

28th June 2021



**Chair - Dr Deborah Peterson**  
Wildlife Act 1975 Review Panel  
Department Environment Land Water Planning

## **WILDLIFE ACT 1975 REVIEW SUBMISSION**

Dear Dr Peterson

The Western Port Catchment Landcare Network (WPCLN) welcomes the Wildlife Act 1975 Review and encourages the strengthening of the Act to be more effective in protecting our wildlife and wildlife habitat.

### **Feral Deer**

Our Landcare Network is grappling with the exponentially increasing feral deer population on the peri-urban fringe of Melbourne 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 would cost over \$1 billion to upgrade the treatment infrastructure.

Many private landholders, some of whom are members of local Landcare groups, share a boundary with Bunyip State Park. These landholders are significantly impacted by feral deer on their properties. Illegal shooting is a huge issue for these landholders as unlicensed shooters take pot shots from their cars into rural properties and risk shooting their livestock which is terrifying for residents. Fern gullies on private land contain isolated populations of rare Butterfly Orchid (*Sarcochilus australis*) and Austral Filmy Fern (*Hymenophyllum australe*) which are put at risk by browsing by feral deer. Local creeks and rivers are also impacted by trampling, especially since the Bunyip complex bushfire in March 2019.

The objectives of the Wildlife Act to protect feral deer for game hunting is totally 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 there are exemptions allowing deer to be "unprotected", but only on private land and not including 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.

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 e.g. rabbits, foxes and pigs. In the wild, feral deer and each of these other animals are invasive pests and should be unequivocally recognised as such.

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

1. Feral deer are now an established, self-sustaining invasive pest, destroying Victoria's biodiversity and wildlife habitat, with the potential to establish across the entire continent;

2. 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;
3. 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.
4. '*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*;
5. 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;
6. To dispel the misnomer that this will threaten sustainable game deer populations, given the exponential growth rate of feral deer in Victoria;
7. 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;
8. Feral deer have also been proven vectors of disease for wildlife and stock and should be legally defined as a biosecurity threat and managed accordingly;
9. State government management of feral deer would be more effective, 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;
10. More opportunities for research into alternative control methods are likely to be realised;
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. 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;
13. 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 invasive species;
14. Pest status would support the establishment of a compliance regime to prevent the deliberate transport of feral deer to new areas;
15. It would allow for local laws to be created to require deer control on private land if necessary;
16. It is unethical to maintain and protect pest animal populations that are causing environmental destruction and economic hardship for the Victorian community.

It is also important 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, R., 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

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