

## STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT OF MELBOURNE'S URBAN GROWTH BOUNDARY

Australia

March 2013

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### Policy details

In December 2008, the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development released a report entitled “Melbourne @ 5 million.” The report, in terms of forecasting Melbourne’s future population growth, revealed that there will be a need to accommodate around 600,000 new residents over the next 20 years within a revised urban growth boundary. Due to this massive increase, the Victorian government has proposed a new urban growth boundary and master plan for urban expansion to support the projected population growth.

The clearing of vegetation in order to support such urban expansion has several potentially negative impacts on the environment however. Some examples of these negative impacts include loss of habitat for native biodiversity, direct mortality of many species, changes to catchment hydrology, water pollution, and an increase of pests as well as other invasive species. Thus, these developments are subject to environmental regulation and planning provisions from both the Victorian government and the Australian government.

### Quick facts

Zone	Melbourne
Topic	Urban Growth, Development, Strategic Environmental Assessments
Starting date	March 2009
Implementing Agency	Victorian government

Case Study



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Under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act of 1999 (EPBC Act), the Australian environment minister considered undertaking a strategic assessment on the impacts of the actions under a policy, plan or program. A strategic assessment occurs early in the planning process and it analyzes the potential impacts of actions stemming from one or more policies, plans or programs. These may include, but are not limited to, local government plans/schemes/policies, district structure plans, strategic land use plans, regional plans and policies, local environmental plans, fire, vegetation or pest management policies/plans/programs, water extraction and use policies, statement of planning policies, building design policy and guidelines, and infrastructure plans and policies.

Strategic environmental assessments, compared to project-based environmental impact assessments, have an advantage as they can be broader, take whole-of-landscape perspectives, and minimize problems with cumulative impacts and “death-by-a-thousand-cuts.” Strategic environmental assessments also provide for early consideration of environmental impacts in the planning cycle, greater certainty for local communities and developers over future development, and reduced administrative burden for developers and governments.

In March 2009, the federal environment minister signed an agreement with the Victorian government to undertake a strategic assessment under national environmental law of the expansion of Melbourne's urban growth boundary. In February 2010, the federal environment minister endorsed the program document entitled “Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable communities: Program Report.” In April 2010, the federal environment minister approved several prescriptions for ecological communities and threatened species associated with the Melbourne strategic assessment. These prescriptions specify requirements for the protection of national matters that must be followed in preparing precinct structure plans and in undertaking individual developments. To offset impacts of the expansion of the urban growth boundary on native flora and fauna, the Victorian government is required to establish a biodiversity offset comprising a 15,000 hectare native grassland reserve.

### Policy challenges

The strategic assessment of Melbourne's urban growth boundary has encountered a few obstacles. In particular, since the assessment covered a very large area, there was a lack of data and information on the vegetation that would be lost as a result of urban expansion. To address this data gap, the Victorian government undertook vegetation and habitat modeling using remotely-sensed data and GIS applications. This provided indicative habitat mapping for threatened species and ecological communities, and assisted with the calculation of biodiversity offset requirements. As part of the approval conditions for the strategic assessment, the minister also required developers to ground-truth this modeled data through flora and fauna surveys prior to clearing any vegetation. This was to ensure that the critical habitat was not lost and other prescriptions were met.

The expansion of the urban growth boundary was initially opposed by a range of stakeholders and urban developers who believed that the offset requirements would generate significantly new costs for the developments. Also, many conservationists believed the offset and mitigation provisions were not stringent enough. Comprehensive stakeholder consultations were undertaken to allay these concerns, as required under the regulatory provisions of the national environmental legislation. These statutory consultation processes enabled the Victorian government to find a middle ground that satisfied most concerns.

The requirement to reserve a large 15,000 hectare reserve on the outskirts of Melbourne was also a significant challenge for the Victorian government. Most of this area was privately owned land by a number of rural landholders and the legal revocation of this land by Parliament was a requirement for the approval of the expansion of the Melbourne urban growth boundary. This required considerable consultation with landowners and adequate compensation to be provided by the Victorian government.



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### References:

The following documents informed the development of this paper:

*Melbourne @ 5 million* <http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/planning/plansandpolicies/planningformelbourne/planninghistory/melbourne@5million>.

*Delivering Melbourne's Newest Sustainable Communities: Program report* <http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/planning/plansandpolicies/planningformelbourne/planninghistory/deliveringmelbournesnewestsustainablecommunities>.