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25 May 2021

GREATER BENDIGO FARMING ADVISORY COMMITTEE RESPONSE TO THE
REVIEW OF THE VICTORIAN WILDLIFE ACT 1975

The Farming and Agribusiness Advisory Committee is a strategic advisory committee for the City of Greater Bendigo. The purpose of the committee is to provide the Council with advice, guidance, and strategic representation to Council with respect to matters concerning the farming and agribusiness community. This includes the topical issue of animal welfare and management, and its ongoing effect on the farming and agribusiness sector. I make this submission to the Review of the Victorian Wildlife Act 1975 (RVWA) on behalf of the Greater Bendigo Farming and Agribusiness Advisory Committee (FAAC) to provide comment on several key aspects of the upcoming review. The FAAC will refer to kangaroos in the submission, as an example of key wildlife with an impact on the farming and agribusiness sector. It is important to note that the comments made can be extrapolated to consider other types of wildlife as well. The Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation will be making a separate submission to the Review.

The committee would like to comment on the following matters identified in the Issues Paper:

- 1.1 Does the Act reflect contemporary attitudes toward wildlife?**
- 1.1.2 Are there conflicts between the interests or expectations of different stakeholders or community members regarding wildlife in Victoria? Please use examples.**
- 1.1.3 How can the act balance the diverse interests of Victorians in protecting, conserving, managing and using wildlife? How might competing interests be better reconciled in legislation?**

- 3.3 The Act has no framework to enable wildlife management plans.**
- 3.3.1 Should the Act enable wildlife management plans? What provisions should be included for such plans?**

Kangaroos have a significant impact on agriculture and the wider community in the Central Victorian region. Kangaroos can have a detrimental effect in a farming system, by eating crops, drinking water meant for livestock and ruining property, particularly fences. Kangaroos alongside road areas also pose significant risks to road users.

The FAAC believes that kangaroo management programs such as the Victorian Government's Kangaroo Pet Food Trial (KPFT) introduced in 2014, and the Victorian Kangaroo Harvest Management Plan (VKHMP) are positive initiatives to control kangaroo numbers in Victoria, and deliver productive outcomes for professional kangaroo harvesters. Recent changes to commercial harvesting regulations (VKHMP) of kangaroos in Victoria to "manage Victoria's kangaroo population and minimise waste by using the carcasses for pet food... will allow landowners to control the kangaroo population on their property and minimise the damage that kangaroos do. It also means that kangaroo carcasses will be used to create economic benefit for Victoria, rather than being left to waste away in paddocks." The recent expansion of the VKHMP to include meat for human consumption also offers an alternative use for the harvested carcasses and may provide significant economic benefit. The extent of the added economic benefit to Victoria will need to be monitored as the project rolls out.

It should be noted, however, that FAAC members who have engaged professional harvesters on their properties under both the KPFT and VKHMP have expressed concern that kangaroo quotas are conservative, and therefore fail to give kangaroo harvesters sufficient financial returns to make it viable to participate. This is even despite increasing the harvestable quota of kangaroo meat to 95,680 carcasses, and allowing a portion of the harvested meat for human consumption, actioned in 2021. FAAC members believe this is due to inaccurate survey methods in the region. According to the report titled, 'State-wide abundance of kangaroos in Victoria: Results from 2020 aerial and ground survey' for the Department of Environment Land Water and Planning, there was an estimated 22,000 Eastern Grey kangaroos surveyed in Greater Bendigo. Furthermore, one recommendation from the report was to 'reduce the frequency of ground surveys', however FAAC members emphasise the need for surveys to be accurate and conducted in conjunction with impacted farmers, and members question the validity of aerial surveys in heavily timbered country.

The review of the Victorian Wildlife Act 1975 could resolve many of these issues by developing and including in the Act best practice guidelines for monitoring wildlife numbers and preparing wildlife management plans in different environments. The Wildlife Act currently has limited criteria outlining how to undertake wildlife management plans. This may lead to poorly developed plans and inconsistency on what needs to be included, as well as confusion from the community as to the effectiveness of different methods used. The Fisheries Act 1995 has clear criteria to be abided by. Something similar would be beneficial to the Wildlife Act to ensure that:

- Performance indicators, targets and monitoring methods are clearly outlined to interested community members.
- Other factors relevant to wildlife management plans are incorporated into wildlife management plans, including the human impact of species distribution, and impacts on the environment.

A member of the City of Greater Bendigo Farming and Agribusiness Advisory Committee reports that a kangaroo harvester engaged on his farm has abandoned participation in the kangaroo culling program due to insufficient financial returns. The member noted that the harvester was advised by departmental staff to limit kangaroo culls to two or three a day, despite kangaroo numbers being prolific on-site, to extend the use of tags across the allocated timeframe i.e. one to two years. With the going rate paid for kangaroo meat for pet food being 0.80 cents per kilogram,

the kangaroo harvester would be unable to harvest sufficient kangaroos per day under this arrangement to redeem the cost of diesel fuel, bullets and his own time – let alone make a profit. Given this financial restriction, FAAC members are concerned that the ultimate success of the ongoing VKHMP will be severely compromised if professional kangaroo harvesters walk away from the program.

While farmers can cull kangaroos on their own properties under an Authority to Control Wildlife (ATCW), FAAC members note that kangaroos may not be culled as humanely under those conditions as harvesters are trained to do, and that kangaroo carcasses will not be utilised.

When considering how to implement Wildlife Management Plans, the Review could consider and outline how the cost effectiveness of the program should be evaluated and reported for participants. Regular opportunities for participants to report back should be incorporated into the program. The FAAC asserts that financial return for kangaroo harvesters involved should be critically evaluated and kangaroo cull numbers revised according to more accurate estimates for the VKHMP. This would allow for more appropriate financial returns for professional kangaroo harvesters and reduce kangaroo numbers to a sufficient level to minimise their costly impacts on farmers.

Kangaroos are also posing significant dangers to roads users on Greater Bendigo main roads adjacent to areas of native forest, particularly during peak times at dawn and dusk. Travellers, commuters and workers risk sustaining injury, significant cost and, tragically even death, travelling through these areas at such times. Urban expansion and increased traffic on our roads are also placing more kangaroos in the path of motorists

According to the Huddle Insurance 'Roo Report', released in June 2019, more than 7000 drivers are involved in, and claim for, kangaroo collisions in Australia per year. As the average comprehensive car insurance policy excess sits at \$8621, kangaroo collisions are costing Aussie drivers more than \$6 million in excess payments each year. The average cost of damage to a vehicle in the event of a kangaroo collision is \$4000; and 15% of vehicles (more than 1000) involved in kangaroo collisions are completely written off.

Statistics attributed to motor vehicle-kangaroo accidents in Greater Bendigo include:

An AAMI press release in 2018 noted that in an analysis of 9,000 accident insurance claims across Australia over the previous twelve months, Bendigo came in as number nine. Victoria was the worst state for animal collisions, with 1 in 3 collisions occurring there.

VicRoads Road Crashstat information for cars hitting kangaroos in Greater Bendigo during 2013-2017 revealed 41 crashes and 50 injuries – 16 were serious.

An RACV press release in 2016 noted that kangaroos were involved in 82% of all animal collisions resulting in an RACV claim. At that time, Greater Bendigo was No. 1 LGA hot spot for collisions at 6.00am and 6.00pm. Also, a total of 413 RACV collision claims were made in Greater Bendigo in 2015-16. Of these, 402 involved kangaroos.

To summarise, the FAAC believes that the Review of the Victorian Wildlife Act needs to consider:

- While kangaroos are native and an important part of the natural ecosystem, the damage to personal property and endangerment to life is significant, and therefore appropriate guidelines surrounding how to build and share wildlife management plans should be considered in the Review of the Victorian Wildlife Act, specifically:
 - Effective monitoring methods in different environments, including continued review of their efficacy.
 - Consideration of the financial returns that need to be implemented, to make a program effective on the ground.
 - Consideration of how the results of wildlife management plans can be made more transparent and available to users of the information.

The FAAAC believes that enhanced kangaroo control in Victoria can be achieved by careful consideration of the Review of the Wildlife Act, 1975.