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Friends of the Earth (Melbourne)

State Pre-Budget 2026/2027 Submission

Introduction

Friends of the Earth Melbourne Inc. is a membership-based environmental organisation which has been active in the state of Victoria for more than 50 years.

While we understand the financial constraints currently facing Victoria, we wish to propose a number of measures that we believe, if funded, would lead to enhanced environmental, social and economic outcomes as a result of the 2025/26 state budget.

For a relatively low cost of implementation compared with many major infrastructure projects being undertaken by the Victorian government, these initiatives would go a long way to protecting biodiversity and communities from climate change impacts, reducing emissions and lowering the cost of living for Victorian households.

We hope you consider these proposals, and please get in contact if you would like any further briefing.

Transport

Investment logic: Initiative

Enhancing economic and social outcomes in Melbourne's suburbs through improved transport connectivity and accessibility

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Overview

This document presents a case for reforming Melbourne's bus network, with a focus on addressing transport disadvantage in the city's western suburbs. Developed by community, industry and academic stakeholders, it aligns with Victoria's Investment Management Standard and supports Treasury's framework for prioritising infrastructure investments.

Melbourne's west is home to some of the fastest-growing populations in the country, yet investment in public transport has not kept pace. Only 39% of Melburnians live within walking distance of frequent public transport (Mallis, 2024), and this figure is substantially lower in outer suburbs. Forced car ownership in these areas increased by 36% between 2011 and 2016 (Currie, 2018), disproportionately affecting low-income households. These conditions have led to long travel times, reduced access to jobs, health and education, increased social isolation, and growing health impacts from transport-related air pollution.

Congestion growth from high levels of car use and limited transport choice is also driving up costs for residents and placing unsustainable capital demands on governments.

The government can consider six response options to these challenges. Our submission recommends a transformational upgrade to the metropolitan bus network, starting in Melbourne's west. This fast, frequent and connected bus grid offers a low-cost, high-impact intervention that can deliver visible benefits within the next electoral cycle. It addresses urgent transport disadvantage, improves public health, enhances productivity and affordability, and contributes to Victoria's emissions reduction targets.

1. The case for investment

Melbourne's western suburbs are experiencing rapid population growth, yet public transport investment has failed to keep pace. This mismatch has created a deepening transport disadvantage, manifesting in reduced access to essential services, increased social exclusion, and growing health and economic costs.

Problem area 1: Health & social exclusion

Only 39% of Melburnians live within walking distance of frequent public transport, and this figure is significantly lower in outer suburbs such as Wyndham and Melton (Mallis, 2024). In these areas, forced car ownership increased by 36% between 2011 and 2016, disproportionately affecting low-income households (Currie, 2018). This trend reflects a broader failure of transport and social infrastructure to support equitable access to jobs, education, and healthcare.

The consequences are far-reaching. Residents face long travel times, high transport-related financial stress, and limited opportunities for active travel, contributing to poor health outcomes. Transport disadvantage is closely linked to social isolation, particularly among older adults and low-income families (Cerin, 2025). Infrastructure Victoria has highlighted significant lags in community infrastructure in growth suburbs, compounding these challenges (Infrastructure Victoria, 2021).

Health impacts are particularly acute in Melbourne's west, where transport-related air pollution contributes to elevated rates of childhood asthma and other respiratory conditions. Diesel emissions from buses and trucks are a major source of localised pollution, especially near schools and residential areas (Walter, 2023). Research shows that transitioning to an electric bus fleet could reduce these pollution hotspots and lead to measurable improvements in public health (Doctors for the Environment Australia, 2024).

Problem area 2: Productivity & affordability

From an economic perspective, **congestion is rising, travel distances are increasing, and the capital costs of road and rail infrastructure are becoming unsustainable**. Continued reliance on car-based transport is driving up household costs and placing pressure on government budgets. These inefficiencies are avoidable: a well-designed bus network can deliver significant improvements in network productivity, reduce maintenance costs, and support a more resilient transport system.

Finally, the transport sector remains a major contributor to Victoria's carbon emissions. A fast, frequent and connected bus grid in Melbourne's west is estimated to reduce emissions by **0.2–0.9 million tonnes per year** after four years of operation (Stone, forthcoming). This mode shift complements the transition to electric vehicles and supports Victoria's broader climate goals.

Table 1 summarises the problem statements and their respective weights, as well as the attribution of benefits to each problem.

Table 1 - Problem statements, weightings and linkage to anticipated benefits of addressing

Problem statement	Weighting	Benefit 1: Reduced social exclusion (50%)	Benefit 2: Improved public health (30%)	Benefit 3: Greater network productivity (20%)
Residents in Melbourne's middle and outer suburbs lack transport choice which affects their health and opportunities	60%	✓	✓	
High levels of car use and limited transport choice is resulting in unaffordable and inefficient responses to congestion	40%	✓		✓

Table 2 presents possible KPIs and candidate measures to track benefit delivery associated with the investment.

Table 2 - Benefit management plan

Benefit	Candidate KPI	Candidate measures
1. Reduced social exclusion	1.1 Improved equity of access to jobs and services	Reduced disparity in 45- minute access to jobs between inner, middle and outer Melbourne. Reduced disparity in 30- minute access to schools and other indicator services between inner, middle and outer Melbourne. Measure changes in accessibility using SNAMUTS or similar indicator.
	1.2: Reduced transport-related financial stress	reduction in 'forced car ownership' quantified as share of households in the lowest quartile of income distribution with two or more cars)
	2.1 Improved air quality	Reduction in particulate emissions
2. Improved physical health	2.2 Increased levels of active transport	
	3.1 Reduced network maintenance costs	Reduced network maintenance costs Improved network efficiency
3. Increased labour productivity		

4. Response options

To address the growing transport disadvantage in Melbourne's suburbs—particularly in the west—the government has a range of potential responses available. These options vary in terms of cost, timeframe, risk, and capacity to deliver meaningful benefits. The following table presents six distinct approaches, comparing their strengths and limitations to support informed

decision-making. This analysis highlights the preferred response: a fast, frequent and connected bus network, piloted in Melbourne's west.

Table 3 - Response option summary and comparison

<i>Potential Responses</i>	<i>Disbenefits, risks or uncertainties</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Timeframe to achieve benefits</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1 Business as usual - Continued large-scale increase in road network supply.	Fuels continued growth in car-use, congestion, and suburban expansion. Huge capital demand.	Very high capital investment required		Entrenches transport inequity
2 Support local and non-car trips in suburban Melbourne: Manage travel demand in Greater Metropolitan Melbourne through incentives for more suburban jobs, 20-minute neighbourhood investment, and concentrating new development around public transport.	Unable to deliver benefits in a suitable timeframe; travel demand will continue to grow in the time it takes to rebalance activities and residential development. This would be a good supporting measure alongside other policies.	Some capital investment required but largely re-direction of investment from outer suburban expansion.	20-30 years of consistent policy effort required to achieve significant benefits.	Necessary but long-term
3 Incremental public transport network improvement: Make public transport more viable for a greater share of the population to attract a higher share of trips to public transport and increase transport network performance by incrementally improving service levels of public transport network.	Little political gain as does not fundamentally change perceptions of PT as an alternative to driving.	Can be achieved within PT operational budgets corrected for population growth	Benefits also incremental over .	No improvement in tackling underlying transport challenges

<i>Potential Responses</i>	<i>Disbenefits, risks or uncertainties</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Timeframe to achieve benefits</i>	<i>Comments</i>
<p>4 Upgrade the bus network, starting in Melbourne's West – Make public transport more viable for the city's most transport disadvantaged population while demonstrating the potential for bus reform to increase transport network performance by creating an efficient and attractive bus network, starting in the west.</p> <p>Includes some upgrades of road infrastructure to support efficient bus reform.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of uneven investment in transport needs to be balanced by committing to wider metropolitan rollout after western rollout (use as proof of concept or test to mitigate risk). • Existing norms around car ownership and automobility are pervasive in the face of car dependent urban design which offers unparalleled independence for some people. Must ensure the plight of those who are transport disadvantaged is highlighted and that there is suitable investment in messaging, storytelling and behavioural initiatives to support transition to bus reform to prepare and inspire public. 	Modest	Benefits would be clearly visible within next electoral cycle.	<p>Road infrastructure changes must be carefully targeted to achieve greater PT travel-time competitiveness cf. private cars (or car-use will continue to accelerate).</p> <p>Disproportionate need and appetite for bus reform in Melbourne's west to address socioeconomic disadvantage, including transport disadvantage. Existing community groups could be leveraged to grow political support for this investment, which in turn can demonstrate proof of concept for wider metropolitan rollout.</p>
<p>5 Upgrade metropolitan bus network - Make public transport more viable for a greater share of the population to attract a higher share of trips to public transport and increase transport network performance by improving the efficiency of network across metro Melbourne.</p>	<p>Apparent lack of political appetite for widespread investment in bus. Technical complexity increases political risks.</p>	Affordable given scale of benefits	5-8 years	

<i>Potential Responses</i>	<i>Disbenefits, risks or uncertainties</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Timeframe to achieve benefits</i>	<i>Comments</i>
6 Upgrade rail network – Make public transport more viable for people serviced by existing or future rail corridors by investing in rail infrastructure agenda while pursuing only incremental change in bus networks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reinforces housing unaffordability in rail corridors. - Lack of network-wide connectivity and reach – benefits concentrated around rail corridor only. 		10 years or more	

5. Preferred response

The proposed fast, frequent and connected bus grid in Melbourne’s West is a strategic pilot that addresses urgent transport disadvantage while laying the foundation for metropolitan-wide reform. It is designed to deliver visible benefits within the next electoral cycle, making it a politically and economically sound investment. The intervention is scalable, cost-effective, and aligned with Victoria’s emissions reduction targets.

Table 4 - Summary of interventions and associated changes and assets that make up the preferred response

Intervention	Changes	Assets	Cost	Timeframe
Fast, frequent & connected grid network piloted in West	Contract renegotiation. New network operations planning.		\$5m for initial planning. \$95m annual operations. (In addition to existing \$195 p.a. for current services)	Commence full operations Summer 2026-2027
Priority upgrades	Signal priority	Bus stop upgrades. Safe pedestrian crossings. On-road priority.	\$200m	Year 1: capital investments to support initial roll-out
Communication and support	Communication & education		\$5m	Year 1: On-ground support for users, advertising etc.
Fleet electrification	Contract renegotiation	New bus fleet. Depot reconfiguration.	~\$750m more than anticipated fleet replacement costs if diesel buses retained. ~\$150m	10 – 15 years for complete roll-out

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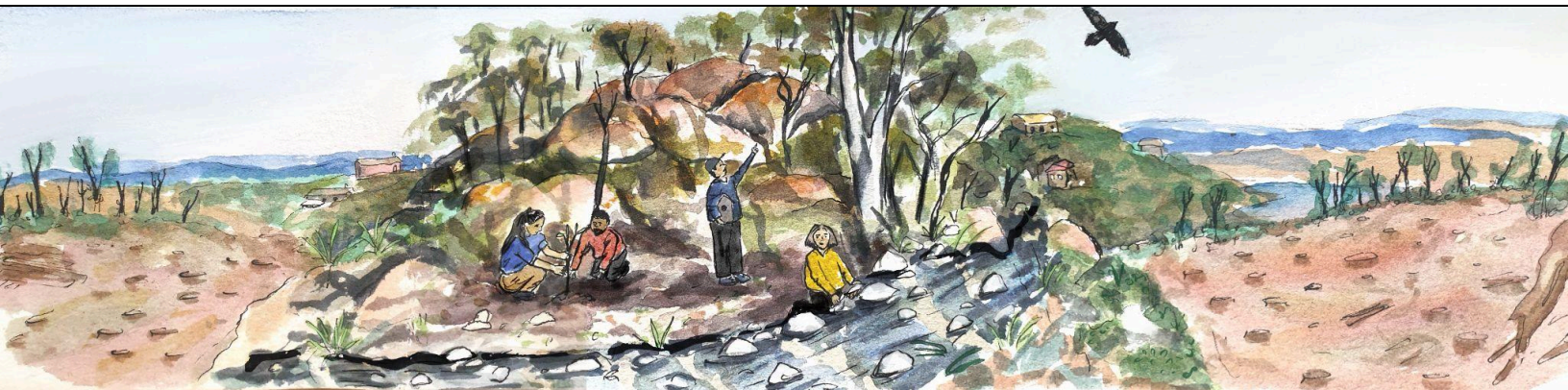


Illustration by Sofia Sabbagh.

Forests

We commend the Victorian government for its [recent announcement](#) that it will contribute \$30 million in order to deliver on some of the recommendations of the Great Outdoors Taskforce and Eminent Panel for Community Engagement reports.

The Great Outdoors Taskforce was “the largest single public land assessment ever undertaken.” The Taskforce produced excellent, comprehensive, actionable [recommendations](#) that can be resourced by the government in consecutive state budgets. The Eminent Panel process also delivered a [detailed synthesis](#) of what ecosystems and communities in its target region need to move forward and thrive beyond logging. FoE welcomes these comprehensive engagement reports and sincerely thanks the Victoria government for its timely commitment to deliver on some of these recommendations in 2026/2027.

We also thank Minister Dimopoulos for delivering promised protected areas in the west of the state and creating a conservation reserve in Mirboo North as part of the [Parks and Public Land Bill 2025](#). FoE is grateful for this positive momentum after many years of engagement.

We eagerly await legislative reforms as part of the new Public Land Act and other amendments to close logging loopholes. The [Great Outdoors Taskforce recommended](#) “changing relevant legislation and regulations to prevent the return of large-scale commercial native timber harvesting in state forests” and that the Victorian Government should make “appropriate and supplementary changes to other Victorian legislation and regulations managing forests and public land to prevent the return of commercial native timber harvesting in state forests” (pg. 30). FoE asks Minister Dimopoulos to pass comprehensive amendments that permanently prevent all future industrial threats, including mining and salvage logging in native forests on public land and intervene to prevent native forest logging on private land at a state level.

Positive commitments and programs to retain or expand in 2026/2027 budget



Great Outdoors announcement Oct 20:

FoE celebrates the recent [\\$30 million dollars the Victorian government has already committed](#) in the 2026/2027 budget in order to respond to the recommendations of the Great Outdoors Taskforce and Eminent Panel for Community Engagement reports.

We are excited to see \$4 million to “deliver more on-ground field staff to help guide and educate forest visitors, encourage positive behaviours, and work with communities to support the needs of local and visiting users”, another \$4 million to “pilot collaborative forest management models via Healthy Forest Plans” and \$19 million dollars for Parks Victoria infrastructure like campsites, facilities and educational signage to inform the public about environmental and cultural values. Allocated funding for activities that will 'guide visitors, tackle pests and weeds, and protect native wildlife,' is very welcome news. It's also exciting that new visitor education programs are budgeted to inform locals and visitors about the environment and promote respectful behaviour.

It is very positive that reforms to the Public Land Act will enable Traditional Owner collaborative governance, planning and management of forests, including enabling the creation of Cultural Reserves and the formal recognition of Cultural Landscapes. FoE hopes the government will continue to work with Taungurung Land & Waters Council's to fund [pilot projects](#) for success.

Friends of the Earth supports collaborative approaches to caring for native forests that prioritise First Peoples decision making and priority setting and invites the participation of local communities, volunteers, and environment groups. We commend the government's intention to

pilot holistic, place-based programs that embrace local communities in the process of forest regeneration. We are hopeful that pilot [Healthy Forests Plans](#)' will be positive & will evolve to catalyse holistic forest restoration at scale, repair logged landscapes and enable local communities across the state to come together to move forward, beyond logging. Importantly, the [Great Outdoors Taskforce report](#) recommended that "Healthy Forest Plans must not include management of state forests for native timber harvesting."

FoE eagerly awaits evidence of significant legislative reform via the new Public Land Act and expects additional amendments to those listed in the recent announcement that can ensure native forests are permanently protected from industrial and commercial extraction (including logging, salvage logging and mining). All logging loopholes must be closed and legislative change permanently protects native forests from exploitation before the 2026 state election.

Future Forests program:

Based on what we know to date about the currently funded 'Future Forests program' there are some positive programs the government is delivering that should be retained and scaled. \$52.4 mill over two budget cycles.

Alpine ash reseeded and regeneration:

It is essential that government maintain and expand [alpine ash reseeded and restoration programs](#). We'd like to see this positive existing program improved due to the scale of the problem, purpose aligned with regeneration and climate adaptation post-logging, and for seed collection and arborist techniques to be reviewed to ensure best practice conservation standards. Funding for this work is also relatively short-term and needs to be secure. Monitoring programs that track re-seeding success and regeneration rates is also important, especially with the historical record of failed ash regeneration.

Additional GOT / EPCE recommendations to prioritise & fund in 2026/27 budget

Note: FoE would like to see recommendations from the GOT & the EPBCE applied to both study areas (North East & Gippsland and the Central Highlands) as has been done in the government's recent, packaged announcement on Oct 20.

1. Fund bio-cultural assessment for Traditional Owner groups e.g. Wurundjeri Woiewurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation

As explored in the [EPCE](#) report.

2. Fund GOT recommendation 3

Develop collaborative management guidelines for public participation and decision-making on forest management that is place-based and in partnership with local communities, Traditional Owners, and user groups (GOT recommendation 3). Expand this to the Central Highlands study areas covered by the EPCE.

FoE's notes on recommendation 3: FoE hopes this will be facilitated via Healthy Forest Plan pilots and that environment groups, community groups and extensive, on-the-ground participation of local communities (based on co-design not consultation) will inform this process, *not* industry players still invested in outcomes that would serve an extractive economy.

3. Fund GOT recommendation 5

Change relevant legislation and regulations to prevent the return of large-scale commercial native timber harvesting in state forests.

FoE's notes on recommendation 5: FoE stipulates that amendments should be comprehensive to permanently prevent all industrial and commercial extraction in native forests, including salvage logging and mining. FoE agrees that this should not limit Traditional Owner cultural fire programs or access to bio-cultural resources. FoE opposes the state-government's current forest and fire management activities, including broad-scale planned burning in forests and the strategic fuel break program. We advocate for a full scientific review of these practices and have estimated \$1mill in 2026/2027 in the costing table below.

3. Fund GOT recommendation 6 & EPCE recommendation 8

Invest in the collection of meaningful data and develop a holistic data system to accurately monitor and evaluate forests across all values. The data system should include indicators from conservation science, forests science, citizen science and Traditional Owner land management measures.

4. Fund GOT 8, 10, 11 & 12 & EPCE 9 & 11:

Develop a Great Outdoors marketing campaign to encourage people to visit and value Victoria's forests, and work with forest users to educate and promote positive behaviours when using forests.

We recommend the implementation of a tourism campaign to promote the significance of the Central Highlands forests.

This includes: • a single source of information on central highlands forests, values and experiences • recognising and supporting commercial operators such as licenced tour operators, recreational organisations and club membership to promote responsible use, education and training opportunities • promotion of destinations, local tourism and experience opportunities (e.g. existing draw cards, wineries, art galleries) • supporting a range of audiences including culturally and linguistically diverse communities and all-abilities access.

Establish an investment coordination panel to develop a nature-based Tourism Product Development and Licensing Strategy and investigate a 'commercial user pays' funding model that applies to commercial tourism uses of state forests. Commercial tourism operators should contribute to protecting and maintaining the health of our forests.

Establish a dedicated fund for works that restore, maintain or improve existing visitor amenities and infrastructure in forests such as campgrounds, toilet blocks, picnic areas, and tracks and trails. Priorities for investment should be determined in consultation with the local communities, Traditional Owners, and user groups.

Conduct a review into the current funding framework for public land in the Central Highlands and identify new, innovative pathways for enhanced funding for public land outcomes.

FoE's notes on the above recommendations:

FoE is thrilled to see circular funding strategies to enable tourism to fund land management recommended by the GOT and we hope this will be actioned in 2026/2027. This would assist

state governments by alleviating budget pressures in future budget cycles. We also support a dedicated state government fund to improve infrastructure and facilities as described in the GOT's recommendations.

As part of Murrindindi Shire's Local Development strategy that is being funded by the government's successful investment in the [Community Development Fund](#), the Tourism Innovation Working Group is developing an innovative enterprise 'Beyond the Black Spur'. This developing project is aligned with EPCE recommendation 9. Please contact Project Support Officer Anna Paix at Murrindindi Shire Council to discuss ways 'commercial user pays' models mentioned in GOT initiatives could fund this locally directed project.



Scale forest restoration programs



Forest restoration initiatives outlined in the recent announcement will need to be properly resourced in consecutive state budgets in order to address the scope of ecosystem repair that's required after decades of mismanagement. The government's response includes \$30 million for new forest management and infrastructure — just 2 percent of the \$1.5 billion Forestry Transition Program. We would hope to see a similar investment into restoration, which has been calculated at requiring \$5,000 per hectare. FoE hopes some of the recommendations that have emerged during these consultations about the need for secure funding for land management will be further explored.

The government's recent [announcement](#) stated that “since 2024, [DEECA] have regenerated over 1,200 hectares of forest.” However, the GOT report outlined that there was at least 1,200 hectares of forest requiring regeneration just in their relevant study area (the North East region and Gippsland). ANU research released in May also mapped over [8,000 hectares](#) of forest that had failed to regenerate in the Central Highlands region alone.

We commend the government's decision to fund transformative pilot projects and involve volunteer capacity in forest regeneration. We agree that: “tree planting and regeneration are most powerful when communities are part of it...” and that “volunteer-driven regeneration lets us achieve more, faster – restoring more land, supporting biodiversity, and creating stronger community ties.”

Friends of the Earth is hopeful that the government programs referenced in the announcement, including rebuilding seed stores to regenerate forests after major disturbances like logging and bushfire, will continue to increase their capacity to ensure the survival of critically endangered mountain ash forests and vulnerable alpine ash forests.

Scale the 'Healthy Forests' pilot programs funded in 2026/2027 during 2027/2028:

FoE is hopeful that pilot programs like Healthy Forest Plans in Noojee and Gippsland will be positive and can evolve to facilitate forest restoration at scale. FoE has been conducting community organising in the transition regions of Murrindindi Shire and council areas in the North East Alpine forest management area. We recommend scaling this work to Murrindindi Shire and a North East Shire (Mansfield Shire or Alpine Shire) in 2027/2028, since East Gippsland Shire and Yarra Ranges Shire will be engaged during the initial Orbost and Noojee pilots respectively. Funding 'Healthy Forest Plans' in the Murrindindi region would also align future pilots with the aspirations of proactive Traditional Owner organisations, such as Taungurung Land & Waters Council, who have requested collaborative management pilots in these areas (e.g. Deberra Biik or the Rubicon state forest). It would also honour [Recommendation 1](#) of the Eminent Panel for Community Engagement.

Restoration of mountain ash ecosystems: The government's announcement on Oct 20 included measures to protect areas surrounding water catchments in the Yarra Ranges by including them in the existing Yarra Ranges national park. These changes, while necessary, are not nearly significant enough to protect critically endangered mountain ecosystems or ensure ecological resilience and connectivity. We recommend reframing environmental management to better build resilience and reflect the unique and significant values of these forests. This includes designing and implementing active and adaptive management – including protection, ecosystem restoration, disturbance management and threat mitigation, and monitoring for state forests. Such approaches should be place based and tailored to local ecological conditions, community values, and biocultural expressions and health of Country. Considering landscapes and regional scale issues, the Panel notes the relevance of this recommendation to supporting environmental planning and management across all public land. Recommend that as soon as practicable, a new overarching forest management strategy, collaboration road map and subsequent management plans be developed for the Central Highlands forests. These management plans should:

- identify overarching management purposes
- pilot and test new frameworks and practices
- adopt a landscapes approach regardless of tenure, as well as a focus on Place and local context
- recognise the important and dynamic relationships between forests and people
- support 'braiding' – the bringing together and making stronger – of Traditional Owner and environmental science
- redefine 'active' and 'adaptive' management and the role of people in landscapes
- practice adaptive, responsive and innovative approaches through a flexible, iterative process of learning and decision making
- establish direction and planning for landscape restoration programs, including for previously harvested coupes. Recommend investment in establishing the enabling conditions for Recommendation 7, including:
- upgrading spatial data and information systems to support planning and management (e.g. roads, tracks and trails that supports a range of recreational activities and experiences)
- delivery of a comprehensive cross tenure invasive pest plant and animal control programs, particularly deer
- reimagine the road track and trail network and forest/park infrastructure to tailor towards a new set of management objectives and fit for multiple purposes with sensitive design
- resourcing for reading Country, for land and water assessment of biocultural values
- resourcing of delivery partners to support collaborative governance, planning and management and development of

new land management frameworks • better temporal and spatial planning that shifts activities and experiences in the landscape to provide for a variety of experiences as well as resting and rehabilitation of areas • design and resource active biocultural and biodiversity mapping and monitoring programs, that can deliver biodiversity health monitoring capability to support real time management decision making. Efforts could be supported by researchers, citizen science, communities and philanthropists and would include reseedling for forest restoration, erosion control, habitat restoration (i.e. nestboxes), invasive species control.

Climate resilient forests and woodlands



Snow gum woodlands investigation:

Friends of the Earth has been advocating for the Victorian government to carry out an investigation into the ecological health of snow gum forests and woodlands in Gippsland and north eastern Victoria. We believe this can be managed within DEECA, which would mean that

no specific budget is required. We appreciate the extra detail provided by Minister Dimopoulos in [his answer in Parliament on Sep 2](#) regarding departmental efforts toward assessing the risk to snow gum woodlands vulnerable to the impacts of [bushfire and dieback](#). Once the investigation is completed it is likely that there will be budgetary implications for responding to its findings and this will occur during the 2026/27 financial year.

Accordingly, we recommend that \$0.2m be allocated to implementing the findings of the investigation.

Forests and fire management



Bushfire Response: strengthening Victoria's firefighting capacity

Victoria's Climate Science Report (2019) presented clear evidence that climate change is supercharging our bushfire seasons. Scenarios predict the annual number of high fire danger days to increase by over 60% (from 1985-2005 levels) by the 2050s. This poses huge threats to Victorian lives, health, industry, First Nations cultural heritage, and biodiversity.

The 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires tested Victoria's ability to defend communities and the places we love from catastrophic fires. It is clear that these climate-fuelled bushfires already present a huge challenge for Victoria's volunteer and career firefighters. Greater government support is needed to enhance Victoria's firefighting capacity so firefighters are able to respond to and contain these bigger, more frequent blazes.

We acknowledge that there has been significant investment in the Victorian Budget in recent years for firefighting efforts.

In the 2020 Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfire Season, Victoria's Inspector-General for Emergency Management noted that when large bushfires have occurred in the past, Victoria has depended on external assistance of firefighters and equipment from other jurisdictions. With bushfire seasons lengthening around the world, jurisdictions' abilities to share resources will become increasingly limited as 'bushfires in Victoria are increasingly coinciding with fires and other emergency events elsewhere in Australia and overseas'.

Friends of the Earth calls for the government to commit to the following:

Proposal 1: Additional FFMV remote area firefighting crews to protect fire-sensitive ecosystems

The Victorian government already funds a large firefighting force through Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV). This includes crews which have special training and are tasked with working in remote areas, including our national parks.

There are currently four seven-person remote area (rappel) firefighting teams within FFMV, which are responsible for First Attack efforts – for instance, where lightning has caused a fire ignition in a remote area.

In the 2019/20 season, widespread lightning strikes caused hundreds of fires, many of which went on to devastate townships, farms, and public [lands](#). In the most recent fire season (2024/25) the Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park and Little Desert National Parks experienced major fires. It is clear that we need additional crews trained in remote area firefighting.

The Allan government must provide sufficient funding for the state's firefighting capacity (via FFMV) to ensure that all fire-sensitive vegetation communities - including cool temperate and warm temperate rainforest, peatland, snow gums, alpine ash, and mountain ash communities - can be protected from bushfire. Increasing our state's capacity for aggressive first strike will mean we can control lightning strike fires while they are still small. The potential economic benefits of avoiding large fires is enormous. This will require funding for additional remote area crews to protect these ecosystems. At present, precious natural areas often have firefighting crews removed and redeployed to protect human assets in times of major uncontrolled fires.

New fire detection and prevention technology should also be explored and employed to protect significant areas, before bushfires can become a threat.

Proposal 2: [A volunteer remote area firefighting team](#)

The government should establish a volunteer remote area firefighting force within the CFA, which would be tasked with supporting FFMV firefighters in protecting public and natural assets in national parks. Most other states and territories already have volunteer RAFT teams and Victoria is lagging behind.

The inquiry into the 2019/20 bushfires noted that the increase in prolonged, simultaneous bushfires is exceeding the capacity of career and volunteer firefighters, referring to their overall numbers as well as 'management of fatigue and occupational health and safety'. The inquiry recommended that new capacity be added to meet 'surge requirements' when a sudden sharp increase in personnel is needed.

It is well known that many existing volunteer brigades are struggling to maintain numbers of active members. We propose the establishment of teams that can recruit, train and deploy people from urban areas who are currently unable to be involved in volunteer firefighting because they live too far from a CFA brigade. This would be a new way to counter the problems noted above.

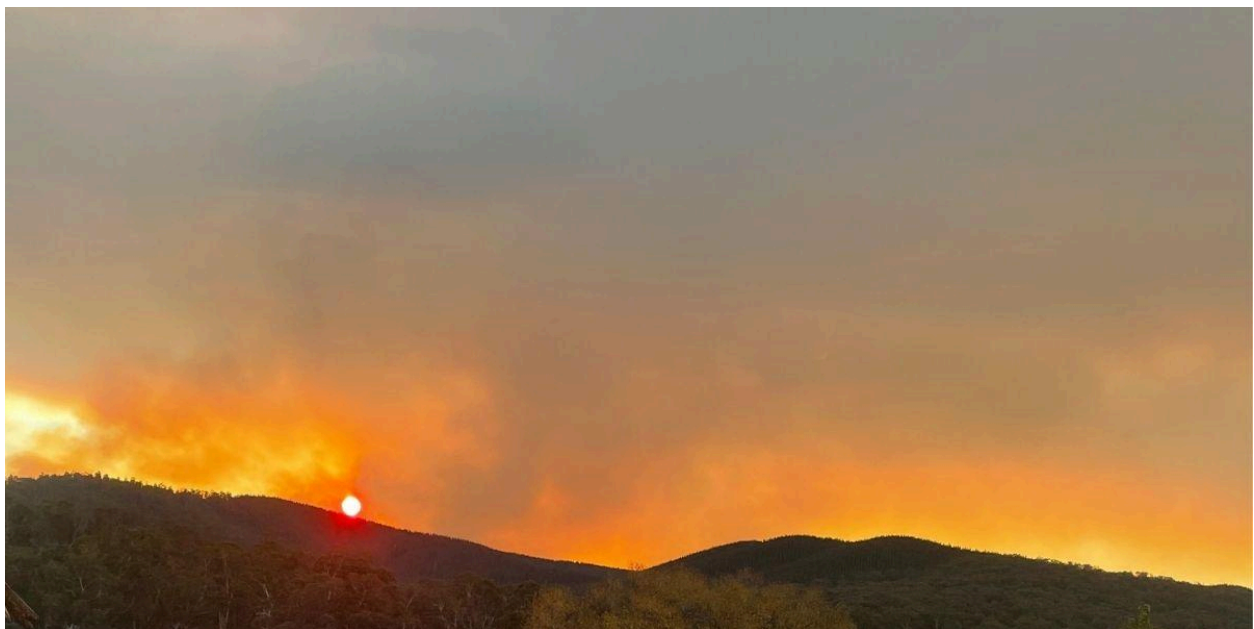
We propose

- The creation of a new volunteer remote area firefighting team, based within the CFA, which explicitly seeks to recruit new members from urban areas who are not currently eligible to volunteer with a local brigade
- The crews would be trained in dry land firefighting (arduous) techniques, as FFMV project firefighters are (ie beyond the current requirements of the CFA general firefighter qualifications), and would be asked to nominate their availability to be deployed as part of strike teams during difficult and long fire seasons
- They would be deployed as regular strike teams, and could be sent to any part of Victoria and potentially deployed interstate
- They would work on fires on both public and private land, in conjunction with FFMV and CFA firefighters from regular brigades

The proposal has support and now only needs funding

- the chief officer of the CFA supports the proposal
- the head of FFMV supports the proposal
- the CFA is currently developing a trial program in arduous firefighting, which is a precursor to having crews ready for this new team (it also means that Victorian CFA volunteers can be deployed interstate and overseas for arduous/ remote firefighting). If the pilot is a success there are plans to roll it out across the state

- volunteers within the CFA have recently initiated a seasonal firefighter program. These are people who would turn out specifically to fight grass and bushfires as part of a strike team, support VICSES in storm and flood response, and potentially carry out planned burns as members of the Planned Burn Taskforce. This demonstrates that a RAFT model is possible without any organisational changes being required within the CFA
- All we need is a modest investment from the state government to establish a pilot program, with a focus on recruiting city based people for the team



Conduct a comprehensive, scientific review of current planned burning and strategic fuel breaks programs

FoE [objects to current planned burning practices](#) and the strategic fuel break programs and asks for these programs to cease until a scientific review confirms effective best practices and ecologically sound interventions to manage fire risk.

As an interim measure until this review occurs, the government could also address this by re-distributing FFMV broad-acre fuel management funds to [fire detection and suppression](#) plans and remote area fire fighters.

Summary



Friends of the Earth commends the Victorian Government for its significant commitments to funding positive outcomes for forests, threatened species and nature based tourism in 2025/2026.

We acknowledge the state's budget constraints and celebrate the existing commitment to acting recommendations. However, we advocate for additional recommendations to be implemented in 2026/2027 and for positive programs to be scaled in consecutive budgets. The Ecosystems Inquiry 2021 recommended 1% of state domestic product, so Victoria's irreplaceable ecosystems still require significantly greater investments.

While clear-fell logging may have stopped in January 2024, the Allan government's legacy can be finishing this era of forest management well by locking off any potential future extractive use of public land forests and approaching forest restoration as an opportunity by resourcing this activity in consecutive state budgets.

Requested Budget Allocation:

Output (\$ millions)	2026/27	2027/28	2028/2029
<p>Piloting Healthy Forests Plans in Noojee & Orbost in 2026/2027.</p> <p>Scaling Healthy Forests Plan pilots to Murrindindi Shire & a council area in the North East forest management region in 2027/2028.</p> <p>Robustly fund extensive forest restoration through these programs.</p>	\$ 4 mill	\$8 mill	\$10mill
<p>Future Forests Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> maintaining seed collection and storage capabilities and assets targeted on-ground biodiversity action to support healthy forests Biodiversity and Threatened Species Survey Program fire ecology and forest modelling. Forest Ecosystem Research Program. 	\$52.4 mill	\$52.4m	\$52.4m
Actioning other priority recommendations made by the Great Outdoors Taskforce and EPCE (detailed above).	\$2mill	\$4mill	\$8mill
Actioning an investigation into sustainable funding options for Central Highlands forests, as recommended by the Central Highlands EPCE (detailed above)	\$1mill	TBC	TBC
Response to the internal (DEECA) investigation into the health of snow gum woodlands vulnerable to bushfire and dieback.	\$200,000	TBC following outcomes	TBC
Explore compensation and back-pay for unpaid land use and logging royalties to build Nation-based capacity for land management and address injustice identified during the Yoorook process, as part or parallel to the Treaty process .	\$65mill	Retain	Retain
Retain the entire community development fund and continue to support the Local Development strategies of transitioning regions (\$22mill commitment to be retained in consecutive budgets)	Retain	Retain	Retain
Ensure sufficient fire fighting resources to protect ecological assets in addition to communities and infrastructure. Fire sensitive communities like Alpine Ash, mature snow Gums and rainforest should be protected proactively, like Alpine Peatlands. This could include resourcing FFMV and / or establishing a volunteer remote area firefighting branch within the CFA.	\$2m	\$2m	\$2m

Fund a transparent and comprehensive scientific review of Forest Fire Management's broad-acre burning activity.	\$1m	TBC following outcomes	TBC
Re-distribute FFMV broad acre fuel management funds to <u>fire detection and suppression</u> technology and remote area fire fighters.	Redistribute current allocation	Retain	Retain

Gas Demand Reduction

Community Service Announcements

The Victorian Government are national leaders in helping people switch from fossil gas to renewable energy with a suite of offerings from solar and battery subsidies and loans through to subsidised appliance upgrades. However the level of public awareness about these programs is poor, leading to limited take up of the benefits on offer.

We urge the Victorian Government to promote the Victorian Energy Upgrades Program and the Solar Victoria subsidies and loans across mainstream and social media platforms, directing people to the SEC website as a central point of information for households and businesses. These promotions should highlight the savings and other benefits for homes and businesses in switching from fossil gas to solar powered electric appliances backed by home battery technology.

The announcement of the re-establishment of the SEC by Labor was a clear vote winner in the lead up to the last state election and we urge the Victorian Government to capitalise on the inherent community support for the SEC by promoting and celebrating what it has to offer the people and businesses of Victoria.

Solar streets program

To amplify the above community messaging, we advocate for a targeted solar streets program that incentivises communities to switch from gas to renewable electricity one street at a time. Priority should be given to streets in lower income areas, at the end of gas transmission lines to start the necessary cauterisation of the gas distribution network. We propose allocated State

Government resources, tying in with local governments to offer home energy assessments and assistance where required for households to take advantage of the offerings already available under the VEU and Solar Victoria programs.

This project could partner with key Council areas, offering promotion through distributed local government newsletters, websites and social media in targeted municipalities.

By resourcing the above projects the Victorian Government will be better able to meet its commitments to reach net zero emissions by 2040 and reduce the risk of running into forecast gas supply shortfalls during the 2026 winter peak demand period and beyond.

Requested Budget Allocation:

Output (\$ millions)	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
Community awareness advertising to promote VEU and Solar Victoria offerings through the SEC one stop shop	\$5	\$5	\$3
Solar streets program promotion and staffing	\$4	\$5	\$2



Climate Adaptation

A leading voice on climate adaptation in the environment movement, Act on Climate has been facilitating discussion around climate risks and local preparedness needs, as well as practical community-led solutions, over the past three years. Through talking to communities members on the frontline of climate impacts, and through its deep engagement in the Victorian Government's Inquiry into Climate Resilience, **the catastrophic climate risks facing Victoria and immediate need for investing in community-led climate adaptation has only become clearer.**

Both the Climate Resilience Inquiry Parliamentary Report and the National Climate Risk Assessment (NCRA), which were recently released, offer clear findings that show this.

According to the NCRA, spending on disaster recovery could increase by 5 to 7.2 times, placing increasing fiscal pressure on governments. The assessment states that this indicates that increased investment, resilience and adaptation will be required.

The Inquiry into Climate Resilience found that “funding shortfalls represent a critical barrier to implementing climate resilience initiatives” and that “non-recurrent funding for resilience projects restricts long-term capacity building and strategic outcomes”.

Act on Climate's permanent Victorian Community Climate Adaptation Fund (VCCAF) is mentioned specifically in the Climate Resilience Inquiry Parliamentary Report as a key funding mechanism proposed by stakeholders. It notes: “As clearly articulated by stakeholders to the Inquiry, the establishment of a Climate Adaptation Fund can significantly strengthen Victoria's climate resilience.” It adds that it “can address gaps in existing funding frameworks, reduce the economic and social costs of climate impacts, and build long-term resilience across the state”.

While we understand the financial constraints currently facing Victoria, **the amount requested to be invested in climate preparedness through a VCCAF is not unattainable and will ensure immense future savings for the state in the short as well as the long term, as well as increasing Victorian communities' safety.**

An improvement in cost of living and the wellbeing of Victorians will be another outcome from a VCCAF. Climate adaptation solutions are shown to reduce Victorian's energy costs, increase their food security, increase their health and wellbeing, reducing health costs and isolation.

Climate impacts and disasters are already costing the Victorian Government billions and escalating social problems. Funding climate preparedness now will save lives, reduce recovery costs, reduce the cost of living, and ease pressure on our health system and economy from climate impacts.

Implementing a VCCAF in the 2026/27 state budget. would lead to enhanced environmental, social and economic outcomes.

This fund proposal has been submitted for previous budgets. **This version has additions clarifying and providing examples of how ongoing funding could work and showcasing its alignment with the recommendations from the state’s Resilience Inquiry.**

As noted in the Resilience Inquiry Parliamentary Report, the “increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events leads to compounding and cascading effects”, making investment in climate preparation in the next budget vital.

Proposal 1: Victorian Community Climate Adaptation Fund (VCCAF)

The Victorian Government’s investment in climate adaptation needs to be larger and it needs to be continuous to enable the immediate and extensive adaptations needed to prepare for now unavoidable climate impacts.

We call on the Victorian government to establish a permanent Victorian Community Climate Adaptation Fund (VCCAF)

The fund, starting at \$25 million per year and scaled up as needed, would distribute money annually to community groups that **undertake localised adaptation and resilience projects**. This approach would **help the government meet its obligations to the Victorian Climate Change Act (2017) and ensure Victorian communities can enhance their capacity to adapt to impacts**.

Below is our 4-page summary of our proposal for a VCCAF. Please see our full proposal and outline of a VCCAF here: [AoC 2026/27 state budget submission](#)

Victoria is at the forefront of emissions reduction, but it is falling behind on climate adaptation¹. It is one of the most vulnerable states in the world - it is in the top 5% of highest

¹ An explainer on where VIC Gov is falling behind on climate adaptation is in our extended proposal

risk states globally. And there has been a 74% increase in damage to property in Victoria from 1990 to 2050².

Climate disasters are **costing the Victorian government billions and escalating social problems**. We need to spend money now to protect people later, as waiting to respond to these disasters greatly increases the long-term monetary and societal cost. **Funding adaptation now will reduce recovery costs, as well as ease pressure on our health system and economy from climate impacts.**

The Government needs to increase investment in adaptation measures in the state, at least matching the Federal Government's Disaster Ready Fund contribution, and make this a feature of the budget every year to ensure Victorian communities are as prepared as possible.

Its **adaptation planning work needs to be backed up with ongoing funding and public communication. This will ensure communities are prepared and aware** of the climate impacts forecast to affect Victoria.

The funding of climate adaptation needs to be:

1. Adequate
2. Ongoing
3. For community-led solutions

1. Adequate Funding

This **funding needs to be adequate** according to the **risk to life and quality of life** facing Victorians, as well as the **monetary risk** facing Victoria.

Adequately funding adaptation now will reduce future costs of responding. A **\$1 investment in climate adaptation** or disaster risk reduction has been estimated to **save from \$2 to \$11 in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction costs**³. And **simply responding to disasters is likely to cost 11 times more**⁴. In addition, a **\$1 investment in adaptation and resilience has been shown to generate more than \$10 in benefits over 10 years**⁵.

Without increased funding, **insurance costs will continue to grow**⁶. And preparing against expected climate impacts is **crucial to safeguard critical systems and people, and ultimately leads to improved social, economic, and environmental outcomes**.

- 83.75% of submissions to the Victorian Government's Climate Resilience Inquiry noted more climate adaptation funding is needed.
- The Climate Resilience Inquiry Parliamentary Report found that "funding shortfalls represent a critical barrier to implementing climate resilience initiatives".
- The Inquiry recommends "providing adequate funding to local government and community-based organisations to raise public awareness and build climate resilience".

² Cross Dependency Initiative's (XDI) Gross Domestic Climate Risk

³ CSIRO 2020, Climate and Disaster Resilience

⁴ 'Adapt or die': Nightmare weather coming for unprepared Australia, news.com.au

⁵ <https://www.wri.org/research/climate-adaptation-investment-case>

⁶ Insurance Catastrophe Resilience Report 2021–22, accc.gov.au

2. Ongoing Funding

This funding needs to be **ongoing** to ensure the **continuity of adaptation initiatives** and the **entrenchment of climate adaptation** within communities.

Funding is currently provided in the form of competitive, oversubscribed grants. Once-off grants do not provide enough funding nor the consistency needed for climate adaptation.

DEECA's Community Development Fund⁷ and Rural & Regional Renewal's Disaster Resilient: Future Ready program⁸ are **good examples of how long-term funding can be executed**.

- 49.58% of Resilience Inquiry submissions noted ongoing funding is needed.
- The Climate Resilience Inquiry Parliamentary Report states that “non-recurrent funding for resilience projects restricts long-term capacity building and strategic outcomes”.

3. Community-led solutions

This funding needs to be community led to ensure it goes towards **fulfilling fundamental needs and keeping everyone in a community safe** as we adapt.

Community-led adaptation is pivotal because it is grounded in community knowledge, expertise and priorities⁹. It takes into account local knowledge and experiences of local climate impacts - **solutions need to be localised to the specific context to ensure they are just and maladaptation is avoided**.

- 61.67% of Resilience Inquiry submissions noted climate adaptation should be place-based, or community-led, with 74.58% mentioning it should consider those most at risk and 42.92% mentioning it should be Indigenous-led or follow Indigenous knowledge.
- The Inquiry found “community-led initiatives are crucial for building climate resilience”.

A VCCAF is highlighted in the Climate Resilience Inquiry Parliamentary Report as a key funding mechanism proposed by stakeholders.

- Over a third of Climate Resilience Inquiry submissions (39.58%) called for a Victorian Community Climate Adaptation Fund (VCCAF).

The Inquiry Parliamentary Report notes that “**the establishment of a Climate Adaptation Fund can significantly strengthen Victoria’s climate resilience.**” It adds that it “**can address gaps in existing funding frameworks, reduce the economic and social costs of climate impacts, and build long-term resilience across the state**”.

⁷ <https://www.deeca.vic.gov.au/forestry/grants/community-development-fund>

⁸ <https://frrr.org.au/funding/disaster-resilient-future-ready/>

⁹ Community-led Responses to Climate Change: Discovering conditions for equity and social justice, Menzies Foundation

Investing in a VCCAF will **reduce costs to the Government and Victorians by keeping people, Country and infrastructure safe from the risks presented by the climate impacts that are unavoidable and here now.**

Requested Budget Allocation:

Output (\$ millions)	2026/27	2027/28	2029/30
Establish a permanent Victorian Community Climate Adaptation Fund	\$25	\$30	\$35

Examples of Initiatives that could be Funded:

The ALGA 2025 Adapting Together report¹⁰ has examples of **councils' climate-resilient investments, which are estimated to provide up to \$4.7 billion in avoided costs and benefits to communities by 2030.** Examples of some specific projects are in the table below, with more in our full budget submission.

Project/Organisation	Project Description	Outcome
Geelong Sustainability - Climate Safe Rooms	The project retrofitted one room in 16 vulnerable households in the Geelong region to reduce the negative health impacts of climate extremes.	Increased comfort, health and happiness, with fewer days where residents were cold and uncomfortably hot (75% decrease). The average participant saved \$1,462 on health and energy costs ¹¹ .
Moonee Valley Sustainability - Renewing Dwell	Retrofitting a Community building with solar panels, draught proofing, insulation, shading and 'coolscaping'.	It will provide a cool safe space for community members to seek refuge in during heat waves.
Totally Renewable Yackandandah - Energy Preparedness	The project involved the strategic installation of generator plug-in points at four main locations. Additionally, solar panels and batteries were installed at two	The initiative has improved the ability of community facilities to continue operating despite minor outages, to ensure key services are available to the

¹⁰ <https://alga.com.au/adapting-together-local-government-leadership-in-a-changing-climate-report/>

¹¹ *Climate Safe Rooms Findings and Final Report*, Geelong Sustainability

	locations.	community.
<u>City of Melbourne Native Wildflower Meadow</u>	The project involved planting over 1 million seeds of 27 different species in Royal Park.	Improved diversity of bats, birds and insects in the area ¹² to allow for species migration, and mitigate biodiversity loss.
<u>Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust Country Fire crew</u>	Set up its own Country Fire crew ¹³ and is developing a culturally appropriate emergency relief centre ¹⁴ .	A dramatic shift in community attitudes towards fire and education of other crews in about the importance of recognising cultural history and traditional sites ¹⁵ .
<u>Cardinia Hills Youth Fire Readiness Program</u>	A behavioural change program designed to enable peer led cultural change in the attitudes and readiness of local youth towards fire safety.	Built the resilience of students, enhanced youth relationships with emergency services, and had a positive impact on family fire prevention, as well as school staff fire prevention knowledge.



Proposal 2: Climate Impact Statement in the State Budget

The Government will need to modernise the budget process to align public spending with its obligations to the Climate Change Act (2017) — the implementation of the state climate strategy and adaptation action plans.

When it comes to the climate crisis, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

¹² *Increasing biodiversity in urban green spaces through simple vegetation interventions*, Journal of Applied Ecology

¹³ aiatsis.gov.au/explore/keeping-lake-tyers-community-safe

¹⁴ abc.net.au/news/2022-09-08/indigenous-emergency-relief-centre-for-lake-tyers/101419064

¹⁵ abc.net.au/news/2018-07-08/victorias-only-all-aboriginal-fire-brigade-at-lake-tyers-trust/9934884

The Victorian Government needs an early intervention framework to ensure that it can account for the avoided costs that result from strong mitigation policies.

The Andrews Government set out interim Emission Reduction Targets and Climate Adaptation Plans for Victoria. The Government will need to modernise the budget process to align public spending with its obligations to the Climate Change Act (2017) — the implementation of the state climate strategy and adaptation action plans.

Each year, the Victorian Government allocates billions of public investment into infrastructure, government-supported programs, and services. While the government has a clear grasp of expenditure on education, health, and infrastructure, et cetera, there is currently limited understanding around climate-related expenditure and the ways in which climate impacts will affect the budget in coming decades.

The Victorian budget has evolved over the years to deal with changing context and issues. The Cain government modernised the Victorian budget in the 1980s. It brought greater transparency to the process by linking expenditure to a broader economic strategy and later including social justice thinking. Victoria became the first state to adopt accrual accounting under Premier Jeff Kennett.

In 2017, ratings agencies Standard & Poors and Moody's stated that **banks, cities, and states that fail to account for climate risk could face credit rating downgrades**. It is advantageous for governments to adopt climate-risk accounting measures to get out in front of the move. Failure to do so could see the government making contradictory decisions, such as allocating public funding towards forestry which undermines the state's greatest carbon sink, or major road projects that lock in existing dependency on private motor vehicles.

In 2024, communities are already battling escalating climate impacts such as bushfires, heatwaves, and floods. A growing body of research demonstrates that **climate impacts are hindering workers' abilities to do their jobs safely and optimally**. The impacts are wide-ranging and affect workers across geographic and industry boundaries.

'Climate impacts' are defined not only as environmental phenomena, but by their interaction with people. Friends of the Earth (FoE) and RMIT's 2022 Climate Impacts at Work report defines climate impacts as 'a collision between a given system (e.g. a household, organisation or infrastructure network) and particular weather and longer-term climate conditions'¹⁶.

This definition acknowledges that a person's day-to-day life is a significant factor in how strongly they will be affected by climate impacts. For example, a worker whose home is damaged in a flood or bushfire and needs to take time off will experience heightened stress if they are employed in insecure work, meaning 'insecure income, no leave and few workplace protections'.

¹⁶ Denham and Rickards 2022, 14

Therefore, **Victoria's preparedness for climate disasters is affected by the social security of its people and the state of its workforce**, regarding factors such as job security and wellbeing. FoE's Climate Impacts at Work report highlights not only the seriousness of each individual impact, but the ways impacts have flow-on effects across industries and outside of people's work lives.

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