

Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021

Summary of the draft plan

Parks Victoria has developed this draft plan to improve the management of feral horses in the Alpine National Park, reduce the damage they cause to vulnerable natural values, cultural values and water and catchment qualities of the Victorian Alps.



Purpose of the draft plan

The *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021* is a revision of the *2018-21 Action Plan*, driven by recent increases in the size and distribution of feral horse populations, the impact on habitats from the Black Summer bushfires, and the limitations of management methods that have been used to-date. See Section 3 of the *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021* for more detail.

This draft plan identifies the additional actions required to address these changes as well as to achieve the goals of feral horse management in the Victorian Alps:

- reduce the severe damage caused by feral horses to threatened alpine vegetation communities and the native flora and fauna they support, particularly riverine wetlands, alpine peatlands and streambanks;
- protect Aboriginal cultural heritage; and,
- conduct feral horse management humanely and safely.

The draft plan articulates the management outcomes and actions to deliver on the strategy for humane feral horse control set out in the *Greater Alpine National Parks Management Plan (2016)*.

More information is available in Section 1 of the *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021*.

Outcomes

To protect the environment from the impacts of feral horses, control programs will be focussed on achieving defined conservation and animal welfare outcomes, summarised below:

- Regeneration or recovery of alpine peatlands and streambanks.
- Improved distributions and abundances of vulnerable or threatened native alpine animal and plant species.
- Protection of Aboriginal cultural sites and places.
- Horse management conducted safely and humanely.
- These, along with indicators, measures and deliverables, are further detailed in the *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021*.

Threats from feral horses

As large animals with big, hard hooves, feral horses cause immense ecological damage, particularly in the fragile high country of the Australian Alps.

Through their grazing, trampling, pugging* and simply walking around in Victoria's alpine environment, they disturb and cause damage to:

- native wildlife, plants and vegetation communities that have evolved over millions of years in the absence of heavy hard-hooved animals;
- delicate, slow-growing native vegetation relied on by critically endangered species for food and shelter; and
- the quality and volume of water coming from the Victorian Alps multi-million dollar catchment area.

These impacts compound the risk of extinction for rare and vulnerable species, such as the Tooarrana and Guthega skink, which are already threatened by habitat loss from the Black Saturday bushfires and increased fire frequency. These threats are further detailed in Section 2 of the *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021*.

*Pugging is small, deep pits formed in soft wet soil by hard hooves



Geographic scope

Feral horses currently only occur in two Victorian parks - the Alpine National Park and Barmah National Park.

This draft plan addresses the management of feral horses in the Alpine National Park. Specifically, the known populations in the Bogong – Cobungra area and the eastern Alps.

Legal and moral obligations

There are clear legal obligations for Parks Victoria to protect and manage Victoria’s natural environment, specifically the parks estate.

These are set out in a range of legislation including the *Parks Victoria Act 2018*, the *National Parks Act 1975* (Vic), the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (Vic), the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth).

Feral animals have no place in Victoria’s natural environment. Parks Victoria is obliged to protect Victoria’s natural environment and native species which are being harmed by the impacts of deer and feral animals, including feral horses.

See Section 3 of the *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021* for more detail.

Control methods

A range of potential methods exist for the control or removal of feral horse populations.

In deciding which methods should be applied to remove feral horses from the Alpine National Park, Parks Victoria has considered various factors including humaneness, efficacy, cost, practicality, operator and public safety and environmental impact.

Following consultation with independent veterinary, welfare and ecology experts, public consultation on the 2018 Action Plan and subsequent feral horse management experience, Parks Victoria has determined that the following methods are the most appropriate to achieve the goals of feral horse management in the Alps:

- Trapping and rehoming (where appropriate recipients are secured)
- Ground shooting of free ranging horses
- Aerial shooting (in exceptional circumstances, or if other methods cannot meet objectives.)
- Fenced exclusion (for small areas)

These methods are further detailed in Section 4 of the *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021* along with information on methods which will not be used in the Alpine National Park.

Management actions

The following actions are designed to achieve the conservation goals of reducing the severe damage to vulnerable alpine vegetation communities and habitats, and to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage:

- Removal of all feral horses from the Bogong High Plains
- Significant reduction in the eastern Alps population through annual removals, particularly in areas of high conservation value.
- Populations prevented from spreading (contained), through surveillance and targeted removals of new mobs.

- Maximise animal welfare outcomes through clear standard operating procedures and monitoring of on ground activities.
- Meet community demand in providing captured horses to rehoming locations that comply with suitable standards for animal welfare.

These are described in more detail in Section 5 of the *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021*.



An exclusion fence protects native vegetation (left) from damage by feral horses (right), Alpine National Park

Monitoring, evaluation and review

Parks Victoria is committed to an evidence-based approach to the management of natural and cultural values.

Monitoring and evaluation are fundamental to that approach, helping to ensure that decisions are based on the best information available and that the effectiveness of management improves over time as knowledge increases.

The monitoring, evaluation and review (MER) actions are summarised in Table 6.1 in the *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021*.

An annual review of operations will be undertaken to determine progress in the delivery of the management actions outlined in this plan, and the extent to which conservation and welfare objectives are being met.

Tell us what you think

The *Draft Feral Horse Action Plan 2021* is open for feedback on *Engage Victoria* until 23 April 2021.

Anyone is welcome to review the plan and supporting material and provide feedback – <https://engage.vic.gov.au/alpine-feral-horse-action-plan> .

More questions?

For the answers to many Frequently Asked Questions on this issue, go to the Parks Victoria website - www.parks.vic.gov.au/get-into-nature/conservation-and-science/conserving-our-parks/feral-animals/feral-horses/feral-horse-faqs.