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Chair - Dr Deborah Peterson
Wildlife Act 1975 Review Panel
Department Environment Land Water Planning
C/0-engage.vic.gov.au

Dear Dr. Peterson,

**Re: Yarra Ranges Council submission on the *Wildlife Act 1975*
Review.**

Yarra Ranges Council welcomes the Wildlife Act 1975 Review and encourages the strengthening of the Act to be more effective in protecting our wildlife and wildlife habitat. We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback to the review.

Yarra Ranges Council is a large municipality on Melbourne's peri-urban green wedge, with significant natural assets, important agricultural areas for greater Melbourne and communities invested in the protection of our natural areas. As a large peri-urban municipality, with incredible biodiversity and habitat for many threatened faunal species such as the Helmeted Honeyeater and Leadbeater's Possum, adequate protections for these species is critical.

In Yarra Ranges, our most challenging pest animal impact by far is that driven by feral deer including Sambar, Fallow and Red species.

Yarra Ranges Council, along with other land management authorities are currently working with DELWP on the development of the Peri Urban Regional Deer Control Plan – an action that has arisen from the Victorian Deer Control Plan released in Oct 2020. This process has led to the development of a "situation analysis" examining the impacts of deer across the peri urban Melbourne region, with staggering statistics emerging.

Feral Deer

The peri urban area of eastern Melbourne is grappling with the exponentially increasing feral deer population on the peri-urban fringe that is destroying important wildlife habitat. Feral deer are not only destroying biodiversity, but are also dramatically impacting agriculture, the economy, cultural values and human safety, due to increasing deer-vehicle collisions and human interactions. Feral deer are also threatening the water quality of waterways in the Yarra Catchment including Melbourne's water supply. Protozoan parasites (*Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia* species) that could cause zoonotic disease in humans and can put wildlife populations at risk ('Giardia and Cryptosporidium in mammalian wildlife – current status and future needs.'

Trends in Parasitology, 21:8 August 2005), have been detected at low levels in deer faecal pellets in Melbourne drinking-water catchments. If Melbourne's water supply had to be treated for *Cryptosporidium* it may cost over \$1 billion to upgrade the treatment infrastructure.

The objectives of the Wildlife Act to protect feral deer for game hunting is both inappropriate and inconsistent with other government policy and legislation. There is confusion both in government and the community by the fact that feral deer are protected as game under the Wildlife Act, whilst providing exemptions for deer to be "unprotected", only on private land excluding Hog deer. Public land managers currently must seek an 'Authority to Control Wildlife', to permit the removal of an introduced feral pest, to protect biodiversity and wildlife habitat in conservation areas.

Sambar Deer

Damage caused by Sambar, particularly browsing, antler rubbing and physical removal of particular plant species, is resulting in serious ecological consequences. Threatening processes instigated or maintained by Sambar include: loss of individual taxa, altered vegetation structure and massive widespread removal and prevention of regeneration, which is now resulting in the loss of plant communities in some areas. These observations are particularly disturbing, as it is apparent that Sambar are yet to reach their full ecological and population potential in south-eastern Australia. (Peel et al. 2005).

The destruction documented is now so widespread and severe that in places it represents an 'ecological disaster' for specific plant and animal species, ecological vegetation classes and floristic communities. It is strongly recommended that all feral deer, but Sambar in particular, should no longer be protected under the Wildlife Act so that control methods can be devised and implemented. It now appears that such measures will be essential for the long-term survival of some fragile plant species and communities in Victoria (Peel et al. 2005). The exponential growth rate of Sambar can see the population double every 2 to 4 years, and 40% of the population is required to be removed per annum, to simply 'maintain' current numbers (Hone et al 2010). Deer population estimates for Victoria are between 1 million (DELWP and DEDJTR 2018) and 2 million, therefore requiring between 400,000 and 800,000 deer to be removed annually to just prevent further population growth. The required annual removal targets have not yet been established by state government.

Allowing feral deer to remain as 'game' under the Wildlife Act 1975 in Victoria because they are 'already established in the wild in Victoria and beyond eradication with current control methods', is inconsistent with how we approach other pest animal management including rabbits, foxes and pigs. In the wild, feral deer are invasive pest animals and should be unequivocally recognised as such.

All feral deer species in Victoria should be removed as 'game' under the Wildlife Act 1975 for the following reasons:

1. Feral deer are now an established, self-sustaining invasive pest, creating an 'ecological disaster' for Victoria's biodiversity and wildlife habitat (Peel et al. 2005), with the potential to establish across the entire continent (Davis et al. 2016);
2. '*The reduction in biodiversity of native vegetation by Sambar deer*' is listed as a Potentially Threatening Process under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*;

3. *Nematolepis wilsonii* (Shiny Nematolepis), a small tree that is listed as 'vulnerable' under EPBC Act, is found in the Yarra Valley Catchment and is endemic to Victoria and is also listed under the FFG Act. Damage caused by Sambar is identified in the recovery plan as the greatest threat to this species (Murphy et al. 2006).
4. Several threatened faunal species living in unique ecosystems within Yarra Ranges are being impacted significantly by deer browsing, trampling, wallowing and rubbing. These include a number of endemic ecosystems and/or species such as the Helmeted Honeyeater at Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve; Mt Donna Buang Wingless Stonefly at Mt Donna Buang, Slender Tree Fern, Dandenong Burrowing Crayfish, Kallista Stonefly, Dandenong and Sassafras Amphipods of the Cool Temperate Rainforests of the Dandenongs. These amongst many other precious species are being impacted by deer.
5. Legislation and policy for invasive species should be consistent and clear across land tenure. Currently there is confusion in policy and legislation as to how deer should be managed;
6. It is important that the legislation and policy for feral deer management is in alignment across Australia to ensure consistency of management practices and best possible options to reduce the serious impacts of feral deer. Victoria is lagging behind the other states in best practice deer management, policy and legislation;
7. The nomination of deer as protected 'game' under the Wildlife Act 1975 was made when deer were far fewer in number and were deemed in need of protection for recreational hunting purposes;
8. To dispel the misnomer that this will threaten sustainable game deer populations.
9. It is a contradiction to protect an introduced game species under the same act that also protects Victoria's indigenous wildlife. Feral deer are a direct threat to the wildlife and habitat that the Wildlife Act is aiming to protect;
10. Feral deer have also been proven vectors of disease for wildlife and stock (Hampton and Davis 2020) and should be legally defined as a biosecurity threat and managed accordingly;
11. Feral deer are also known to spread a *Phytophthora*, which is widespread in the peri-urban areas of Melbourne and causing dieback of native trees and wildlife habitat;
12. State government management of feral deer would be more effective with clearer legislative listing, as currently biosecurity officers are not authorised to assist with deer management. At this critical point of feral deer populations increasing, all potential resources should be available to halt further dispersal;
13. More opportunities for research into alternative control methods are likely to be realised;
14. The change of the status of deer in other states, has proven to raise awareness of the serious impact of feral deer and has increased management action by private landholders;
15. The Act should be changed to the 'Native' Wildlife Act, with the protection of 'native' wildlife as the key objective, not the regulation of hunting native and invasive species;
16. Pest status would support the compliance regime to prevent the deliberate transport of feral deer to new areas;
17. It is unethical to maintain and protect pest animal populations that are causing significant ecological damage and potential ecosystem collapse, significant agricultural impact, safety risk and economic hardship for the Yarra Ranges community.

It is also recommended that the Wildlife Act Review considers the recently released recommendations from the *Senate Inquiry into the Impacts of Feral Deer Pigs & Goats in Australia*, particularly Recommendation 8. Relevant recommendations include:

- **Recommendation 6:** The committee recommends that a standalone Key Threatening Process listing for feral deer under the *EPBC Act* be adopted, accompanied by a Threat Abatement Plan, to elevate the focus on controlling deer impacts.
- **Recommendation 7:** The committee recommends that the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment report annually to Parliament on the status of all Key Threatening Processes (KTPs) listed under the *EPBC Act*, along with information on what monitoring and management activities have been undertaken under Threat Abatement Plans associated with KTPs.
- **Recommendation 8:** The committee recommends that all Australian jurisdictions make any necessary changes to their existing legislative and regulatory frameworks to:
 - ensure that wild deer are treated as an environmental pest;
 - maximise the ability of landholders to control feral deer on their land; and
 - maximise the ability of park managers to control feral deer in World Heritage Areas and National Parks.
- **Recommendation 9:** The committee recommends that Commonwealth, state and territory governments should commit to eliminating feral deer populations in World Heritage Areas, areas of national environmental significance, and national biodiversity hotspots.

Other important issues

The Wildlife Act review also needs to consider:

- The protection of viable wildlife populations, the genetic variations of each species and their habitats;
- The impacts of Climate Change and the necessity to protect ecosystems and larger connected vegetation patches, to ensure more resilient and sustainable wildlife populations;
- Enforcement of the Act, along with increases in penalties, including prison;
- The Act needs to increase protections for wildlife and wildlife habitat by providing new tools such as “wildlife protection zones” and “wildlife protection orders”.
- All native wildlife should be defined and protected as native wildlife, including our native ducks and quails, especially considering waterbird populations have dropped by 90% in the last 4 decades (Kingsford 2019).

Enabling legislation that can be used to support the efforts of Local Government, Community and State Government agencies to protect wildlife and wildlife habitats is critical.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Wildlife Act 1975 Review.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amanda Smith'.

Amanda Smith
Coordinator Biodiversity Conservation
Yarra Ranges Council

References:

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