

JOINT STATEMENT

The Striped Legless Lizard, listed as vulnerable nationally and endangered in Victoria, is not only threatened with local extinction in Melbourne, but 30 individual lizards currently held by Zoos Victoria now face a future in captivity as the sad end to a sorry tale of conservation 'fails' as Melbourne rapidly grows.



WE'VE SIGNED THIS STATEMENT:

- Victorian National Parks Association
- Friends of Iramoo
- Green Wedges Coalition
- Pinkerton Landcare and Environment Group
- Melton Environment Group
- Friends of Merri Creek
- Friends of Kororoit Creek
- Western Region Environment Centre
- Werribee River Association
- Western Melbourne Catchments Network
- Friends of Bannockburn Bush
- Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley
- Ballarat Environment Network
- Friends of Skeleton Creek
- Jacksons Creek EcoNetwork

JOINT STATEMENT

COMMUNITY GROUPS CALL FOR MELBOURNE'S STRIPED LEGLESS LIZARDS TO BE GIVEN A CERTAIN FUTURE

Victoria's Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) on Friday 4 September briefed a group of scientists, community groups and government staff on the results of an analysis of 'salvage and translocation options' it recently drafted for the Striped Legless Lizard.

This research was an attempt to play 'catch-up' after a series of planning decisions for Melbourne's growth areas fixed the fate of this endangered species by finding that even if these species were present at a site, the land could be cleared and the animals would be 'salvaged' and looked after by Zoos Victoria.

The Victorian Government proposes that instead of protecting some areas containing these threatened species, all land clearing affecting the lizard will be compensated for by the creation of a large grassland reserve west of Melbourne. The Federal Government has signed off on this decision. One additional action was to find out if the species, once salvaged, could be successfully moved or translocated into the grassland reserve. At the time no-one knew if this was possible or not.

The research took a closer look at previously known information for the species and sought expert opinion. It did not require any additional survey efforts on land yet to be developed – in particular land between Caroline Springs and Melton thought highly likely to support the species. The research found that habitat for the species is in fact far less than first thought. It also found that there remain a couple of 'hotspots' near Melbourne where large populations of the lizard can be found, elevating the significance of these locations. These hotspots are mainly within the St Albans area up through Cairnlea, and are roughly linked by the Kororoit Creek.

Unfortunately these hotspots currently face strong in-fill urban development, with a number of housing developments planned by developers who are now seeking approval by the Federal Government. The recent approval of The Point at Burnside, comprising 80 hectares of Striped Legless Lizard habitat, sets a precedent and seals the fate of a very large population of lizards. That approval will also result in the fragmentation of populations along Kororoit Creek. Further approvals along Kororoit and Jones creeks would seal the fate of hundreds more lizards.

As well as confirming that the lizards aren't as widespread as previously thought, the analysis determined that in order to test whether the species can be translocated from one place to another 11,000 hectares of land would need to be cleared to salvage enough lizards (between 300 and 900 over a few years) to conduct the experiment. The department has said this would not be possible - there are only 2000 hectares of habitat available to be cleared.

The Victorian Government has now abandoned the idea

of a translocation trial and will not require lizards to be salvaged anymore. What does this mean? Essentially the department is dooming threatened species to death by bulldozer.

As clearing within Melbourne's growth areas continues at a slower rate than expected, the rate of acquisition of land within the Western Grassland Reserves has also slowed - the reserve relies on money generated from clearing. While the government believes these reserves will compensate for clearing lizard habitat in the rest of Melbourne's growth areas, it has only discovered a few individuals within reserve land acquired so far. This contrasts with the approximately 30 lizards salvaged from growth areas. The numbers don't add up.

It is not clear exactly how and where money from clearing is being spent to provide for lizards within the Western Grassland Reserves. The fees are merged as one overall payment under the banner of a native vegetation habitat compensation fee and as yet a specific stream for Striped Legless Lizard management within the Western Grassland Reserves has not been provided to the public.

There are conservation reserves that contain higher numbers of lizards that could benefit from funding, and a query has been put to the department regarding whether some of the compensation funds could be used where known populations exist. The response was this is not possible because it would be outside the bounds of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment agreement with the Federal Government.

However, this contrasts sharply with the Burnside approval where the site is located outside of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment area but the development will be allowed to direct offsets to the Western Grassland Reserves. This arrangement has been made under the proposed auspices of the Melbourne Urban Development - Policy Statement for Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) referrals, which makes provision for some urban development outside of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment area to offset into the Western Grassland Reserves. However, this policy only provides for areas of grassland or Golden Sun Moth habitat that are less than 10 hectares. The Burnside development's lizard impacts do not meet these criteria and the offsets for this damage should be sourced elsewhere.

Meanwhile the fate of the 30 lizards cared for by Zoos Victoria remains unclear. They were collected to be used within a translocation program that has now been abandoned. We understand these lizards will either be retained live at by Zoos Victoria or transferred to other institutions for captive management and display. However, whether in captivity or in the rapidly diminishing grasslands of Melbourne, what this species needs is more certainty.



IN THE FACE OF THESE SEEMINGLY DISASTROUS DECISIONS FOR THIS THREATENED SPECIES, CONSERVATION GROUPS ARE CALLING FOR:

- The agreement between the federal and state government be revised to ensure that Striped Legless Lizard habitat is protected in situ.
- A revision of the EPBC listing advice for the Striped Legless Lizard to recognise the new research that shows it has less likely habitat around Melbourne and also to emphasise the importance of the hotspot areas. Hopefully this will affect any future decisions that are pending.
- A review of the decision to allow offsetting into the Western Grassland Reserve for the clearing of Striped Legless Lizard habitat outside of the Melbourne Strategic Assessment area.
- Allowance to be made for funds generated from clearing within the growth areas to be used to support the conservation of known populations outside the Melbourne Strategic Assessment area on the basis that larger populations occur outside the Western Grasslands Reserves.
- An independent review to be undertaken of the government's decision to abandon the salvage and translocation trial and that a group of appropriate experts be convened for this purpose.
- Surveys to be conducted in all areas proposed for development that support likely habitat for the Striped Legless Lizard so that informed decisions can be made and losses documented.
- A research program to be funded by the Victorian Government that involves using expert information and survey data to identify likely additions to the hotspot locations. Follow-up surveys would then occur.
- The Victorian Government to better support management of conservation reserves known to support higher populations of the Striped Legless Lizard, particularly within hotspot areas.

Striped Legless Lizards

shelter in grass tussocks, thick ground cover, soil cracks, under rocks and spider burrows. They also burrow their own holes. They are carnivores and feed on spiders, crickets, grasshoppers, caterpillars and cockroaches.

They can be found right across the grassy basalt plains of the western district but their habitat has been severely reduced and fragmented over time.

Cover photo: Striped Legless Lizard, ACT Parks and Conservation Service

Above: Striped Legless Lizard, Ben Twist



Striped Legless Lizards are slender reptiles that resemble tiny snakes at first glance. They belong to a family of lizards unique to Australia and New Guinea most closely related to geckos.

Unlike snakes, they have a fleshy tongue that is not forked, and visible external ears. Like others in this lizard family their rear legs have evolved into two tiny flaps and the front legs have disappeared completely. The tail is extremely long – up to two-thirds of its total length.