‘Government limits to riparian revegetation fail to protect our rivers’

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With the premise of fire reduction the Victorian Government has made a policy change that could substantially affect the conservation of our rivers. This policy applies to the Yellingbo Conservation Area but has much broader implications, setting a potentially dangerous precedent for the management of rivers across the State.

The Yellingbo area is recognised for its significant biodiversity and ecological values, including the last remaining populations of the critically endangered lowland Leadbeater’s Possum and Helmeted Honeyeater—both faunal emblems of Victoria.

The critically endangered lowland Leadbeater’s Possum. The last remaining population is dependent on riparian forest within the Yellingbo area.

To help conserve the area’s threatened biota and other important ecological values, as well as improve water quality and river health, the Victorian Government is investing $3.2 million in implementing the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council’s recommendations to conserve and enhance biodiversity and ecological values of public land within the Yellingbo Conservation Area (YCA).

On the 19th of January, the Government announced a number of policy changes to its implementation in the north east corner of the YCA in response to “community concern regarding revegetation and bushfire risk”.

This area comprises over 150 km of streams, including 24 km of the Yarra River, upstream of the Yering Gorge pumping station that contributes to Melbourne's water supply. The iconic Yarra River is of course, also an important recreational asset to Melbourne, and directly impacts on water quality in Port Phillip Bay and its beaches.

A key change was limiting revegetation to “a maximum of 10 m on each side of a waterway”, as a means of better managing bushfire risk.

Will this directive better manage bushfire risk whilst effectively managing environmental values as asserted by the policy announcement?

As a group of waterway ecosystem scientists, we disagree and explain our reasons below.

The importance of vegetated buffers along waterways for water quality, stream health, and wildlife habitat is well established.

Sound evidence underpins the widespread environmental benefits of riparian revegetation, and this was recognised by the extra $10 million in the 2015-2016 Victorian state budget that was committed to accelerating riparian works in regional Victoria.

Stream health benefits of riparian vegetation increase when they are wider, particularly for large, floodplain rivers like the Yarra. Ten metres is the bare minimum width for any riparian restoration program—making it the maximum permissible width for revegetation in such a significant catchment is manifestly inadequate.

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Many rivers migrate within their riparian zone over distances much greater than 10 m over short timeframes, with riparian vegetation providing natural protection for banks and floodplains. Restricting the maximum riparian revegetation width to 10 m increases the risk of loss of productive land (and built assets such as fences) if rivers migrate beyond vegetated buffers.

Loss of the vegetated buffers also means a loss of the initial investment in revegetation and expected future benefits with respect to water quality and stream health.

In contrast to the well-documented value of striving for wider vegetated riparian widths, the link between a riparian vegetation width of 10 m and "more manageable" bushfire risk is much less clear. This is because the risk to human life and property depends on many interacting factors such as proximity of assets, weather, ignition sources, fuel, and topography.

Under severe fire danger conditions, any vegetation may burn, and any sizeable patch of vegetation located close to assets may pose a fire threat.

However, as the Country Fire Authority has been at pains to point out, fire history records indicate that fire is less likely to start in riparian areas than in other parts of the landscape, and riparian areas do *not* generally act as a 'wick' or 'fuse' for bushfires. Furthermore, given that riparian land is typically small compared with other land uses, riparian land can be expected to have only a limited influence on bushfire spread at a landscape scale.

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As the YCA and its surrounding area is a fire-prone region, bushfire risk, the concerns of the community, and what management strategies can be put in place, are of critical importance. These matters are being addressed by the processes of the government-led YCA Bushfire Risk Assessment and Management Project that is currently underway.

Given the complexity of the relationship between riparian width and bushfire risk, and the detailed government agency and community work that is underway in the YCA bushfire risk management planning process, it seems premature to pre-empt this work by imposing a policy restricting riparian revegetation to a maximum width of 10 m.

Considering the clear inadequacy of a 10 m riparian revegetation width from an environmental perspective, and the undemonstrated value of a 10 m vegetation width restriction with respect to bushfire risk, we urge a revocation of the policy before it sets a precedent that could alter riparian revegetation practices in a way that could undermine community aspirations of restoring healthy waterways.