

Falls to Hotham Community Information Session

May 11, 2022

Questions and Answers

*This document provides a summary of questions that were asked at the community information session online in May 2022. The answers from Parks Victoria are based how they were verbally responded to in the session. In most cases they have been shortened for clarity. Any further clarification or new information is marked in **blue text** to distinguish it as information that is additional to what was provided during the session.*

How will the many thousands of kids that hike with schools or LTOs in this area fit into this plan/trail?

There will be no changes to accessing the park or camping around existing huts. The objective of the trail is to continue to allow schools/students to use the trail for camping and hiking. The upgrades and building infrastructure on the trail will make the trail easier to walk on and lessen the long-term environmental impact of walking on peatlands and wet areas on the Bogong High plains.

The assertion that the advice that access won't change and access to campgrounds won't change is contrary to the Master Plan. What will be the changes to dispersed camping?

To clarify what was said earlier – there will be a change to free camping, but just at one site. That is at the High Knob camping site at the top of the Diamantina Spur. Every other site will be either enhanced or remain in place. Aside from this, there will be no access changes to the park or existing huts that are used to camp.

Camping access is in accordance with the Greater Alpine National Parks Management 2016, which pre-dates this project. Per the management plan, dispersed camping will continue to be permitted along the track except within 100 m of designated Falls to Hotham Alpine Crossing camping areas. The project is likely to impact current displaced camping at High Knob.

Will funding include updates and maintenance of heritage horse yards?

The Business Case identifies a budget to be spent on the huts. We will be engaging with the Victorian High Country Hut Association and other relevant associations to define how to best use this allocated money. Engagement has not occurred at this stage but there will be a detailed engagement process.

We would hope that the horse yards, for example, the Stockyards at Tawonga Hut, would be identified as part of the hut's infrastructure, and therefore included in our funding agreements for maintenance and conservation of the historic heritage of these huts.

When will the Business Case be released for public comment to the extent that it is appropriate?

The Business Case will not be released for public comment as it has already been approved by the Board. However, we are committed to releasing this information to the public and expect it will be released to the extent that it can be in the next few months. There will be some commercial-in-confidence information that we won't be able to release.

Rural Development Victoria and Parks Victoria strongly insist they have no records of evaluations of the Business Plan and prospectus for the Grampians Peaks Trail. Can we assure that the business case for Falls to Hotham will be read and evaluated?

The Business Case has been developed in close consultation with people who are very close to the landscapes and the project. It has been read, evaluated and understood, and is integral in adding value to the project and supporting the decision-making process. The Business Case has been funded by Regional Development Victoria, who were in close consultation for the Business Case and own the document together with Parks Victoria.

Going to the design stage, is there an opportunity for Licensed Tour Operators (LTOs) such as ourselves to offer an opinion on details of infrastructure. In past experiences, Parks Victoria has put in infrastructure that have made things difficult for tours because of design. Can we be involved and have an input in the design process?

We are in the process of onboarding a specialist design team and it is the intent that they will consult with Licensed Tour Operators. Some people were engaged with at the time the Business Case was made. In the case of LTOs using horses, the management plan recognises recreational horse riding in a lot of those areas. As such, the requirements of horse access will inform part of the design and upgrade considerations, and user groups will be identified and engaged with.

Eight tour operators participated in interviews with GHD – the consultants that prepared the Business Case. Those interviews were used to obtain information about current usage and help understand the demand for Falls to Hotham Alpine Crossing. No operational or commercial information was shared.

Environmental sustainability has been identified by Parks Victoria as fundamental to reasons for development of the trail. To consider horse access in the trail design (and potentially avoid putting in certain infrastructure that would protect the environment if horses cannot use it) seems contrary to this, considering the damage feral animals such as horses do to the environment in comparison to bushwalkers. Additionally, how is constructing buildings a more sustainable outcome for the area?

We recognise there is an unavoidable environmental impact of building huts. We are proposing is that the design methodology will have a minimal impact in terms of construction. For example, construction will occur offsite and be helicoptered in and placed on stumps to avoid unnecessary impact to the environment during construction.

Recent data has indicated a significant increase in visitors using the walking trails in the Alpine National Park (over 500 visitors were recorded during a single day during April on the Razorback),

which is increasing damage to the local environment through 'ribboning', creation of new hard packed areas and increased traffic through wet areas. We anticipate the upgraded walking trails will reduce impacts to the environment by keeping visitors within a defined trail footprint and away (or over) wet areas.

While we recognise the construction of huts and the upgrade of walking trails will have a short-term environmental impact, we propose the net medium- and long-term impact will be positive due to reducing visitor impact on the walking trails and surrounds.

We recognise recreational horse riders have access to some of the areas on the Falls to Hotham Alpine Crossing route and that the development of some walking trails has potential to impact the recreational rider experience. To mitigate this risk, we will work with recreational riders or horse riding tour operators to understand trail design that is suitable for both riders and walkers on areas of shared trail.

How were Licensed Tour Operators selected to talk with about the Business Case?

There was a wide reach out to bushwalking LTOs in particular, and we can acknowledge that horse riding LTOs may have been missed. However, there will be opportunity for consultation. GHD obtained a list of all registered LTOs in Victoria that offer bushwalking and sent email communication about the development. They then selected those operating in Alpine National Park/the High Country and undertook further engagement with them as part of consultation for the business case. More detail about the methodology will be offered when the Business Case is released.

Further clarification: GHD Advisory contacted LTOs to inform the Business Case. The survey was sent to operators - that are registered with Parks Victoria - and currently have tourism products in Alpine National Park or walking/hiking tourism offerings in Victoria more broadly. Eighteen LTOs in total responded to the survey.

Western spur having 12 all year-round access to horses.

Under this development there is no intent to change current access arrangements for horses in the management plan. This project is in line with the Management Plan.