

FINAL PRESCRIPTION FOR VICTORIAN GRASSLAND EARLESS DRAGON

Preamble

The Victorian Grassland Earless Dragon (VGED) *Tympanocryptis pinguicolla* was previously thought to be extinct in Victoria but was rediscovered in 2023. The species is a Matter of National Environmental Significance (MNES) under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and assessed under the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (MSA) Program.

Historically, the species likely occurred across native grasslands to the north and west of Melbourne. VGED is a key species of the Natural Temperate Grassland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain (NTGVVP) and Grassy Eucalypt Woodland of the Victorian Volcanic Plain (GEWVVP) ecological communities listed under the EPBC Act.

The VGED has specific habitat requirements, including inter-tussock spaces and spider burrows, and an abundance of invertebrates as a food resource. These attributes can be found in NTGVVP and GEWVVP but are not unique attributes of these communities.

Since the species rediscovery, DEECA has updated the *Victorian Grassland Earless Dragon Habitat Distribution Model* (DEECA 2024) (HDM) using the characteristics of the rediscovery site and important habitat attributes. The updated HDM depicts the areas of potential VGED habitat, to inform conservation and recovery efforts across the landscape.

The MSA Program's strategic impact assessment considered the impacts of the program activities on VGED. The assessment found that actions under the program are not likely to cause a significant impact to VGED. The species was assessed as not likely to be present in the MSA Program area but may be present further to the west of Melbourne. The assessment states that if the species was found during surveys that a prescription would be developed to the Commonwealth's satisfaction to guide mitigation and management decisions.

This prescription applies current practices and has considered the *National Recovery Plan for Four Grassland Earless Dragons (Tympanocryptis spp.) of Southeast Australia (2025)* (National Recovery Plan), to outline actions that mitigate impacts to VGED within the MSA area. The prescription has been prepared consistent with the conservation outcomes and guiding principles of the *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy for Melbourne's Growth Corridors* (DEPI 2013) (BCS). Mitigation of impacts to VGED will be achieved through:

- Avoiding and offsetting habitat removal for VGED through securing strategically sized and connected conservation areas and reserves under the MSA Program.
- Extensive management and restoration of protected native grasslands that connect VGED habitat, supported by on-going monitoring and adaptive management.
- Habitat assessments and targeted surveys to identify if there are additional populations.
- Where additional populations are identified, management of them in-situ where possible, or if necessary, implement translocation (salvage and/or reintroduction) to support genetic diversity and contribute to the conservation outcomes for VGED.

Detail

This prescription has been prepared in consultation with the Commonwealth Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment, and Water (DCCEEW) and details how impacts from urban development on VGED habitat will be mitigated under the MSA Program. This prescription will be used in addition to the BCS to inform decision making and planning processes under the MSA Program.

The actions committed to in this Prescription have been informed by, and are guided by, the *Supporting Document: Grassland Earless Dragon Prescription* (February 2025).

Retention and offset of modelled VGED habitat

As part of the development of this prescription, DEECA have overlayed the contemporary HDM model over the MSA area. The broad overlay shows how the existing framework from the MSA is still broadly suitable in achieving appropriate environmental outcomes.

The HDM identifies 8,814 ha of modelled potential VGED habitat within the MSA Program area inside Melbourne's Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). This area includes:

- 1,595 ha of modelled potential habitat that will be avoided from removal through the creation of conservation areas identified in the BCS. Noting that some boundaries may have subsequently changed since the BCS was approved.
- 7,219 ha of modelled potential habitat, that is available for urban development under the MSA Program.

The removal of 7,219 ha of modelled potential VGED habitat within the MSA Program area will be offset through the establishment of the Western Grassland Reserve (WGR) and the Grassy Eucalypt Woodland Reserve (GEWR).

- The WGR includes 12,018 ha of modelled potential VGED habitat. The WGR has been identified as protecting the largest and highest priority area of connected modelled VGED habitat. The WGR will be under direct conservation management and used as a site for potential reintroduction and maintenance of further wild populations.
- 224 ha of modelled potential VGED habitat is protected outside the UGB in the GEWR.

Where additional land is retained outside the UGB to meet the MSA Program conservation outcomes, DEECA will seek to identify and secure land that also provides VGED habitat.

It is noted that there is the potential for the species to be present within the MSA program area. Should any populations be present, the work described below will ensure they are detected to best practice ability, and suitably managed.

Habitat assessment, and survey, to identify undetected populations

Important habitat attribute assessments will be undertaken across the MSA Program area, both inside and outside conservation areas and offset reserves. The habitat assessments will inform targeted VGED survey efforts and confirm high priority sites for enhanced VGED habitat management and potential reintroduction.

- Habitat assessments will be consistent with the important habitat attributes detailed in the National Recovery Plan. An assessment methodology will be submitted to, and endorsed by, DCCEEW.

- Modelled potential habitat identified by the HDM will guide the location of the habitat assessments. If any land outside the HDM extent is identified through any on-ground observations as potentially high-quality habitat, it will also be assessed.
- Targeted VGED surveys to identify undetected populations will be undertaken on land with confirmed habitat, as determined by the habitat assessment.
- VGED surveys will follow best-practice survey methodology to maximise detectability in consultation with the VGED Recovery Team and DCCEEW.
- Surveys will be undertaken in conservation areas and offset reserves as land parcels are acquired and secured. Surveys will be undertaken in all other areas subject to the planning and development status of the land (refer to scenarios below).

Management of any population found will be guided by the *Rediscovery response protocol for a listed GED* and further guidance as detailed in the National Recovery Plan. Where a new population is found in the MSA Program area a site-specific conservation management plan will be prepared in consultation with the VGED Recovery Team and approved by DCCEEW, taking into consideration the site's existing designation, and planning and development status. The conservation management plan will inform in-situ management opportunities and follow appropriate protocols to capture ecological learnings and contribute to the genetic diversity of relevant captive breeding programs.

Implementation for survey, enhancement, and management of VGED habitat, to identify undetected populations, restore and protect habitat and connectivity

The planning and development status of land within the MSA Program area will shape the survey timing and approach, and subsequent avoidance, mitigation, management and conservation actions. These are as follows:

For land designated a conservation area or offset reserve:

- Survey of VGED habitat to identify undetected populations, restore and protect habitat and connectivity, as discussed above will occur as land is secured, or earlier where access is granted by landowners.
- Management of any new population detected will be guided by the *Rediscovery response protocol for a listed GED* and further guidance as detailed in the National Recovery Plan. Any new population will be managed in-situ.
- Regardless of species presence, VGED habitat within the conservation areas and offset reserves will be restored and managed in accordance with the relevant conservation management plans to ensure the amount, quality, connectivity and extent of habitat is increased. Land identified as priority reintroduction sites (including release locations for the Zoos Victoria Conservation Breeding Program) will be prioritised. On-going monitoring of habitat and protected grassland communities will inform adaptive management actions.
- Existing conservation management plans will be updated to include VGED management actions as considered in the National Recovery Plan.
- New conservation management plans will include VGED management actions as considered in the National Recovery Plan.
- A coordinated and integrated VGED monitoring program of new populations and any translocated populations will be established and endorsed by DCCEEW. The endorsed monitoring program will be incorporated into the MSA Program Monitoring and Reporting Framework.

For all other land outside a conservation area or offset reserve:

1. Scenario 1: *Prior to exhibition of Planning Scheme Amendment for the PSP*

- Impacts to any VGED and habitat to be avoided and minimised where possible.
- Survey of VGED habitat to identify undetected populations, restore and protect habitat and connectivity, as discussed above will occur.
- Where access is provided by landowners, habitat attribute assessments and targeted VGED surveys, as outlined, will be undertaken prior to the PSP preparation.
- Where access is not granted, standard planning controls will be included in the PSP planning ordinance. The controls will condition that prior to works, access be provided to enable mitigation actions to be undertaken consistent with Scenario 2 (see below).
- Management of any population found will be guided by the *Rediscovery response protocol for a listed GED* as detailed in the National Recovery Plan. In the first instance, any found population will be managed in-situ while a conservation management plan is prepared in consultation with the VGED Recovery Team and approved by DCCEEW.
- The development of the conservation management plan for the re-discovered population and the preparation of the precinct structure plan will consider:
 - The value and viability of an area for persistence and recovery of the new population in the context of the habitat patch size and connectivity, and future land use and threats to VGED.
 - Opportunities to amend existing conservation boundaries to include or improve connectivity and support persistence and recovery of any identified populations.
- Where in-situ management is viable, the conservation management plan will include actions to secure, protect and restore habitat and connectivity.
- Where in-situ retention of the population is determined not viable the conservation management plan will include actions for individuals to be translocated, once successfully demonstrated for the species, to support reintroductions into protected habitat. Salvage operations may be considered, for the maintenance and expansion of the VGED ex-situ recovery program, as required.

2. Scenario 2: *Post exhibition of Planning Scheme Amendment for the PSP; planning permit not issued*

- Impacts to any VGED and habitat are to be minimised.
- Where access is provided by landowners, habitat attribute assessments and targeted VGED surveys, where appropriate, will be undertaken prior to a planning permit being issued. Where access is not granted prior to the issue of a planning permit, access for translocation (salvage and/or reintroduction) will be facilitated through standard planning permit conditions and undertaken prior to works commencing.
- Management of any VGED populations found will be guided by the *Rediscovery response protocol for a listed GED* as detailed in the National Recovery Plan. Where timing allows, any found population will be managed in-situ until development commences. A conservation management plan will be prepared, and approved by DCCEEW, to guide in-situ management.
- Prior to on-ground works commencing individuals will be translocated for reintroduction into VGED habitat, once successfully demonstrated for the species, or salvaged to support maintenance and expansion of the ex-situ recovery program, as required.

3. **Scenario 3:** *Post exhibition of Planning Scheme Amendment for the PSP; planning permit already issued*

- Impacts to any VGED and habitat likely to be unavoidable. Salvage, where necessary, should be considered as an emergency protocol.
- Habitat attribute assessments, and where appropriate, targeted VGED surveys will be facilitated by DEECA in accordance with the endorsed approach.
- DEECA will work with landowners to gain voluntary access to the land. Where access is provided, habitat attribute assessments and targeted VGED surveys, where appropriate, will be undertaken prior to works commencing in undeveloped areas. DEECA will work with landowners to ensure that activities do not impede existing development timelines.
- If a VGED population is identified, the short-term actions of the *Rediscovery response protocol for a listed GED* as detailed in the National Recovery Plan will be applied.
- Prior to on-ground works commencing individuals will be salvaged to support maintenance and expansion of the ex-situ recovery program, as required, or reintroduced into VGED habitat, once successfully demonstrated for the species.

Under all scenarios DEECA will consider, where relevant and in consultation with relevant stakeholders, opportunities to secure any identified viable population on a voluntary basis, prioritising land unavailable for urban development (e.g. land required for open space or drainage).

Translocation requirements

The *Salvage and Translocation Protocol for Melbourne's Growth Corridors* and associated spatial mapping on the MSA Map Share tool will be updated to reflect the VGED translocation approach agreed between DCCEEW and DEECA.

- Translocation (salvage and/or reintroduction) will be facilitated by DEECA in accordance with the translocation approach agreed to between DEECA, the VGED Recovery Team and DCCEEW.
- Where individuals are to be salvaged, a plan will be prepared in accordance with the *Salvage and Translocation Protocol for Melbourne's Growth Corridors* in addition to any State regulatory requirements. This will be facilitated by DEECA, and salvaged individuals will support maintenance and expansion of the ex-situ recovery program, as required.
- Where individuals are to be reintroduced, a plan will be prepared in accordance with the *Salvage and Translocation Protocol for Melbourne's Growth Corridors* and authorised under relevant State regulatory requirements. VGED individuals will be reintroduced to areas that support persistence and recovery of VGED within protected conservation areas or reserves, or other locations to be determined in consultation with DCCEEW. Reintroduction sites will be selected where they contribute to conservation outcomes for VGED.

Managing and monitoring populations

Site-specific conservation management plans will include actions to record any detected population, manage in-situ where relevant, and monitor VGED and the important habitat attributes of the site, and will include management of in-situ and reintroduced populations. Information collected will be used to:

- improve and inform adaptive management measures for VGED
- refine and update models, decision making tools, and relevant plans and protocols for VGED, and
- identify and inform the management and preparation of additional potential reintroduction sites for VGED.

VGED monitoring activities will be incorporated into the MSA Monitoring and Reporting Framework.