

Planning for Melbourne's Green Wedges and Agricultural Land – Land use challenges

Fact sheet 3



Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas face several challenges, putting land that produces much of our food, supplies clean drinking water, manages our waste and provides materials to build our infrastructure under threat. But what are these challenges and why are they a problem now?

Accommodating Melbourne's growing population

Melbourne's population will grow from 5 million in 2018 to 9 million by 2056. In the same period, Victoria's total population will reach 11.2 million (*Victoria in Future*, 2019).

Much of this increase will be in Melbourne, its growth areas and its peri-urban towns. This will put pressure on housing and infrastructure, increase demand for food and resources and lead to more waste and pollution.

As identified in *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050*, we must avoid urban sprawl and maintain a balance between the needs of the community, economy and environment.

Adapting to a changing climate

Victoria's climate has become warmer and drier in recent decades. Climate modelling predicts this trend will continue. There will be higher average temperatures, less rainfall, increased flooding, rising sea-levels and more extreme weather events, including heatwaves and drought.

Parts of northern Victoria will likely be hit hardest. Some food production is expected to move further south. More people will be sharing less water. Reusing urban wastewater and stormwater for food production will become increasingly important.

People living in high bushfire risk areas will face longer bushfire seasons and more days of extreme heat. With a growing population, more people could be exposed to natural hazards. Land-use planning will help reduce this exposure by influencing where and how development occurs.

Managing increased land use conflict and the urban-rural interface

Melbourne's green wedges and peri-urban areas are some of the most beautiful and culturally rich places in Victoria. The 'sea/tree-change' lifestyle has become increasingly popular as workplaces become more flexible and transport options improve, making regional living more accessible. If not managed, this change can lead to unplanned conversion of agricultural land for rural homes. New residents in rural areas can lead to conflict with agricultural businesses due to the noise, dust and smells that are a normal part of farming. In some cases, farming may be restricted due to complaints from non-farming neighbours.

Land at the interface of urban and rural areas tends to be highly contested and under pressure to accommodate land uses that serve urban populations. Conflicts arise because this land is larger and more affordable than urban land. There is ever-increasing market pressure to convert rural land to urban uses.

Pressures on the viability of farming

There are a number of factors that influence the agricultural sector as a whole such as changing markets and consumer preferences, advances in technology and innovation, declining terms of trade and government policy and investment decisions.

To adapt and evolve to these changes, the agricultural sector has moved towards closer integration of the agrifood chain, increased efficiencies and innovation, more intensive production and, for some commodities, a trend towards larger farms to achieve economies of scale.

The ability of green wedge and peri-urban farms to adapt is challenged by high levels of land speculation, inflated land prices, high operational costs (e.g. council rates) and limited opportunities to expand.

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Balancing competing community needs

Critical infrastructure like airports, water treatment plants and waste and resource recovery centres help meet the needs of Melburnians. They provide essential community services. Often, these facilities need to be built away from residential areas.

This also means renewable energy infrastructure, including wind turbines and solar panels that require a lot of space, is often located in rural areas.

Victoria's growing population also demands new infrastructure – including railways, roads and new suburbs. This increases demand for resource extraction through quarrying.

These important resources, infrastructure and services need to be supported while maintaining the environmental and agricultural features of the green wedges and peri-urban areas.

We must strike a balance that achieves improved environmental, economic, cultural, health and wellbeing outcomes for our communities.

Providing certainty for the future

Establishing the green wedges and Melbourne's urban growth boundary (UGB) has helped protect farmland and the natural environment from urban uses. However, the UGB has been amended a number of times to allow for urban expansion.

Uncertainty about the future of green wedges can lead to land speculation and land banking. This inhibits investment in agriculture. Land that is close to the UGB can be bought by speculators in case it is expanded. This increases the value of the land and prices farmers out. In addition, land is sometimes left idle, making it prone to invasive weeds and pest animals. What could have been prime productive agricultural land is left unused.

Under the current regime of rural zones, councils (in their role as responsible authority) can issue permits for a range of uses that are considered secondary to the primary purpose of a zone. The combination of wide discretion and performance-based provisions that have a degree of flexibility can lead to uncertainty and inconsistent decisions.

Have your say

You are invited to consider the challenges and opportunities raised in the consultation paper and provide feedback on the proposed planning system changes by making a submission.

Submissions can be made online at
<https://engage.vic.gov.au/gwal>

For any questions or assistance please contact
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