



# RADIO INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

## Victorian Country Hour 8 August 2024

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[Warwick Long]

So the peri-urban areas around the city right now, those high-growth shires, and, well, one of the biggest, one of the ones planned for the post-growth, actually, around Melbourne over the decades ahead is the Mitchell Shire. But changes to planning rules there, so when you think Mitchell Shire, I think Beveridge, Seymour, Toobarac, Tallarook, Broadford, Wallan, Kilmore, that sort of area, has members of its farming community concerned. It's a long-running planning change that now only has farmers concerned.

They won't be allowed to run their businesses if it gets approved at a council meeting later this month. Joining me now on the program is Rae Clark and Geoff Albers out of Tallarook there, behind a big farming property there. Rae, I'll start with you first, if that's okay.

Can you tell us what's going on in the shire and what's behind these planning changes?

[Rae Clark]

Yeah, thanks, Warwick. Look, Mitchell Shire are proposing to introduce 60,000 acres of overlays across farming zone land in Tallarook, Trawool, Pyalong, Toobarac, Nullavale. An overlay will restrict what we can do on our farms.

So under our planning laws here in Victoria, the first thing is your zoning, whether you're farming zone or commercial, industrial, we all know that. And then a secondary tool that they use to limit what you can do, what you need a permit for, is called an overlay. So 94% of our land that's affected is farming zone land, and that means it's supposed to be used for agriculture, for primary production.

And what they're proposing to do is to bring in these, they're called a significant landscape overlay. And their purpose is to protect the views of the landscape for the people on the public roads. And this landscape that they want to protect is the very farming, beautiful rolling hills or plateaus with grazing stock that we've created through our farming practices over years.

But what they're doing with these overlays is they're bringing in all these rules. So one that really concerns a lot of us is it actually says a permit will be required to remove, destroy or lop any native vegetation.

[Warwick Long]

So what does that mean in a farming sense?

[Rae Clark]

Yeah, so it means you can't crop. It means you can't keep on top of the woody weeds that keep coming up each year. It means that if dead native vegetation fall across your tracks, you need a permit to remove them as it's written.

Now, Council keep saying it doesn't mean that, look elsewhere in the scheme, but it doesn't say that. And we're saying why would you include these words? A permit is required to remove, destroy or lop any native vegetation.

[Warwick Long]

So as you understand it, sorry, just stepping back through that, Rae Clarke's with you, we're talking about changes in Mitchell Shire that farmers are concerned about. So as you understand, under that legislation to protect native pastures or native environment, you wouldn't be able to crop or plough land.

[Rae Clark]

That's right, because you can't remove any native vegetation. And we know that most of the natives in our farms, most of them are prolific self-seeders. We spray thousands and thousands of seedlings every year. So at the moment, there's an SLO over about half of the Tallarook area at the moment, it's going to double to 25,000 hectares, sorry, to 12,000 hectares instead of 6,000. At the moment, it includes an exemption that if it's less than 10 years old, or if the land is being re-established or maintained for cultivational pasture, et cetera, et cetera. That's been removed.

So they've taken that out and put in this ridiculous requirement, a permit is required to remove, destroy or lob any native vegetation.

[Warwick Long]

So how much land is affected here?

[Rae Clark]

60,000 acres. A little bit, just over half of that is at Pylong and Toobarac, and the other half is at Tallarook, Trawool, Cherry Tree Ranges.

[Warwick Long]

And you're saying 94% of it is farming land within that season?

[Rae Clark]

Farming zone land, yeah. So 96% of the Pylong and Toobarac is, and 94% of the Tallarook area, so all that comes into about 94%.

[Warwick Long]

So I'm just trying to look at this from the shire point of view. With changes like this, what's the shire trying to protect?

[Rae Clark]

So they've engaged an external Melbourne-based consultant to do a landscape study, to do three volumes. We shudder to think how many hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent on this. And they've driven around, and what they're saying is we want the views from the Goulburn Valley Highway or from the rail trail to be protected.

But it really doesn't justify it, because farmers have created these views. You know, if we hadn't been looking after native vegetation, removing it where necessary, looking after it in other places, it would just be scrub everywhere. So it's very unclear what they're trying to do and what their justification is.

[Warwick Long]

So I'd imagine a lot of farmers in the Mitchell Shire they're talking about this. What are the concerns from the farming community? Like, what do you think these changes will look like?

And what does it mean for people to... to your ability to make money from your businesses?

[Rae Clark]

People are really worried about losing their livelihood. The cost of getting a permit, but also the time. And if it's too hard to get a permit, people won't, and they'll just let their farms go.

That then reduces the value of everybody else's farms. It reduces your farm. There's also rules around what buildings you can put up, around your fences, what sort of fences you can have.

It talks about the sympathetic colour of your farm sheds.

[Warwick Long]

Oh, so you'll have to paint your shed a certain colour to get a permit will you?

[Rae Clark]

Depending on what Colour Council might like, which they haven't published. Yeah, yeah. And so there's all these restrictions, whereas at the moment, you know, if it's farming zone, then the primary purpose is agriculture and much freer for farmers to manage their land sympathetically as we've been doing for 140 years in the Mitchell Shire.

[Warwick Long]

So when is this decided? When does the council put this to a vote at its next meeting?

[Rae Clark]

So the 19th of August, a councillor meeting, which is Monday after next. And they're voting to adopt this study. If they adopt it, they'll then go forward and start the process of amending the Mitchell Planning Scheme.

So, you know, that's usually a 12 to 18 month process. But this decision on Thursday the 19th is really key. So we're encouraging everybody to write into council.

Council's saying consultation's closed, but we're hearing constantly from people who haven't heard about the change. So we're urging people to email council and tell them how worried you are and tell them what effect it's going to have on your ability to run your farm.

[Warwick Long]

So, and Rae, thank you very much for talking to us. I'll get you to pass over the phone, if that's OK. So the 19th of August will be when that's decided.

We'll put in a request with Mitchell Shire to have a chat to them, and hopefully they will make somebody available for the 19th of August. Geoff Albers is also with you, who has a property at Tallarook, will be affected by this. Geoff, welcome to the country.

[Geoff Albers]

Thank you.

[Warwick Long]

Tell us about your farm.

[Geoff Albers]

It's approximately 4,800 acres. It covers plateau country at the top of the Tallarook Ranges and slopes, facing north and west.

[Warwick Long]

And how will these changes affect the property that you work, Geoff? What are you worried about?

[Geoff Albers]

Well, the major worry for me is the inability to remove any native vegetation. That means we're supposed to allow native vegetation to take hold on our properties and not to remove it. And over a period of probably 10 years, I would say that the properties would become very, very disadvantaged, let's say.

[Warwick Long]

What kind of country is it at Tallarook?

[Geoff Albers]

It's granite country. It's virtually all granite. There's a little bit of ironstone as well.

[Warwick Long]

And, Geoff, I'm trying to put my hat on here for the Mitchell Show. Do you have native vegetation that's worth protecting, though, on your farm?

[Geoff Albers]

No, I'd love to be quite frank. We really don't. There's nothing very special about the vegetation.

We're adjacent to the Tallarook State Forest. And I tell you, it's the most dismal forest you can imagine. So we'd get more of the same on our properties if we have to allow native vegetation to regrow.

[Warwick Long]

Are you surprised at the idea for these changes? And they may be adopted in 10 or 11 days' time. Are you surprised at how quickly this change could occur?

[Geoff Albers]

I was absolutely shocked. It was about the last thing that I ever could have imagined, to be quite honest.

[Warwick Long]

And the Council, as we just heard from Rae Clark there saying, the Council says there are other parts of the planning scheme that will allow some of your farming practices to continue, even if they're banned in here. Why don't you believe them?

[Geoff Albers]

Well, they're all part of the same planning scheme. The SLOs are a subsidiary part of the planning scheme. The planning scheme itself has got an exception, which is quite acceptable to us.

And I think Rae's just explained that one to you. But the SLO is diametrically opposite of that statement. And then how do you reconcile the two?

If someone said to you, that is black, and then on the other hand, they said to you, that is red, what do you believe? It doesn't make any sense.

[Warwick Long]

Interesting to talk to you, Geoff. Thanks very much for joining us on the program and thank Rae too for us. Right.

Thank you. Geoff Albers there.

[Geoff Albers]

Don't forget to tell your listeners about our website, [farmprotect.org](http://farmprotect.org).

[Warwick Long]

Geoff Albers there from Tallarook, nearly 5,000 acres of his property could be affected by some of the changes with Mitchell Shire. We'll ask Mitchell Shire to come on our program.