

19/05/2017

**From: Interdisciplinary Conservation Science Research Group**  
RMIT University  
GPO Box 2476  
Melbourne VIC 3001

**To: Hon. Richard Wynne MP**  
Minister for Planning  
Level 16, 8 Nicholson Street  
East Melbourne, VIC 3002  
[richard.wynne@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:richard.wynne@parliament.vic.gov.au)

**Cc: Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio MP**  
Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change  
Level 36, 121 Exhibition Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000  
[lily.d'ambrosio@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:lily.d'ambrosio@parliament.vic.gov.au)

Dear Minister Wynne,

It has come to our attention that there is an opportunity to substantially improve the community, biodiversity and cultural heritage outcomes of the current proposal for the duplication of the Western Highway between Beaufort and Ararat.

Because of the lapse in the VicRoads planning permit, it is our understanding that you, as Minister, now have the opportunity to intervene regarding the final stage of the Western highway duplication project.

We are sure you are aware of the many serious problems with the environmental assessment and subsequent negative impacts of the duplication project to date. To briefly summarise:

- Native vegetation was incorrectly classified;
- The number of large old trees was grossly underestimated resulting in the clearance of 885 and the potential future clearance of approximately 340, rather than the miscounted 221;
- Significant areas of vegetation of high conservation significance and the presence of EPBC-listed species were overlooked on the planned route; and
- The section of the duplication project yet to be completed has significant ecological and possible cultural heritage values that were not previously identified.

For the remaining section of the duplication project, we understand the current route is under contention and are aware of a viable alternative route. This alternative Northern route has been assessed to have a far lower impact on biodiversity and cultural heritage. It is in your power to now order a review of the previously selected option for this section of the highway, in order to ensure well-informed decision-making and full compliance with the EPBC Act and the Victoria's Native Vegetation Framework.

From an ecological assessment and peer review conducted in 2016 (please refer to attached reports), it is clear that the proposed alternative route better meets the requirements of the EPBC Act and the Native Vegetation Management Framework to *avoid* and *minimise* environmental impacts. In our experience, selecting an option that has significantly lower environmental impacts is necessary because of the critical importance of remnant vegetation and also because offsets in vegetation types, such as those impacted by this project, are highly unlikely to be effective (please refer to the recent publication titled 'The anatomy of a failed offset', attached).

We urge you to initiate an independent review conducted by a Panel that you could convene under the Planning and Environment Act. We hope that serious consideration will be given to the alternative Northern route proposed for the Beaufort to Ararat highway section, in order for the best economic, social and environmental outcomes to be achieved for the final stages of this project.

We are available to discuss any aspects of this issue at any time.

Yours sincerely,

The Interdisciplinary Conservation Science Research Group, RMIT University

Ms Florence DAMIENS

Pr Sarah BEKESSY

Ms Anna BACKSTROM

Dr Georgia GARRARD

Ms Sarrah HARTRIDGE

Dr Alex KUSMANOFF

Dr Luis MATA

Ms Laura MUMAW

Mr Matthew SELINSKI

Dr Dhirendra SINGH

Dr Nooshin TORABI