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Sustainable Agriculture Essential to Green Wedge Survival

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Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — In May the house received a report on an *Inquiry into Sustainable Development of Agribusiness in Outer Suburban Melbourne*.

Unfortunately last week the government delivered its response through the decision to expand the urban growth boundary, which will see a reduction of roughly 7 per cent in the area available for the development of agribusiness in outer suburban Melbourne.

I make the point that it is not always inappropriate to consider expanding the urban growth boundary, but any decision must be assessed against a robust policy framework, and this report identifies very clearly the complete and utter absence of any framework, let alone a robust framework. I recognise the contribution of the members for Bass and Kilsyth and my honourable friend Mr Guy, a member for Northern Metropolitan Region in the other place, for the work they have done on this inquiry. I also acknowledge the work of the committee as a whole. It is a report of admirable depth and it assesses the issues effectively.

In 2002 we saw the introduction of the green wedge policy — that is, a huge expansion of land area being “protected” by planning controls. Unfortunately it was done without the necessary detailed planning which needed to be done as part of the process.

One of the outcomes of that — and I have railed about this frequently in the house — is the absence of protection for landscape that unfortunately followed from that decision, was an effective weakening of the controls. Eight years on from the announcements and seven years on from the incorporation of clause 57 into the Victorian planning provisions, there is no comprehensive strategy for the green wedge and no comprehensive implementation plan. In the words of the committee, the government has adopted a ‘set and forget’ attitude.

The report makes it very plain that green wedge zones are too often seen as a negative in a state policy sense. There is no overarching vision; there is no attempt to establish activities that could take place in a worthwhile manner. It is about what you cannot do, except that the other side of this issue is the government’s willingness to keep moving the goalposts.

What has flowed from that is an expectation amongst landowners, land bankers and developers that much, if not all, the green wedge is simply land that is reserved for further urban expansion.

This constant shifting of the goalposts and creation of an expectation of urban development that is very strong in some quarters have occurred because there is no comprehensive plan. The lack of a comprehensive plan means that landowners, particularly farmers who have a commitment to the land, are not able to plan for the long term.

There is a reference in the report to a landowner who cared very deeply about where he lived. He had a generational commitment to the land and wanted to plant trees and develop his property, but in the end he could not bring himself to do that because planting trees may impact on the value of the land for urban development in 20 years time.

There is a situation in the green wedge where caravan parks are a permitted use. Caravan parks have become de facto residential areas, and are permitted, yet at the same time Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal is telling people they cannot build a house on their own land, even if they have a title, despite the fact they often want to engage in legitimate agricultural pursuits.

The Melbourne 2030 reference group reported that the urban growth boundary should not be moved where key values, including agriculture, require protection. Yet last sitting week the urban growth boundary was moved, wiping out a large slab of highly valuable agricultural land in the south-east.

The report identifies a number of challenges including the shortage of planners, the challenge of rural urban classification and the government's failure to respond in a meaningful fashion to the committee's previous reports on that issue. It also identifies opportunities, particularly opportunities from the availability of water from the south-eastern treatment plant that I have spoken of before.

The green wedge stakeholders in the wider community face many challenges. The report makes it plain that despite eight years and unprecedented funds, the government has failed to act. Unless there is a strong and appropriate plan for green wedges, they may well be lost for future generations.