is no mention any track access being denied or considered; we would like to think that the status quo will remain in as much as our SOP states that we will be consulted if there is any movement in this area.
3. **Dispersed Vehicle Based Camping** is currently allowed in State Forests and is a very popular recreation with our members and the public. The proposed change from State Forests to National Parks may impact this activity and only allow camping in designated restricted camping areas. These camping areas may be gravelled and have fencing or barriers to prevent casual camping close to vehicles. Dispersed Vehicle Based Camping allows the campsite to be placed anywhere appropriate and have the vehicle parked in close proximity allowing access to car fridges and other equipment stored in the vehicle. This is the preferred style of camping by our members and consideration should be given to allowing Dispersed Vehicle Based Camping in low impact areas. Dispersed Vehicle Based Camping provides a unique and remote experience as opposed to being corralled in to designated sites with barriers separating campers and their vehicles. We propose consideration be given to Dispersed Vehicle Based Camping in National Parks, Regional and Conservation Parks.
4. **Camping Fees** do not exist in State Forests in the investigation area and the Association does not see any justification for introduction of camping fees in any of the proposed Parks in the future. Recreational hunting, especially **Deer Hunting**, is a popular with many of our members and we note that this activity will be greatly impacted by your proposed change of State Forest to National Parks especially. Taking in to account the vast increase in deer numbers encroaching into these areas and even within the outer suburbs of Melbourne this may be a negative move and will see even larger populations of feral deer because of this proposal. We would hope that hunting and use of firearms may be authorised by the land manager as part of a pest animal control program like what has been happening in other parks across the state and that this will be an adequate solution to the feral deer problem if the changes take place.
5. **Dog Walking** is another enjoyable activity that our members currently do in State Forests, and we do not see how this activity would have any additional impact on the environment, especially if the dog is on a lead or under control of the owner. Many tourists also travel with their dogs and visitations to the investigation area would be negatively impacted if the proposal is adopted.
6. **Metal Detecting and Prospecting** is another recreation that many of our members enjoy in this area and the proposed changes will impact this activity. The Association acknowledges there are some indigenous sacred sites and sensitive environmental areas that require preservation and exclusion from this activity, but we would not like to extinguish this pastime totally.

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Four Wheel Drive Victoria is committed to supporting the recreational interests of our member clubs and the greater four wheel drive community. We will continue building on our already strong relationship with the Land Managers. Volunteer activities such as our Camp Host programs, Clean Up the Bush, Track Clearing and exhibits at State and National 4wd and recreation shows are regular events on our calendar and as a Registered Training Organisation Four Wheel Drive Victoria will also continue to promote and educate travellers about responsible and sustainable 4WD touring and camping. We also are very conscious of the social well-being that is associated with enjoying the outdoors and with mental health at the front of mind these days, we also understand the advantages of being able to move around freely in the landscape pursuing whatever passion takes one's fancy, be it bushwalking, birdwatching, push bike riding, fishing, hunting, or photographing flora and fauna, without bollards or locked gates precluding these activities.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer a submission to the VEAC Assessment of the values of state forests in the Central Highlands. This is the submission of Four Wheel Drive Victoria with respect to this assessment.

Yours faithfully,



Wayne Hevey
CEO
Four Wheel Drive Victoria
(On Behalf of Four Wheel Drive Victoria and its Member Clubs)

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