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# Alarm over Mitchell Shire push to impose conservation overlays on farmland



By [Andrew Miller](#)

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 Bullock fattener Leone Ryan, Kerami, Pyalong, says she believes all her land will be covered by one of the proposed SLOs. Picture by Andrew Miller

Farmers in the Mitchell Shire, north of Melbourne, have described plans to significantly expand conservation overlays of prime agricultural land as "covert rezoning".

Mitchell Shire Council is considering a Landscape Assessment Study (LAS), which recommends adding more than 19,000 hectares of new Significant Landscape Overlays (SLO) in areas around Pyalong, Tooborac, Trawool and Mount Piper.

The proposed SLOs, overlays aiming to "identify, conserve and enhance" the character of significant landscapes, would require a permit to remove, destroy, or lop any native vegetation.

A new group opposing the changes, Protect Our Farms, claims 94 per cent of the overlays are proposed for privately owned land, which is currently zoned for farming.

"The application of SLOs to privately owned farming land could be perceived as a covert re-zoning effort, burdening large areas of agricultural land with conservation-like restrictions without undergoing formal rezoning processes," the group said.

"With the vast majority of the new SLO areas affecting privately held farming land, there is a significant risk of reduced agricultural productivity and increased regulatory burdens on landholders."

The proposed SLO's would see a 440 percent expansion of coverage from 1.98 percent of the shire to 8.76pc.

The number of landholders affected by the proposed SLOs, which will cover over 25,000 hectares, would rise by 180pc, from 156 to 439.

Protect Our Farms spokeswoman Rae Clark, Melbourne, said a vote on the proposed SLO's was expected later this month.

She said there was currently an SLO in the Tallarook area, but vegetation that had been there for less than 10 years could be cleared.

"Under the proposals, a dead tree falls down, and you need a permit to remove it," Ms Clark said.

"It's a state government push, is what they have told us."

She said a similar study had been done for [Macedon Ranges Shire Council](#), but it had dropped plans for overlays after farmer opposition.

Bass Coast Shire also tried to impose [stringent conditions on erection of fencing](#).

"It's too onerous - the guidelines to get a permit are 80 pages long," Ms Clark said.

Geoff Albers, who runs up to 600 head of Angus/Simmental-cross breeders and calves on 1820 hectares at Great Missenden, Tallarook, said the proposed new permit requirements were "unworkable".

"It is totally impractical to require a permit to carry out constant ongoing maintenance (eradication)," he told the council.

He said regrowth eucalypts and wattles were prevalent throughout Great Missenden and self seeded in pastures every year, requiring ongoing eradication.

"This year we had more than 5,000 Red Gum seedlings in a 10 acre area of our Upper Goulburn Road front paddock," he said.

Mr Albers said permit exemptions under the current SLOs, allowing for removal of vegetation that had been there for less than 10 years, should be retained.

"The council's materials make it seem like these changes are minor, but the reality is they will impose severe restrictions on how we can use our land." he said.

"It's part of this grand delusion about greening, these are green zealots."

Bullock fattener Leone Ryan, Kerami, Pyalong, said she believed all her land would be covered by the proposed SLO.

She said the SLO would make it much harder to sell her land, due to the restrictions imposed under the proposed overlay to preserve scenic landscapes.

"My whole farm would be under it, because they consider the Lancefield-Pyalong road the viewing platform, just like the Highplains road," she said.

"Not only do you go through council for all this rigmarole, you then go through the SLO board who have a tighter rigmarole than the council.

"Imagine the red tape - you would no more be able to build a building, somewhere near the road, because they would say it would restrict people's views.

"The tourists are more important than the farmers."

Mitchell Shire chief executive Brett Luxford said the LAS was a "crucial step" towards preserving the unique character of the shire's landscapes while supporting sustainable development.

"We are committed to ensuring that the Significant Landscape Overlay provisions appropriately balance the need to protect our regionally significant landscape areas with farming operations," he said.

"Our extensive community consultation process, which included 16 drop-in sessions and over 112 submissions, has been instrumental in shaping the final recommendations of the Landscape Assessment Study.

"I want to reassure our residents that the removal of native vegetation regrowth for fire safety, grazing, and cropping remains permitted under the Significant Landscape Overlay provisions.

"The upcoming council meeting on August 19 will be a significant milestone as we seek endorsement for the Landscape Assessment Study, reflecting the community's input and our commitment to balanced and sustainable landscape management."

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I'm a general reporter with Stock & Land, with a special interest in irrigation issues. I completed my cadetship, with the Age, in 1980. Over my career, I've worked for ABC radio news (Mt Isa, Qld) and at provincial and suburban newspapers.

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