

Foreword

The Western Highway is the primary road link between Adelaide and Melbourne. It is a key route in delivering the national freight task as well as serving expanding regional industries and tourist traffic bound for the Grampians region. The Western Highway also plays a significant social role in providing connectivity to western Victorian communities.

VicRoads is proposing to duplicate the Western Highway between Ararat and Stawell (the Project), as part of the larger Western Highway Project which involves duplication of the highway between Ballarat and Stawell, not including bypasses of Beaufort and Ararat. The proposed highway duplication will significantly improve road safety, reduce travel costs and assist road freight efficiency for goods and produce.

The Project requires a range of statutory approvals under State and Commonwealth legislation. The Victorian Minister for Planning determined that an Environment Effects Statement (EES) is required for the Project. The Commonwealth Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities determined the Project to be a controlled action requiring assessment and approval under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). The EES process has been accredited as the assessment approach for the purposes of the EPBC Act. The assessment of the EES by the Minister for Planning will inform the EPBC Act approval, Planning Scheme Amendments (PSA) and the Cultural Heritage Management Plan (CHMP) that are required for the Project.

The Ararat to Stawell EES responds to the Scoping Requirements for the EES issued by the Minister for Planning in September 2011, and describes the outcomes of the investigations, the alignment options evaluated, the predicted environmental effects and proposed management measures for the Project. Amendments to the local planning schemes will be required and the resulting draft PSA is included as part of this EES document.

In the vicinity of the proposed highway duplication, investigations have identified the presence of flora and fauna species and ecological and vegetation communities of both state and national significance.

The proposed alignment transects three bioregions; Goldfields bioregion (GB), Central Victorian Uplands bioregion (CVUB) and Wimmera bioregion (WB) and five Ecological Vegetation Classes (EVCs) of varying quality. Species that are listed as Critically Endangered and Vulnerable under Commonwealth legislation which have been detected in the studies are the: Golden Sun Moth (fauna) and Trailing-hop Bush (flora). There is similar protection under State legislation. The proposed duplication has the potential for adverse impacts on biodiversity,

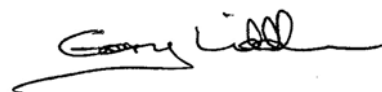
especially native flora and fauna, and for this reason an integrated assessment of the environmental effects of the proposal has been undertaken.

VicRoads proposes a duplication alignment that utilises the existing road reserve as much as possible. However, at various points the proposed new carriageway moves away from the existing road reserve to provide an outcome that balances the protection of the national and state listed vegetation communities and species with the impact on landowners adjacent to the highway.

The exhibition of the EES and associated draft PSA provides the formal opportunity for the community and other stakeholders to make written submissions on the EES and the proposed construction and operation of the duplicated Western Highway, as well as the proposed draft PSA. These submissions will be considered by an independent Inquiry, which will report to the Minister for Planning.

The Ararat to Stawell EES has been developed following extensive consultation with the community and stakeholders including the Ararat Rural City Council and Northern Grampians Shire Council, as well as government agencies. A Technical Reference Group convened by the Department of Planning and Community Development has worked closely with VicRoads and provided advice during the preparation of the EES.

Where appropriate and feasible, VicRoads has incorporated community and stakeholder advice into the investigation and evaluation of alignment options and mitigation measures. VicRoads thanks all who have contributed their time and knowledge.



Gary Liddle

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