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Mitchell Shire seeks to 'calm the farm' over planned scenic overlays



By [Andrew Miller](#)

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📷 Rural planner Linda Martin-Chew says farmers in the Mitchell Shire should not be concerned about proposed scenic overlays. Pictures Linked in and Andrew Miller

Mitchell Shire Council has moved to pacify farmers, concerned about proposed landscape overlays it wants to introduce to protect views in the shire.

The council will consider endorsing a Landscape Assessment Study (LAS) – which proposes expanding Significant Landscape Overlays (SLO) – at its August 19 meeting.

If councillors agree, officers will prepare a planning scheme amendment, for likely consideration early next year.

Farmers claim the proposed SLOs, which would cover almost 24,300 hectares of privately owned farming zone, threaten livelihoods across Pyalong, Tooborac, Tallarook, and surrounding areas.

But Mitchell Shire chief executive Brett Luxford said there was widespread consultation about the LAS, between February 2021 and April this year.

"Over the three stages of development of the LAS council received 112 submissions, directly notified 1388 affected properties via mail and conducted 16 community drop-in sessions," Mr Luxford said.

"Part of the feedback to date has helped to refine the extent of the proposed SLO which is now fewer than 400 affected properties."

Mr Luxford sought to reassure the rural community the proposed extension of the SLOs would not prohibit the removal of native vegetation regrowth, which was critical for fire safety, grazing and cropping.

"The proposed SLO triggers a planning permit for buildings and works, it does not require a planning permit for grazing, cropping and other ongoing agricultural land uses which are allowed as of right under the Farming Zone," he said.

In response to submissions and concerns raised at community drop-in sessions SLO provisions had been drafted to minimise impacts on farming operations.

Proposed exemptions

It was proposed to exempt the following buildings and works from requiring a planning permit:

- . Agricultural buildings up to 200 square metres
- . Farm access tracks
- . Post and wire fences, solid fencing below one metre in height and livestock yard fencing
- . Water tanks
- . Open sided agricultural structures

New dwellings and larger sheds would require a planning permit under the proposed SLO, Mr Luxford said.

And a leading Wandong rural planner agreed farmers had little to fear from proposed overlays.

The Rural Planner director, Linda Martin-Chew, a Mitchell Shire resident, said there was no provision, under the proposed overlays, to restrict control of regrowth.

"It's affecting less than half the properties they originally wished it to apply to," Ms Martin-Chew said.

"There has been some winding back, to try and address people's concerns.

"Landholders definitely don't need to get a permit to put up a fence, there are particular sized agricultural buildings that are exempt, it's really just affecting the significant parts of the landscape, not the entire farm."

Controls were important for agritourism - "I think Mitchell Shire is not as well known for its landscapes, as other places like Macedon and the Yarra Ranges and I think it deserves more protection".

"Once you get to the point where you are building mansions on tops of hills it really is spoiling things," she said.

"People in those areas are managing their hillsides carefully anyway, so they are not necessarily looking to build on the tops of hills.

The great danger was subdivision, which resulted in smaller lots with more people wanting to build on hilltops or ridgelines.

Clearing regrowth less than 10 years old would still be permitted, as it was covered by state wide provisions, she said.

"Mitchell is a stunning place and it can do with all the protection it can get," she said.

Call to defer decision

But the [Protect Our Farms](#) group has called on the council to defer any decision on the endorsement of the LAS and the proposed SLOs until after November's council elections.

With council elections imminent and the council set to enter caretaker mode, chair Geoff Albers said Protect Our Farms strongly believed it was inappropriate for the current council to make such a significant economic decision that would bind the incoming council

"This decision has the potential to cause significant economic harm to our farming community," said Protect Our Farms chairman Geoff Albers.

"With the council entering caretaker mode, it is entirely inappropriate for the current council to make a decision of this magnitude."

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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.