

**Clearing of 477 hectares of native vegetation on
Victoria Location 10335, Marchagee - Coomallo
Road, Shire of Dandaragan**

Mr R Klaassen

**Report and recommendations
of the Environmental Protection Authority**

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Summary and recommendations

The proponent, Mr R Klaassen, proposes to clear approximately 477 hectares of native vegetation on Victoria Location 10335, Shire of Dandaragan for agriculture and / or plantation forestry. This report provides the Environmental Protection Authority's (EPA's) advice and recommendations to the Minister for the Environment on the environmental factors relevant to the proposal.

Section 44 of the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* requires the EPA to report to the Minister on the environmental factors relevant to the proposal and on the conditions and procedures to which the proposal should be subject, if implemented. In addition, the EPA may make recommendations as it sees fit.

This report has been prepared for the Minister for Environment and Heritage on the basis of information provided by staff of relevant government agencies in the absence of any technical information on potential environmental impacts being required to be provided by the proponent.

Relevant environmental factors

Based on the available information, It is the EPA's opinion that the following are the environmental factors relevant to the proposal, which require detailed evaluation in this report:

- (a) Bioregional conservation; and
- (b) Significant flora.

Conclusion

The EPA has considered the proposal by Mr Klaassen to clear 477 ha of native vegetation on Victoria Location 10335 in terms of whether the proposal is able to meet the EPA's objectives for the environmental factors of:

- (a) Bioregional conservation; and
- (b) Significant flora.

The EPA has also taken into account its Position Statement on Environmental Protection of Native Vegetation in Western Australia.

The EPA has concluded that the proposal is unable to meet the EPA's objectives for Bioregional conservation. Further there is insufficient information available to advise that the proposal can meet the EPA objectives for Significant flora and that this could only be established through further investigations carried out or sponsored by the proponent. Under the circumstances the EPA does not consider this investigative work to be warranted for the present proposal.

The EPA is also aware that the proposal may obviate or lessen the effectiveness of the catchment restoration efforts of local landholders and funding obtained from the Commonwealth Natural Heritage Trust and, in the absence of any mechanism to effectively offset the proposed reduction in biodiversity, would be inconsistent with the Government's Bush Heritage Trust commitment to achieving the national goal of reversing the long term decline in the quality and extent of Australia's native vegetation cover by the year 2001.

The EPA has assessed a number of land clearing proposals in recent years. As a result of information derived from these assessments and growing scientific evidence of significant and broad scale environmental degradation and reduction of biodiversity in the agricultural region resulting from the clearing of native vegetation, the EPA has formed the view that any further reduction in native vegetation in this region through agricultural clearing cannot be supported.

The EPA has therefore concluded that the proposal by Mr Klaassen to clear 477 ha of native vegetation on Victoria Location 10335 is environmentally unacceptable and should not be implemented.

The EPA considers however, that should Mr Klaassen put forward a proposal for clearing of a small proportion of the native vegetation on the property in order to facilitate improved

efficiency of management, this could be considered, provided that formal mechanisms for long term protection of the majority of the native vegetation on the property (such as an Agreement to Reserve under the provisions of the Soil and Land Conservation Act) are committed to, as part of the new proposal.

The EPA is mindful that its position on the protection of native vegetation is consistent with the Government's election policy statement on land clearing.

The Government is encouraged to expand on its election policy statement, giving attention to both landholder equity and the administrative arrangements for processing land clearing applications in a more efficient manner.

Recommendations

Section 44 of the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* requires the EPA to report to the Minister on the environmental factors relevant to the proposal and on the conditions and procedures to which the proposal should be subject, if implemented. In addition, the EPA may make recommendations as it sees fit.

The EPA submits the following recommendations to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage:

1. The Minister considers the report on the relevant environmental factors of Bioregional conservation and Significant flora as set out in Section 4 of this report, including the EPA's conclusion that the proposal is unable to meet the EPA's objectives for Bioregional conservation and that there is insufficient information available to advise that the proposal can meet the EPA objectives for Significant flora.
2. The Minister notes the EPA's advice that as a result of growing scientific evidence of significant and broad scale environmental degradation and reduction of biodiversity in the agricultural area resulting from the clearing of native vegetation, the EPA has adopted the general position that from the environmental perspective, any further reduction in native vegetation through clearing for agriculture within this area cannot be supported.
3. The Minister notes that as a result of the advice referred to in 1 and 2 above, the proposal to clear 477 ha of native vegetation on Location 10335, which relates to land within the agricultural region, is environmentally unacceptable and should not be implemented.
4. The Minister notes that the EPA would be prepared to consider a referral for a new proposal to clear a small area of native vegetation on Location 10335, which would allow for the majority of the remaining native vegetation on the property to be protected in perpetuity within an Agreement to Reserve under the provisions of the Soil and Land Conservation Act. Such a proposal may be found to be environmental acceptable.

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1. Introduction and background

This report is to provide advice and recommendations of the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage on a proposal to clear native vegetation for agricultural purposes in the West Midlands area.

The proponent, Mr R Klaassen, proposes to clear approximately 477 ha of native vegetation on Victoria Location 10335 which is located on Marchagee-Coomallo Road within the Shire of Dandaragan.

A Notice of Intent to Clear (NOIC) for Location 10335 was received by the Commissioner of Soil and Land Conservation in August 1997. The proposal was forwarded to the Level 3 'Inter Agency Working Group (IAWG)' for consideration in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding for the Protection of Remnant Vegetation on Private Land in the Agricultural Region of Western Australia (MoU, 1997). The IAWG considered that there was potential for the proposal to have a significant impact on the environment and referred the proposal to the EPA in December 1997. The EPA determined that the potential environmental impacts were sufficient for the proposal to be formally assessed under the provisions of Part IV of the *Environmental Protection Act 1986*, in April 1998.

Further details of the proposal are presented in Section 2 of this report. Section 3 discusses the strategic context for consideration of the proposal, Section 4 discusses the environmental factors relevant to the proposal, Section 5 presents the EPA's conclusions, and Section 6 the EPA's recommendations.

2. The proposal

The proponent, Mr R Klaassen, proposes to clear approximately 477 hectares of native vegetation on Victoria Location 10335, which is located 30 kilometres (kms) north-west of Badgingarra within the Shire of Dandaragan, on the Marchagee - Coomallo Road (see Figure 1). It is intended that the cleared land will be used for agriculture (grazing sheep and cattle, and cropping) and / or forestry using deep rooted perennial species such as Maritime Pine, *Pinus pinaster* or Tagasaste, *Chamaecytisus palmensis*.

The areas of native vegetation on the property (including those areas proposed for clearing under this proposal) are shown in Figure 2. A total of approximately 73 ha of native vegetation (approximately 5 %) would remain on the property after the proposed clearing.

Table 1 presents the key characteristics of the proposal in relation to affected vegetation types and the Department of Agriculture's Soil/ Landscape Systems.

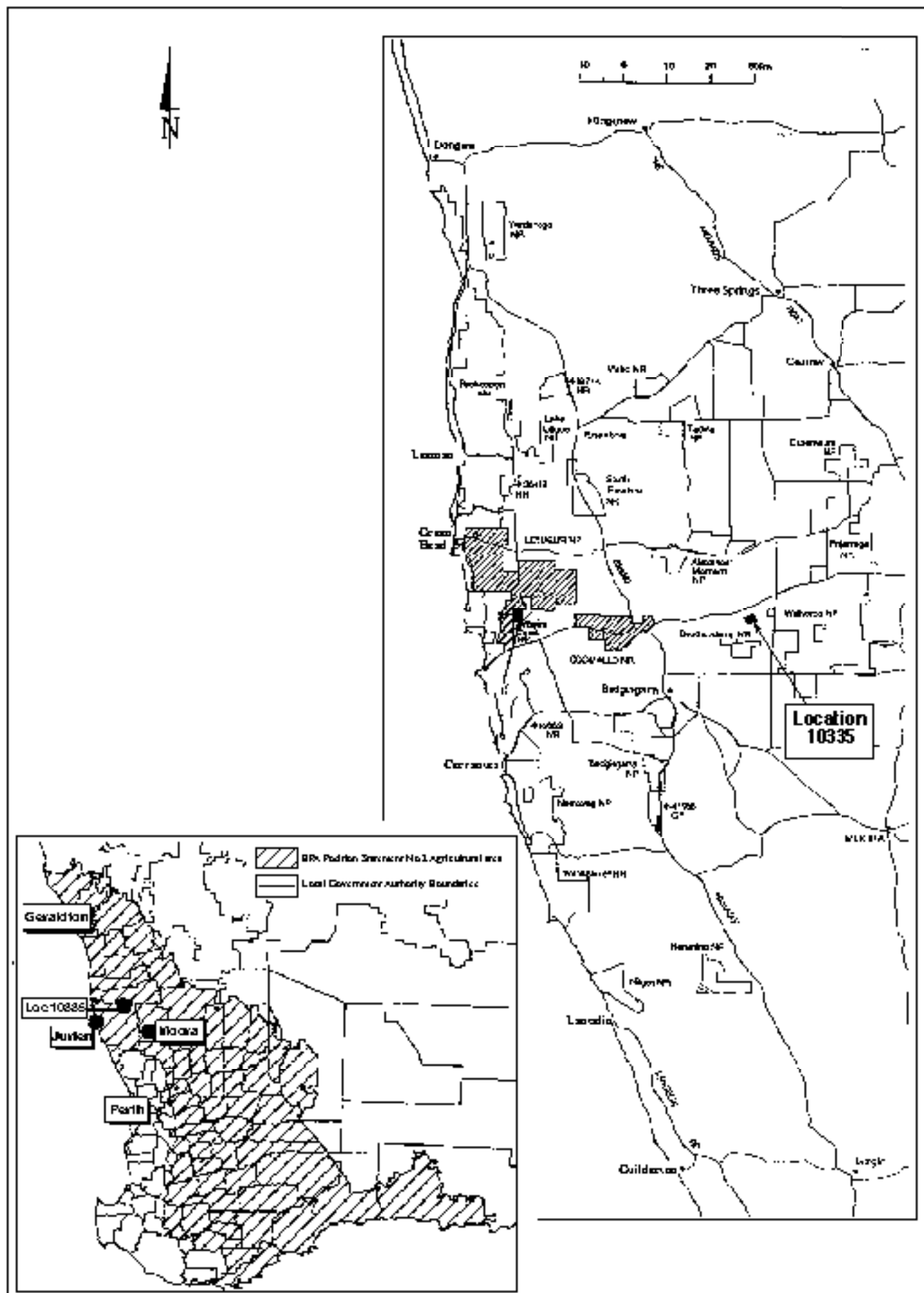


Figure 1. Locality of Victoria Location 10335 Shire of Dandaragan.

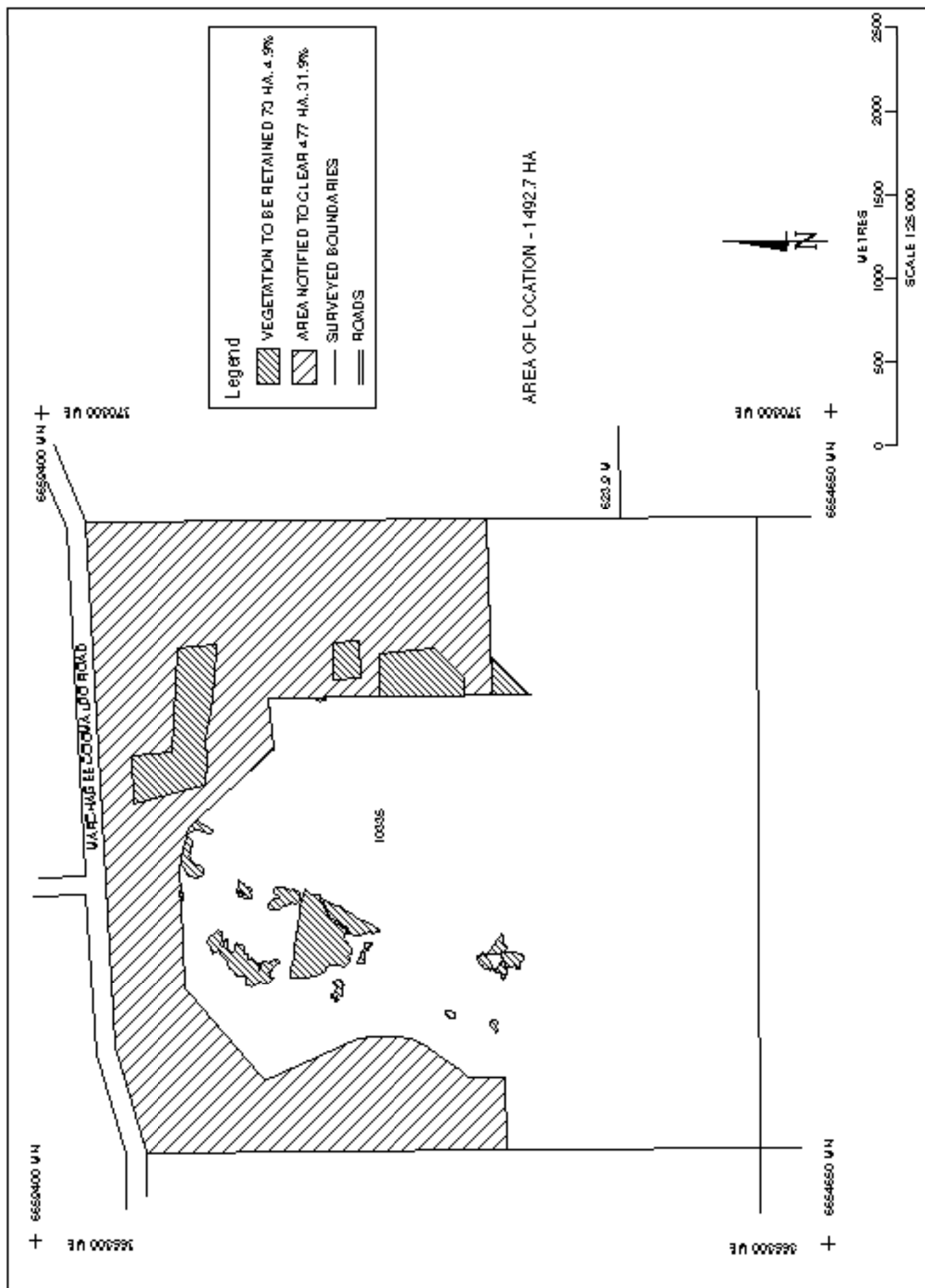


Figure 2. Notice of Intent to Clear for Location 10335.

Table 1. Summary of key proposal characteristics: Notice of Intent to Clear No 83/97: Mr R Klaassen 5 September 1997

Element	Description
Total area of property	1492.7 hectares
Area of property currently uncleared	Approximately 550 hectares (37%)
Area to be cleared (area estimated by Agriculture WA)	Approximately 477 hectares (32%)
Area of native vegetation estimated remaining after proposed clearing	Approximately 73 hectares (5%)
Area of native vegetation proposed to be protected under an Agreement To Reserve (ATR)	0 hectares
Purpose of clearing	Agriculture and /or plantation forestry
Condition of vegetation	The Department of Agriculture Level 2 report on the NOIC indicates that the vegetation is 'intact' and that there is little evidence of invasive weed species.
Description of the Beard vegetation type to be cleared	<i>Mosaic: Shrublands; dryandra heath / Shrublands; hakea scrub heath</i> (from Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) & Department of Agriculture GIS data)
Total representation in (IUCN Category I to IV) reserves of the Beard vegetation type to be cleared	Approximately 35009 hectares or 13% of the estimated Pre-European extent (Hopkins et al, 1996)
Total mapped extent of Beard vegetation type now supporting woody vegetation (any condition)	Approximately 91562 hectares or 34% of Pre-European extent (DEP, CALM, Department of Agriculture GIS data)
Soil / Landscape System for the vegetation to be cleared (Agriculture WA data)	<i>Coalara System</i> (Department of Agriculture GIS data)
Total mapped extent of Soil / Landscape System now supporting woody vegetation (any condition)	Approximately 86655 hectares or 43% of the total area of the System (Department of Agriculture GIS data)
Proportion of Soil Landscape System in conservation reserves (IUCN Category I to IV)	Approximately 17400 hectares or 8.5% of the System (CALM, Department of Agriculture GIS data)

3. Strategic context

3.1 The development of Government policy on clearing of native vegetation

It is now well recognised that broad-scale land clearing and consequential hydrological changes, including salinity, have had a dramatic effect on biodiversity in the agricultural area through the direct loss of vegetation communities and plant species, and the associated loss of mammals, birds, and other animals which depend upon large enough areas of healthy bush for food and shelter. These impacts have been reported in both the State and Commonwealth State of the Environment reporting (Government of Western Australian 1998, Commonwealth of Australia, 1998a).

In response to impacts on biological diversity and nature conservation, as well as land and water degradation, the State and Commonwealth Governments have over recent years developed and implemented various policy positions and programs to provide a strategic context for the protection of remnant vegetation.

These include:

- *Western Australian State Government position on land clearing (Government of Western Australia, 1995);*

- *National Strategy for the Conservation of Australia's Biological Diversity (Commonwealth of Australia 1996);*
- *Memorandum of Understanding for the protection of native vegetation on private land in the agricultural region of Western Australia (MOU 1997);*
- *Natural Heritage Trust partnership agreement, Western Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 1997);*
- *Commonwealth State of the Environment Report (Commonwealth of Australia 1998a);*
- *Western Australian State of the Environment report (Government of Western Australia, 2000);*
- *WA Salinity Strategy (Government of Western Australia, 2000; and*
- *National Greenhouse Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998b).*

In addition, the Government's 2001 election policy statements provided information on agricultural land clearing as follows:

- The clearing of remnant native vegetation is one of the main pressures on biodiversity as well as contributing to salinity and other forms of land degradation.
- Clearing native vegetation within the agricultural area is generally not acceptable other than relatively small areas where alternative mechanisms for biodiversity are addressed.
- Applications for clearing should be assessed on their scientific merits.
- Preventing farmers from clearing remnant native vegetation raises issues of equity which must be addressed.

While the EPA recognises the importance of the resolution of equity issues relating to farmer proponents it is unable to consider these issues in undertaking environmental assessments under Part IV of the Environmental Protection Act.

3.2 The EPA's position on environmental protection of native vegetation

The EPA has assessed a number of land clearing proposals over recent years.

Based on the issues arising from information presented during these assessments, the strategic framework provided by Government policy positions and programs referred to, and general scientific information which has become available on the potential cumulative impacts of broadscale clearing on the environment, the EPA has developed Position Statement Number 2 regarding 'Environmental Protection of Native Vegetation in Western Australian' (EPA, 2000).

Specifically in relation to the 'Agricultural area', as illustrated in Figure 1 of Position Statement No 2, the EPA's current position on clearing in the region includes the following:

1. *Significant clearing of native vegetation has already occurred on agricultural land, and this has led to a reduction in biodiversity and increase in land salinisation. Accordingly, from an environmental perspective any further reduction in native vegetation through clearing for agriculture cannot be supported.*
2. *All existing remnant native vegetation should be protected from passive clearing through, for example, grazing by stock or clearing by other means such as use of chemicals including fertilisers.*
3. *All existing remnant native vegetation should be actively managed by landholders and managers so as to maintain environmental values.*
4. *Because of the extent of over clearing in the agricultural area, development of revegetation strategies at a landscape level, including the provision of stepping stones, linkages and corridors of native vegetation should be a priority.*
5. *Clearing of deep rooted native vegetation for replacement with non native deep rooted crops (eg Tagasaste or bluegums) is generally not regarded as acceptable and these alternative deep rooted crops should be planted on already cleared land."*

The EPA recognises that this position extends beyond the State Government position of 1995, which removed the presumed right to clear native vegetation in landscapes containing less than 20% of the original vegetation. The criterion of 20% vegetation related primarily to land degradation impacts and does not adequately provide for nature conservation and biological diversity considerations. Understanding of the need to protect remnant vegetation for nature conservation and biological diversity values has advanced since the 1995 State Government position as reflected in the policy and strategy initiatives listed above.

The EPA also recognises that in addition to being within the agricultural region as referred to in EPA Position Statement Number 2, the present clearing proposal is located in the Shire of Dandaragan, where there is approximately 50% of the original vegetation cover remaining. Much of the area of the Dandaragan Shire however (including the location of the present proposal) is located within the Geraldton Sandplains IBRA Bioregion (Thackway & Creswell, 1995) which has long been recognised as having very high nature conservation and biological diversity values (eg Burbidge et al, 1990).

EPA Bulletin 424 (Burbidge et al, 1990) describes the significance of the vegetation in the nearby Mt Lesueur area, which has been identified as an area of world, national, State and regional conservation significance, as do subsequent EPA reports relating to agricultural land clearing such as EPA Bulletin 894 (EPA, 1998). Importantly, Bulletin 894 states that the major characteristics of the region include its high number of endemic plants, species richness of vascular plants and vertebrate animals, and diverse vegetation associations and communities.

For this reason and because other parts of the region contain primarily cleared landscapes, that portion of the Geraldton Sandplains Bioregion outside the rangeland pastoral zone has been included in the 'Agricultural area' defined in the EPA's Position Statement No 2.

Victoria Location 10335 lies within the agricultural area as defined by Position Statement No 2.

The proposal outlined in the NOIC which was referred to the EPA, envisages that some of the area to be cleared may be used to establish Tagasaste or other deep rooted perennial crops. As stated in the Position Statement, clearing of deep rooted native vegetation for replacement with non native deep rooted crops (eg Tagasaste or bluegums) is generally not regarded by the EPA as being environmentally acceptable and these alternative deep rooted crops should be planted on already cleared land.

The EPA holds strongly to its view, in relation to clearing within the Agricultural area, that the challenge for Government is to establish a response to the equity issue as soon as possible, rather than to continue to allow further clearing.

3.3 The Natural Heritage Trust and local conservation initiatives

The EPA is aware that substantial funding from the Commonwealth Natural Heritage Trust has been obtained by landholders within the Boothendarra sub-catchment (within which the proposal is located) for revegetation initiatives. The EPA is therefore concerned that further clearing of native vegetation may obviate or lessen the effectiveness of the expenditure of these funds and related expenditure of money and effort by landholders. Furthermore, the EPA is aware that all Australian Governments, including Western Australia, have committed themselves through the agreement in relation to the Bush Heritage Trust, to achieving the national goal of reversing the long term decline in the quality and extent of Australia's native vegetation cover by the year 2001. Allowing further substantial clearing within a sub-catchment where funds and efforts are being expended to re-establish or protect native vegetation, without an appropriate offset contribution by the landholder, would be inconsistent with the Bush Heritage Trust commitment.

4. Environmental factors

4.1 Relevant environmental factors

Section 44 of the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* requires the EPA to report to the Minister on the environmental factors relevant to the proposal and on the conditions and procedures to which the proposal should be subject, if implemented. In addition, the EPA may make recommendations as it sees fit.

This report has been prepared for the Minister for the Environment and Heritage on the basis of information provided by staff of relevant government agencies in the absence of any technical information on potential environmental impacts being required to be provided by the proponent.

Based on the available information, It is the EPA's opinion that the following are the environmental factors relevant to the proposal, which require detailed evaluation in this report:

- (a) Bioregional conservation; and
- (b) Significant flora.

In assessing this proposal, the EPA utilised information and advice from a range of Government agencies. In particular, information was sought from Mr Ted Griffin, an experienced botanist working within the Department of Agriculture, who has undertaken a number of extensive documented surveys of vegetation, soils and landscapes within the Geraldton Sandplains Bioregion.

The relevant environmental factors are discussed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3 of this report.

4.2 Bioregional conservation

Description

Flora biodiversity and species richness

The EPA has been advised that the areas of native vegetation within the proposal area occurring on sand and gravel soils are likely to support heath and scrub heath plant communities with species richness levels in the order of 50 species per 100m². According to Griffin (pers comm, 1998) the locality of the proposal is associated with plant communities with moderate to high levels of species richness. In view of this species richness and the location of the proposal within the Geraldton Sandplains Bioregion as described in Section 3.2 of this report, the EPA considers that the level of significance of the vegetation in the local area, in the Western Australian context is high.

Viability of remnants proposed for protection

The majority of vegetation remaining on the property occurs in one large irregularly shaped remnant adjoining Marchagee-Coomallo Road but some also occurs within a number of other very small areas (Figure 2). The proposal would result in a majority of native vegetation within the large remnant being cleared, with several small areas within the main remnant and elsewhere on the property not being cleared. The total area of native vegetation on the property remaining uncleared if the proposal was implemented is estimated at 73 hectares (5% of the property area) which would be distributed between 15 separate remnants ranging in size from less than 1 hectare to 30 hectares. These areas are unlikely to be viable for the protection of native vegetation in the long term due to their small size, high perimeter to area ratio, low level of interconnectedness and lack of linkage to larger remnants on adjacent land.

The EPA considers that the small, unconnected remnants proposed for retention would have relatively low value as habitat and very low long-term conservation viability. Therefore the proposal would result in an environmentally significant reduction in the conservation value of native vegetation remaining on Location 10335.

The EPA recognises that a very large area of native vegetation is located immediately to the property and north of Marchagee Coomallo Road within the 'Big Soak Plains' Crown Reserve. This matter is discussed further below.

Regional representation of vegetation types

The native vegetation on Location 10335 is described by Beard (1979) as *Mosaic: Shrublands; dryandra heath / Shrublands; hakea scrub heath*. Based on an analysis of digital mapping by Hopkins et al (1996) and 1996 Department of Agriculture data on occurrence of 'woody vegetation' approximately 91562 hectares or 34% of the Pre-European extent of this vegetation type, now supports 'woody vegetation'. However, the quality of the areas of 'woody vegetation' mapped within this dataset is highly variable, incorporating aggregations of trees and degraded native vegetation with a limited understorey component, as well as intact native bushland. The information used in the dataset is also approximately 5 years old and therefore the current area of intact native vegetation with long-term viability for biodiversity conservation is likely to be significantly less than this figure.

Hopkins et al (1996) estimated that approximately 35 009 hectares or 13% of the estimated Pre-European extent of the *Mosaic: Shrublands; dryandra heath / Shrublands; hakea scrub heath* vegetation type occurs in current secure nature conservation reserves (Nature Reserves, National parks and Conservation Parks). This would increase to 18% with the inclusion of the 25 600 hectare parcel of unallocated Crown Land immediately north of Marchagee-Coomallo Road known as the 'Big Soak Plains' in the conservation reserve system. Approximately 12 700 hectares (approximately 50%) of the Big Soak Plains area is mapped as supporting the *Mosaic: Shrublands; dryandra heath / Shrublands; hakea scrub heath* vegetation type.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) has advised that negotiations to have part or the whole of the Big Soak Plains area added to the nature conservation reserve system are proceeding. The area may therefore become a conservation reserve vested in the Conservation Commission of Western Australia within the next few years.

Within the Geraldton Sandplains Bioregion, the geographic database of Soil / Landscape Systems also provides indicative information on the distribution of plant communities. Within the Geraldton Sandplains, the distribution of plant communities (defined in terms of floristic composition) has been demonstrated to be closely related to Department of Agriculture's soil-landscape mapping (Griffin pers comm.). This mapping is more detailed than Beard's vegetation and maps cleared and uncleared areas equally well. Therefore the level of protection of native vegetation occurring within the area covered by each Soil / Landscape System provides an indicator of the level of biodiversity conservation which is complementary to that provided by evaluation using Beard (1979) vegetation types.

The vegetation proposed to be cleared is within the Coalara Soil/ Landscape system. Approximately 43% of the area of this system is estimated to support woody vegetation based on GIS analysis and approximately 20% of this vegetation (8.5% of the original area of vegetation which occurred within the System) occurs within secure nature conservation reserves (CALM, Department of Agriculture GIS data).

Assessment

The overall extent remaining of woody vegetation mapped as occurring within the Beard vegetation type and Soil / Landscape System affected by this proposal appears to be slightly above the 30% minimum threshold level below which species loss appears to accelerate exponentially at an ecosystem level, as referred to in EPA Position Statement No 2. In view of the uncertainties associated with predicting the extent of viable intact native vegetation on the basis of the 'woody vegetation' dataset, however, the EPA takes the view that further loss of native vegetation mapped as occurring within the *Mosaic: Shrublands; dryandra heath / Shrublands; hakea scrub heath* vegetation type may result in the overall extent of viable intact native vegetation of this type (or the associated plant communities) being reduced to below 30% of their Pre-European extent. The EPA considers that this would be environmentally unacceptable.

Additionally in view of the moderate to high species diversity of the area and the low viability of the native vegetation areas which would remain after the proposed clearing, the EPA views the proposal as being one which has the potential for significant adverse environmental impacts and a further reduction in the contribution of native vegetation in the area to biodiversity conservation in the region.

Accordingly, the EPA is of the view that the proposal is unable to meet the EPA's objectives for Bioregional conservation.

4.3 Significant flora

Description

Advice on the presence of Declared Rare Flora (DRF) and priority flora was provided to the Commissioner of Soil and Land Conservation by CALM. This information has been forwarded to the EPA for consideration as part of this assessment.

CALM has advised that there is one population of DRF and thirteen populations of priority flora taxa in the vicinity of the proposed clearing. As the vegetation in the vicinity is similar woodland, heath and scrub heath to that found on the property, there is a likelihood that populations of DRF or priority flora may also be present on the property. A botanical survey of the area of native vegetation proposed for clearance has not been carried out. Therefore the EPA is of the view that there is insufficient information available to advise that the proposal can meet the EPA objectives for Significant flora and that this could only be established through further investigations carried out or sponsored by the proponent. Under the circumstances the EPA does not consider this investigative work to be warranted for the present proposal.

Assessment

The EPA is unable to establish whether the proposal can meet the EPA's objectives for Significant flora. However, given the likelihood that populations of DRF and priority flora may be present within the clearing area, the EPA is of the view that the proposal could not be judged to meet the EPA objectives for this factor unless this is established by investigations carried out or sponsored by the proponent. In view of the EPA's general position in relation to clearing of native vegetation within the Agricultural area as set out in Position Statement No 2, and the level of significance of the vegetation types present as discussed in section 4.2, the EPA does not consider this investigative work to be warranted for the present proposal.

5. Conclusions

The EPA has considered the proposal by Mr Klaassen to clear 477 ha of native vegetation on Victoria Location 10335.

The EPA has considered the proposal in terms of whether the proposal is able to meet the EPA's objectives for the environmental factors of:

- (a) Bioregional conservation; and
- (b) Significant flora.

The EPA has also taken into account its Position Statement on Environmental Protection of Native Vegetation in Western Australia.

The EPA has concluded that the proposal is unable to meet the EPA's objectives for Bioregional conservation. Further there is insufficient information available to advise that the proposal can meet the EPA objectives for Significant flora and that this could only be established through further investigations carried out or sponsored by the proponent. Under the circumstances the EPA does not consider this investigative work to be warranted for the present proposal.

The EPA is also aware that the proposal may obviate or lessen the effectiveness of the catchment restoration efforts of local landholders and funding obtained from the

Commonwealth Natural Heritage Trust and, in the absence of any mechanism to effectively offset the proposed reduction in biodiversity, would be inconsistent with the Government's Bush Heritage Trust commitment to achieving the national goal of reversing the long term decline in the quality and extent of Australia's native vegetation cover by the year 2001.

The EPA has assessed a number of land clearing proposals in recent years. As a result of information derived from these assessments and growing scientific evidence of significant and broad scale environmental degradation and reduction of biodiversity in the agricultural region resulting from the clearing of native vegetation, the EPA has formed the view that any further reduction in native vegetation in this region through agricultural clearing cannot be supported.

The EPA has therefore concluded that the proposal by Mr Klaassen to clear 477 ha of native vegetation on Victoria Location 10335 is environmentally unacceptable and should not be implemented.

The EPA considers however, that should Mr Klaassen put forward a proposal for clearing of a small proportion of the native vegetation on the property in order to facilitate improved efficiency of management, this could be considered, provided that formal mechanisms for long term protection of the majority of the native vegetation on the property (such as an Agreement to Reserve under the provisions of the Soil and Land Conservation Act) are committed to, as part of the new proposal.

The EPA is mindful that its position on the protection of native vegetation is consistent with the Government's election policy statement on land clearing.

The Government is encouraged to expand on its election policy statement, giving attention to both landholder equity and the administrative arrangements for processing land clearing applications in a more efficient manner.

6. Recommendations

Section 44 of the *Environmental Protection Act 1986* requires the EPA to report to the Minister on the environmental factors relevant to the proposal and on the conditions and procedures to which the proposal should be subject, if implemented. In addition, the EPA may make recommendations as it sees fit.

The EPA submits the following recommendations to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage:

1. The Minister considers the report on the relevant environmental factors of Bioregional conservation and Significant flora as set out in Section 4 of this report, including the EPA's conclusion that the proposal is unable to meet the EPA's objectives for Bioregional conservation and that there is insufficient information available to advise that the proposal can meet the EPA objectives for Significant flora.
2. The Minister notes the EPA's advice that as a result of growing scientific evidence of significant and broad scale environmental degradation and reduction of biodiversity in the agricultural area resulting from the clearing of native vegetation, the EPA has adopted the general position that from the environmental perspective, any further reduction in native vegetation through clearing for agriculture within this area cannot be supported.
3. The Minister notes that as a result of the advice referred to in 1 and 2 above, the proposal to clear 477 ha of native vegetation on Location 10335, which relates to land within the agricultural region, is environmentally unacceptable and should not be implemented.
4. The Minister notes that the EPA would be prepared to consider a referral for a new proposal to clear a small area of native vegetation on Location 10335, which would allow for the majority of the remaining native vegetation on the property to be protected in perpetuity within an Agreement to Reserve under the provisions of the Soil and Land Conservation Act. Such a proposal may be found to be environmental acceptable.

Appendix 1

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