

August 2019

### **CONSULTATION SUMMARY**

Draft Strategic Acton Plan for the protection of floodplain marshes in Barmah National Park and Barmah Forest Ramsar Site



Prepared for

**PARKS VICTORIA** 



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### Summary

In April and May 2019, **Parks Victoria asked** interested groups, organisations as well as the public to comment on the draft Strategic Action Plan for the protection of floodplain marshes in **Barmah National Park and Barmah Forest Ramsar** Site ("the Draft Plan"). The consultation period took place over eight weeks with participants able to complete a survey online or make a written submission.

This report presents the summarised responses from 2,394 people throughout the consultation period. Engagement findings will be used to inform the final Strategic Action Plan.

The Draft Plan is comprised of four conservation management strategies:

- 1 > Water management
- 2 Control programs for feral horses
- 3> Control programs for pigs and other introduced animals
- 4> Control programs for invasive plant species (weed management)

Overall, there are very strongly held views held both for and against the Draft Plan. There was a slight majority of participants (51%) who indicated they support or strongly support the Draft Plan. However, in contrast 42 per cent of participants indicated they did not support or strongly did not support the Draft Plan. Further analysis indicates that participants' overall support for the Draft Plan is strongly linked to their support for the proposed control programs for feral horses.

Participants showed support for three of the four conservation management strategies; water management, control programs for pigs and other introduced species, and invasive plant species. However, there are significant differences in opinion related to how to address the horse population in Barmah National Park ("the Park").

There are strongly held views both for and against the control of horse numbers. Approximately 53 per cent of participants believe controlling horse numbers is important, due to beliefs including that they are causing environmental damage in the Park. However, many participants, regardless of their view on whether horse numbers should be managed, are more supportive of rehoming and passive trapping than controlled shooting.

# > Introduction

This is an independent report commissioned by Parks Victoria to summarise public and stakeholder feedback collected during the consultation period for the Draft Strategic Action Plan for the protection of floodplain marshes in Barmah National Park and Barmah Forest Ramsar Site.

The purpose of this report is to summarise stakeholder and community feedback on the Draft Plan, gathered via Engage Victoria, the Victorian Government's online consultation platform, between 5 April and 30 May 2019.

All comments provided to Parks Victoria, including survey responses and written submissions, have been individually read and themes with common meaning grouped together. All efforts have been made to interpret feedback in a fair and equitable manner.

The consultation process was open to all, and people self selected to participate. Participants were not recruited by Parks Victoria. It should therefore be noted that the views expressed represent the view of people interested in the management of Barmah National Park and wetland, and not a representative view of the 'average' Victorian or Australian.

This report focusses exclusively on the comments collected during the April and May 2019 consultation period and not any prior engagement activities.

This report is not a commentary on the Draft Plan, nor does it present views on the merit of any of the comments made by stakeholders and the public in relation to the Draft Plan. It simply aims to present what was said by all participants in the consultation process.

The language used is reflective of the language used in the Draft Plan or by the participants in the consultation and is not a judgement made by the analysis team. We have also attempted as much as is possible to make this report accessible to all by using non-technical language.

Horses are described in a number of different ways by participants in this engagement process. Parties use the terms "feral horses" and "brumbies" depending on their point of view and at times those terms will be used in this report. However, if we are not expressing the language of a participant the term "horses" will be used.

The engagement webpage including background information and survey can be found at: engage.vic.gov.au/barma h-strategic-action-plan

#### 2.1. Purpose of the engagement

On 5 April 2019 Parks Victoria made available on Engage Victoria the Draft Strategic Action Plan for the protection of floodplain marshes in Barmah National Park and Barmah Forest Ramsar Site, (engage.vic.gov.au/barmah-strategic-action-plan).

The public, interested stakeholders, community groups and organisations had the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Plan during the eight-week consultation period.

Key outcomes from the consultation will be considered by Parks Victoria in the finalisation of the Plan.

#### 2.2. Methodology

The methodology for the consultation period focused on collecting feedback through the Engage Victoria online portal, engage.vic.gov.au.

Interested parties were invited to provide feedback via an online survey or upload written submissions. The survey was developed under the digital standards to guide a public consultation developed by the Department of Premier and Cabinet (https://www.vic.gov.au/set-public-consultation).

The opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Plan was promoted in the following ways:

- ➤ A media release which resulted in 162 subsequent media pieces about the Draft Plan (during the consultation period).
- Notification of the project was distributed to approximately 8,000 registered users of Engage Victoria.
- ➤ Email notification to over 50 stakeholders. Participants were given eight weeks to provide feedback.

The survey on the Engage Victoria website included a range of closed questions (where participants could indicate their support levels for proposed conservation strategies) and three open ended questions, where participants could respond however they choose.

To make sense of the major themes raised through so many comments, a sample of the themes were selected at random and read to identify common themes. From this sample, a frame of expected topics was created and then all the comments read and marked according to which of the identified theme or themes were mentioned within that comment. Occasionally, other themes presented themselves though the process and were added to the topic frame. Best efforts were made to ensure that comments were interpreted and themed fairly.

The major themes are presented in this report. To be considered a major theme there needed to be a significant number of mentions of the theme among participants. In this report, we have presented any themes that have been mentioned by more than four per cent of respondents (or approximately 100 comments).

The consultation period closed at midnight on 30 May 2019. At the close of the consultation period, the responses were reviewed and where duplicates were discovered the responses were combined and considered as one submission.

#### 2.3. Privacy

At the start of the Engage Victoria survey, participants were asked to agree to Parks Victoria's privacy statement, at engage. vic.gov.au/barmah-strategic-action-plan. Participants had the option to request that their submissions were not published. As such, for the purposes of this report, no quotes have been used from participants who selected this option.

# > Participants

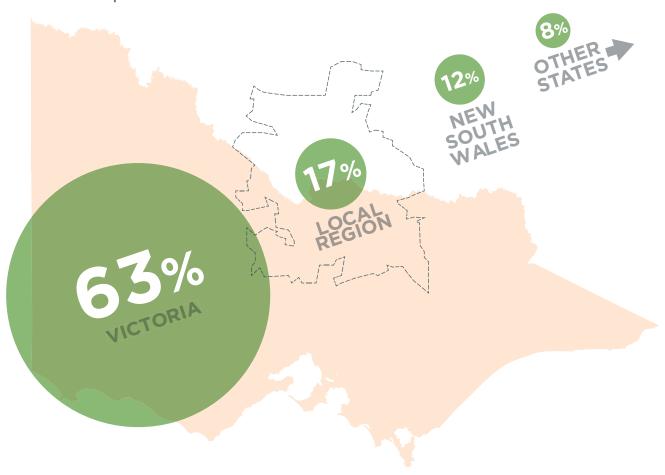
In total 2,394 people completed the Engage Victoria survey. Further to the survey completions, 53 documents were provided via 23 participants who chose to make a written submission.

Participants were located all over Australia, though the majority of participants were from Victoria (over 63%). The majority of participants (94%) did not represent a group or organisation. Participant characteristics are described in detail below.

#### **Table 1: Participants' home locations**

#### 3.1. Location

Locations have been determined by grouping the postcodes provided by participants in their response. Table one illustrates the key locations where participants resided.



#### 3.2. Interests

Participants could select more than one interest in relation to the Draft Plan. Nearly two thirds of participants (65%) identified 'Conservation of the environment' as their main interest in the Draft Plan.

Figure 2: Participants' main interest in the Draft Plan

#### Conservation of the environment

65%/1559

Heritage value of horses

42%/996

**Animal welfare** 

41%/985

**Traditional owner values** 

19%/701

#### 3.3. Visitation

Participants could select more than one interest in relation to the Draft Plan. Nearly two thirds of participants (65%) identified 'Conservation of the environment' as their main interest in the Draft Plan.

Figure 3: Participants' visitation habits

**Daily** 

1%/16

Weekly



Monthly

7%/169

Three or four times a year

34%/803

Rarely

44%/1050

Never

12%/297

#### 3.4. Community groups

As shown in figure four, most participants (94%) responded as individuals.

Figure 4: Participants speaking on behalf of a community group or organisation

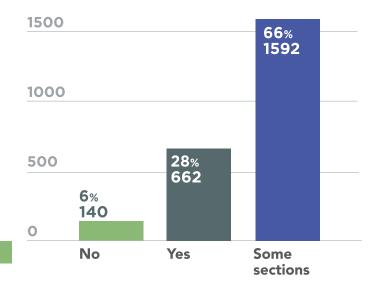


No

#### 3.5. Review of the Draft Plan

Of all participants, the majority of participants had read some sections of the report. There were only six per cent who indicated they had not read the report at all.

Figure 5: Participants interactions with the Draft Plan

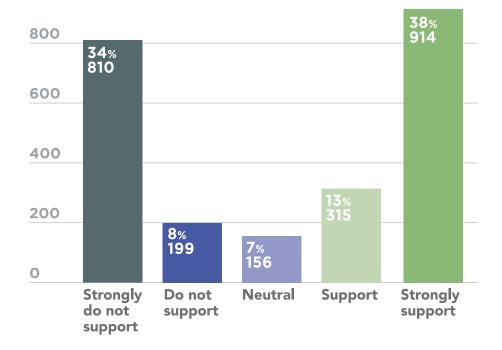


# > Results

#### 4.1. Overall support levels for the draft strategic action plan

Figure six below shows that in total 51 per cent of participants either support or strongly support the Draft Plan. In contrast, 42 per cent do not support or strongly do not support the Draft Plan. Further analysis indicates that participants' overall support for the Draft Plan is strongly linked to their support for the proposed control programs for feral horses.

Figure 6: Overall level of support for the Draft Plan



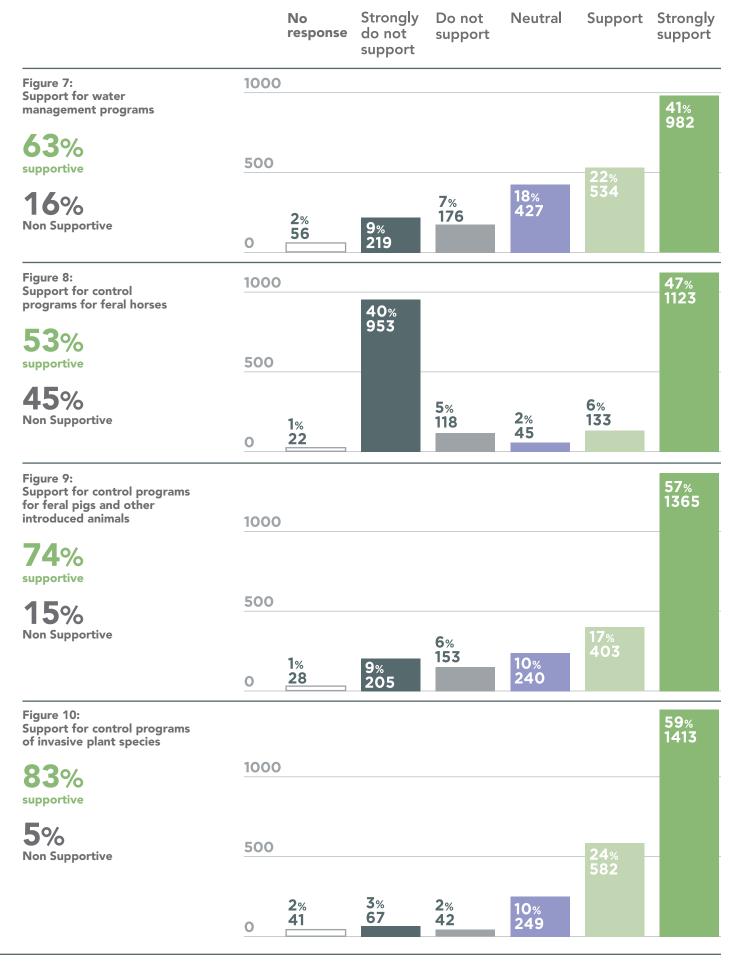
### 4.2. Support levels for conservation management strategies

The Draft Plan includes four conservation management strategies for the floodplain marshes in the Park. The strategies are:

- 1 > Water management
- 2> Control programs for feral horses
- 3 Control programs for pigs and other introduced animals
- **4** Control programs for invasive plant species (weed management)

Participants were asked to indicate their level of support for each of the above four strategies. Results are shown in table two and figure seven to ten on the following pages.

A large majority of participants indicated support for the proposed programs for invasive plant species (weed management) (83%), and for pigs and other introduced species (74%). Over half of the participants also indicated support for the proposed strategies for water management (63%). However, levels of support for the proposed control programs for feral horses saw strong opinions for and against the Draft Plan, with 53 per cent of participants indicating support.





#### 4.3. Further considerations

Question nine of the survey asked participants to note if there was anything else they think is important and should be considered as part of the conservation strategies.

Of the 2,394 participants, 1,163 responded to this question. A summary of the most frequently heard comments:

Horses have a right to live in the Park for heritage and cultural reasons.

"The brumbies are a part of heritage and should be protected. They do not damage the floodplain! What damages it is the unnecessary flooding caused by park! The park would be nothing special without them. An absolutely disgusting plan of action!!"

If horses do need to be removed or numbers reduced, methods other than shooting should be used and explored.

"I fully support the removal of invasive hoofed animals from the region, however I think greater lengths should be gone to "rehome" them before resorting to killing them."

➤ Fertility control and reduction of other invasive species (such as pigs) should be prioritised ahead of shooting of feral horses.

"The removal and eradication of feral pigs should take priority over removal of feral horses. Feral pigs cause far more significant damage to fragile wetlands, Marsh areas and root support systems of trees and grasses inhabiting the Barmah area." ➤ Horses are a pest and damage the native environment in the same way that any other feral introduced species do and horse numbers should be reduced.

"Please do NOT cave into the anticipated outcry from the 'brumby' lovers!!!! For once, let us have an actual cull of feral animals, as has been promised in the past, but seldom done."

Water management as a very high priority that should not be overlooked.

"Getting the right environmental flows is critical. The Victorian Government needs to implement the MDBA Constraints Management Strategy to restore upstream floodplains to enable adequate managed peak flows."

Table three provides a detailed description of the major themes and the percentage of respondents who raised them.

Table 3: Major themes raised as additional matters regarding support for the Draft Plan

Theme	Description	Percentage of participants mentioning this theme*	Number ofparticipants mentioning this theme
Heritage and cultural value of horses	Participants expressed that horses within the park have a long-standing connection to the land and people of the area, and should continue to exist in the park	10.6%	254
Removal of pigs and other feral animals	Participants felt that environmental damage within the Park has been primarily caused by pigs and other introduced species. Participants through their feedback suggested that efforts should be made to remove them before the removal or reduction of the feral horse population	9.6%	231
Improve water management and environmental flows	A number of participants felt that intentional flooding of the Park is harmful to the environment and wildlife and believed there were other ways to better manage water	9.3%	222
Adopt more humane methods for removing brumbies from the Park	Some participants raised significant concerns relating to the proposed methods for reducing the number of horses in the park. Suggested alternative approaches to shooting, included trapping and rehoming. Responses are considered in greater detail in relation to section 5	8.5%	204
Ensure all horses are removed from the Park	Participants believe that horses are causing environmental damage and should be removed from the Park completely in the most efficient manner possible	7.9%	188
Against shooting horses	Participants specifically reference shooting as their main concern. They feel strongly that shooting of horses is an unacceptable means of reducing numbers. Their comments did not offer alternatives	7.8%	186
Investigate fertility control as a means of population management	Participants feel that gelding or chemical fertility control specifically is a suitable means of population control that should be a priority over other methods	6.1%	146

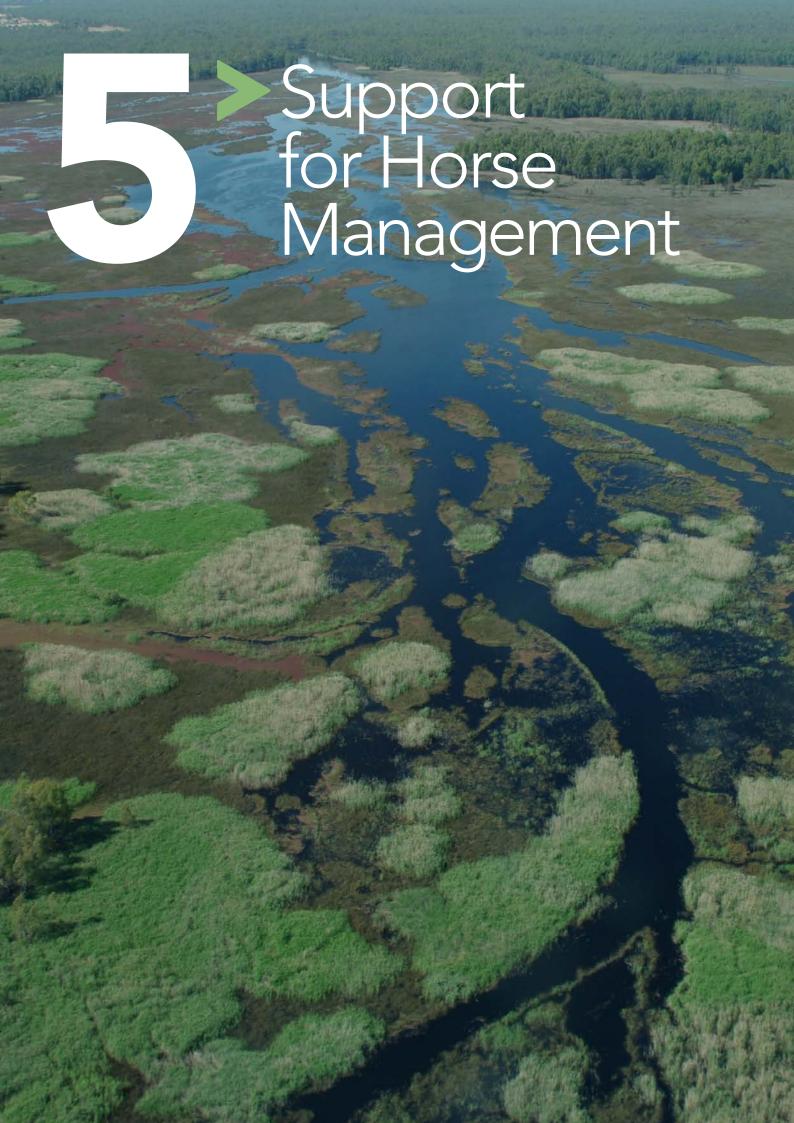
<sup>\*</sup>This percentage represents the number of people who raised this theme when answering question nine.

Other common comments made by fewer participants include:

Environmental benefits of feral horses in the Park: horses keep vegetation levels down and protect the Park from bushfires. Traditional Owner engagement: Indigenous voices should be listened to on the matter of park management.

Tourism benefits of horses: horses have tourism value.

Invasive species and vegetation management: Managing weeds and restocking native vegetation should be a priority.



#### 5.1. Strategies for feral horse management

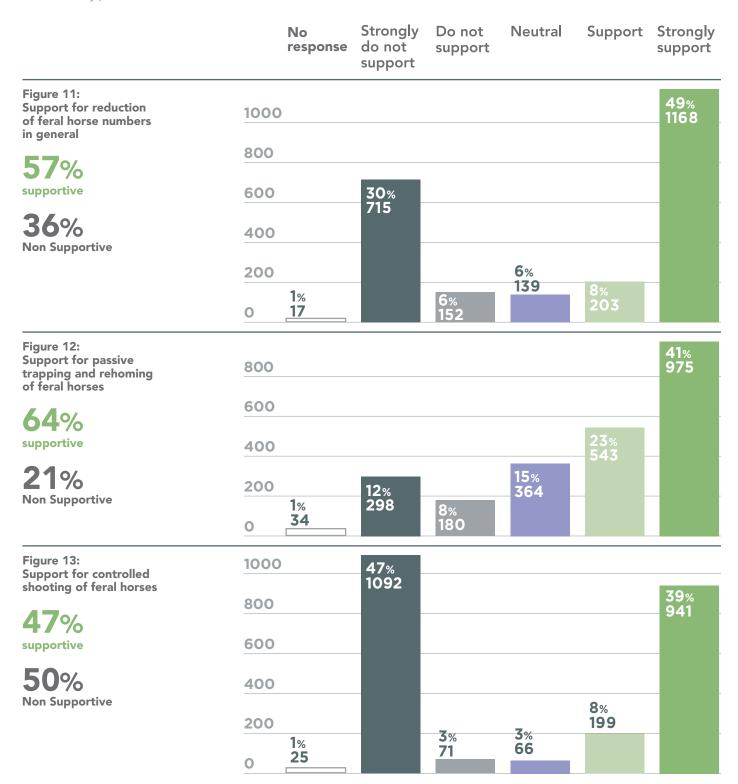
Question ten asked participants to indicate their level of support for the following:

- > Reduction of feral horse numbers
- > Passive trapping and rehoming of feral horses
- Controlled shooting of feral horses by professional shooters under strict welfare and safety protocols

Results indicated that participants are:

- ➤ Divided on the reduction of horse numbers in general (57% supportive, 36% not supportive) (illustrated in figure 11)
- Supportive of passive trapping and rehoming (64% support, 21% not supportive) (figure 12)
- ➤ Almost equally divided on controlled shooting as a reduction method (47% supportive, 50% not supportive) (figure 13)

Results show that participants would generally prefer trapping and rehoming to shooting if horse numbers need to be reduced.





# Maximising rehoming opportunities for horses

Question 11 of the survey focused on the rehoming of horses as a means of managing their population. Of the 2,394 respondents to the surveys 1,165 made a comment associated with this question.

A summary of the most commonly heard comments:

The most common response to this question was that participants believe there are many organisations willing to assist with rehoming if Parks Victoria is willing to work with them.

The most common ideas participants provided regarding how horses could be rehomed were:

#### Work with experienced organisations who have rehomed horses previously.

"As far as I am aware, there are several groups/ individuals willing to train and rehome the Brumbies... In fact, I have 2 brumbies."

#### Work with experienced professional horse breakers who can train horses to live in a domestic setting.

"The Victorian Government must provide funding to help registered organisations that legitimately rehome wild horses as part of their management scheme then. As many organisations rely on donations, funding will help with these horses' transition from wild to having an opportunity to be rehomed."

### ➤ Implement programs where prisoners and war veterans train horses to be rehomed.

"Many people who would take them and educate them and rehome them. In the USA they have a program in place with inmates who educate the horses and find suitable homes for them, they also have the 100 day challenge where anyone willing to give it a go can collect a mustang from the yards and have 100 days to break horse in then compete against others for the title and then the horses are auctioned off. Why can't we do the same here?"

#### Auction horses to people who want to rehome them.

"Rounding up or capture of the horses, allowing auction and rehoming has proven successful in other countries such as New Zealand with the Kaimanawa wild horse program and in various states in the USA with the mustang relocation and rehoming programs."

#### Provide financial support to individuals and organisations to rehome as many horses as possible.

"Offer government grants to help the community organisations to re-home the horses. Allow the horses to be fed so they are in good health for re-homing. Allow human contact with the horses so that they can be domesticated for re-homing."

Other participants raised concerns with the rehoming of horses, claiming this method is highly stressful to the horse (both in capture, transportation and adjustment to captivity). Some felt that fertility control and other methods (including culling) may be better for the welfare of the animal.

"Rehoming is probably a waste of time/ money/resources. There are already too many horses to be rehomed in Victoria (e.g. ex-thoroughbreds). Rehoming is not a valid concept for most of these horses."

Table four provides a detailed description of the major themes and the percentage of respondents who raised them.



#### 4: Description of themes raised regarding maximising rehoming opportunities for horses

Theme	Description	Percentage of participants mentioning this theme*	Number ofparticipants mentioning this theme
Listen and collaborate with local community groups	Participants feel there are many groups available to assist with rehoming and that Parks Victoria should work with them	15.7%	376
Explore other opportunities to facilitate rehoming of horses	Participants shared a range of other approaches Parks Victoria should consider to support rehoming of feral horses (listed above). Suggestions included working with professional horse breakers, prison programs, horse auctions and financial support for rehoming	8.6%	207
Shooting of horses is not supported	Participants again commented that whether the horse population in the Park is deemed in need of management or not, shooting is not an acceptable option	4.9%	118
Rehoming of horses not supported	Participants expressed their concern over a greater focus on rehoming of horses, noting that this approach can cause greater distress to the animal than other population reduction measures	4.4%	106
Investigate limiting fertility as an option	Investigate limiting fertility as an option Participants expressed their desire to have gelding and chemical fertility control investigated and felt this approach should be given a priority over other methods. These participants believe this approach is the most humane means of population control	4.2%	101

<sup>\*</sup>This percentage represents the number of people who raised this theme when answering question 11.

suggestions included:

Other notable The importance of including Indigenous views on the matter of horse control and management of the Park.

Emulate horse management programs in other parts of the world.

Leave the horses as they are with no human intervention.

Sell the horses for food production.



## > Final Comments

Question 12 encouraged participants to provide any further comments they felt were important for Parks Victoria to consider in the finalisation of the draft strategic plan. Of the 2,394 participants to this survey, 1,052 made a response to this question.

In this part of the survey, participants primarily reinforced the views already expressed through their feedback. The most commonly heard comments included:

Support for the Draft Plan and for the opportunity to comment during the consultation process.

"Good proposals. I hope it gets up. Too many such areas are being lost. Even just for self-interest of our own species we must preserve biodiversity."

➤ General statements about the preservation of the environment as a whole. Participants commented on the balance between the different elements of the environment holistically, rather as individual elements.

"I spent many years as a young person in the Barmah forest, unfortunately ignorant to the importance of and sensitivity of wetlands and the damage introduced species and lack of management does to the environment. I encourage and support Parks Vic to act decisively and sensitively to restore and protect the Barmah wetlands and considering the values of local indigenous people NOW."

Table five provides a detailed description of the major themes and the percentage of respondents who raised them.



Table 5: Description of themes regarding any other comments on the Draft Plan

Theme	Description	Percentage of participants mentioning this theme*	Number ofparticipants mentioning this theme
Support for the Draft Plan	General comments offering support for the Draft Plan and the opportunity to comment through the consultation process	7.4%	178
Support for the focus on removal of pigs and other feral animals	Priority should be weighted towards management of pigs and other introduced animals ahead of horses	7.1%	169
Remove all horses	Horses must be removed or reduced by any efficient means	5.1%	122
Protect the water catchment and environmental flows	The highest priority for the Plan should be water management due to its impact on the natural environment	4.8%	116
Adopt more humane methods for removing brumbies	Alternatives to shooting, including trapping and rehoming should be prioritised	4.6%	111

 $<sup>^{\</sup>star}$  This percentage represents the number of people who raised this theme when answering question 12.

Other notable suggestions included:

Inclusion of Indigenous views in the development of the Plan.

Opposition to shooting horses.

# > Written Submissions

Written submissions were provided by 9 individuals and 14 groups and organisations. Between them they submitted over 50 documents. Of these documents, 23 provided views directly from the group or individual regarding their support or opposition to the Draft Plan and the conservation strategies. A list of organisations making submissions is included in Appendix A.

As with the survey results, submissions were analysed in relation to the Draft Plan's four conservation management strategies. Table six shows how many submissions were supportive or not supportive of the different conservation management strategies.

Table 6: Level of support offered for conservation management strategies by those who made a submission

Draft Plan element:	Supportive	Not supportive	Did not address
Water management	15	1	7
Control programs for feral horses	17	6	0
Control programs for pigs and other introduced animals	13	0	10
Control programs for invasive plant species (weed management)	13	0	10

The following summarises the key messages from the submissions received. The feedback has been grouped according to each of the four conservation management strategies:

#### 8.1. Water management

Submissions touched on a range of technical matters related to water management. Common to these is the matter of balancing water requirements between different uses along the Murray River, including water for agriculture and the natural environment. Some submissions also commented on how and when water is allocated to the park and how this might best be managed.

"In recent years, Moira grass in Barmah Forest has had a positive response to environmental water with strong growth and abundant flowering. However, the success of past watering events has been significantly hindered through the presence of feral horses in the forest. This observation was substantiated in 2017, when a 10-ha feral horse and pig exclusion fence demonstrated the enhanced outcomes that could be achieved from environmental watering of Moira grass and river swamp wallaby grass in the absence of these threats. The results support the theory that feral horses and pigs in Barmah Forest pose a significant risk to the success of environmental watering regimes."

#### 8.2. Control programs for feral horses

As with responses to the survey there is some difference in opinion about how horses should be managed. Three main themes were evident in the submissions:

- ➤ Horses in large numbers are damaging the native environment and they must be removed.
- Horses are causing damage but killing them is not a viable solution.
- ➤ Horses are not the cause of the problem and should not be harmed or moved on.

"[Organisation] acknowledges the ecological significance of the Barmah Forest Ramsar Site and the substantial decline in the extent of Moira grass due to grazing animals. We note the demonstration of the impacts of feral horses and feral pigs on Moira grass through use of exclusion fencing. [Organisation] also acknowledges the detrimental impacts of grazers across sites that hold cultural importance to the Traditional Owners, the Yorta Yorta people. For these reasons, and the evidence provided in the plan, we believe that there is significant justification to manage grazing animals in Barmah National Park."

"[Organisation] does not support the culling of the horse herd however we do support the improvement management of the horses. In the case that is improvement management requires the size of the herd to be reduced; either to improve the health of the animals or to reduce any negative impacts on the ecosystem they may be contributing to."

#### 8.3. Control programs for pigs and other introduced animals

The proposals put forward were strongly supported by all that commented on the matter.

"We further support efforts to control feral pigs and deer and limit Giant rush and river red gum encroachment into the Moira grass plains. These measures are essential to maintain the ecological character of the Ramsar site and may need to be stepped up during the lifetime of the Action Plan."

#### 8.4. Control programs for invasive plant species (weed management)

The proposals put forward were strongly supported, with submissions commenting that weed management should remain a very high priority for Parks Victoria.

"The Living Murray initiative has been running an Indigenous Partnership Program for over a decade, and strongly supports the significance of a health country for Traditional Owner and cultural outcomes. Barmah Forest is significant for the Yorta Yorta people. Implementation of the propose management actions in the draft Strategic Action Plan such as the management of feral animals and invasive plants will protect important cultural sites as well as improve the diversity and health of native plants that are used for bush tucker, medicine and cultural activities such as weaving."

### > Appendix A

Organisations who provided feedback through the survey:

Alpine River Adventures

Arthurs Creek Radio Observatory

Association of Sculptors of Victoria

Australian Brumby Alliance Inc.

Australian Brumby Board

Australians for a Fair Go

Australian Brumbies United

Barmah Brumby Conservation Association

Barmah Brumby Preservation Group

Barmah Brumby Support Group

Barmah Heritage Brumbies and Bush Users Group

Batman Brumbies

Birdlife Australia

Birds Australia

Brumby Protection

Bush User Groups United

Cape Paterson Residents and Ratepayers Association

Catherine Young Optometrist

Commonwealth Department of the Environment and Energy

Commonwealth Environmental Water Office

Eastern Action for the Environment

Environment Victoria

Liviloteciiiiques

Essendon Bushwalking Club

Field Naturalists Club of Ballarat

Friends of the Helmeted Honeveater

Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands Inc

Friends of Currango

Getlost Maps

Gippsland Plains Conservation Management Network

Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority

Goulburn Murray Landcare Network

Heritage Brumby Advocates Australia Inc

Hoofs 2010 Inc

Brumby Rescue

Integrasolar

Landcare

Let the Ladies Go

Marine Care Ricketts Point

Monash University

Monbulk Landcare Group

Murray Valley Bushwalkers Inc

National Parks Association

Native Fish Australia (Vic

Oakland Lodge

Paterson Valley Dog Rescue

Peter Lockyer Architect+Builder

Practical Ecology Pty Ltd

Project Hope

RSPCA Victoria

Rakali Consulting Pty Ltc

Reclaim Kosci

Regional Victorians OTDS Inc

Save Barmah Brumbies

Snowy River Brumby Heritage group

Southern Grampians Cottage

Sporting Shooters Association of Australia (Victoria)

The Trustee for Thynne Farm Trust

Thornley Wildlife Foundation

Trust for Nature

Travel Managers Strathfield

University of Melbourne

Vauxhall Owners Club of Aust.

Victorian Brumby Association

Victorian Environmental Water Holder

Victorian Field Naturalist Club

Victorian National Parks Association

Western Highway Conservation Group

Wild Horses Kimberley Inc.

Wodonga Urban Landcare Network

Women's Health Loddon Mallee

Yorta Yorta Nation

#### Organisations that made a submission:

Moira Shire council

The Goulburn Valley Environment Group Inc

Commonwealth Environment Water Office

Murray Darling Basin Authority

Victorian Brumby Association

Australian Brumby Alliance

Victorian National Parks Association

RSPCA

Environment Victoria

Trust for Nature

Wild Horse & Burro Fund

Birdlife Australia

Heritage Brumby Advocates Australia Inc

