

Landholders welcome concessions

By Geoff Adams

A new Mitchell Shire farm lobby group is claiming some small wins in its push for changes to proposed planning laws.

Last week, the Protect Our Farms group and Mitchell Shire councillors and staff met at a Landcare meeting to discuss the Significant Landcape Overlays that are proposed in Mitchell Shire.

The shire wants to protect valuable landscapes but farmers are concerned it will interfere with their enterprises.

On Thursday, the Glenaroua Landcare Group hosted a meeting attended by about 50 people, including Mitchell Shire councillors Rhonda Sanderson and Fiona Stevens, and Mitchell Shire planning officers.

Protect Our Farms secretary Rae Clark spoke about how the group was formed in response to what local farmers describe as a lack of genuine consultation on the proposed new overlays.

The presentation emphasised the restrictive permit requirements, impractical regulations, and prioritisation of aesthetic considerations over agricultural needs.

Protect Our Farms highlighted the consultation process, which included statutory and environmental groups, but excluded key agricultural groups and downplayed the concerns of farmers — those most affected by the proposals.

Ms Clark said Protect Our Farms was



A meeting on proposed planning changes has heartened Mitchell Shire farmers.

encouraged by a small shift beyond prepared responses to more genuine engagement by council representatives with the issues raised.

Pyalong grazier and business owner Marla Stone said it was the first time she could remember, where council was really challenged beyond what they thought when they entered the meeting.

A detailed panel discussion took place about the mechanics of how the planning scheme and the overlay will work in relation to the contentious issue of native vegetation removal.

Ms Clark said this allowed direct engagement on Protect Our Farms' concerns and council's prepared responses, which had not directly addressed the crux of those concerns.

"This was constructive as, rather than being met with the same 'form answers,'" she said.

"Council planners acknowledged our

concerns with the SLO wording about native vegetation.

"We're pleased that planning officers have now agreed to review whether the phrase 'a permit is required to lop, remove, or destroy any native vegetation' is, in fact, mandated to be included in the SLO by the state government."

Ms Clark said the meeting featured an extended period of comments and questions from concerned farmers, who expressed objections and strong reservations about the impact of the SLOs on their operations and raised heated concerns about council's process.

Tallarook farmer and Protect Our Farms chair Geoffrey Albers said the Q&A between farmers and council officers highlighted the significant divide in understanding and priorities.

Tooborac farmer Hannah Pennington, a directly affected landowner, expressed concern at the meeting that community issues were downplayed in council reports.

Ms Clark acknowledged the mixed feelings following the meeting but welcomed the three concessions offered by council's planning team.

"There's a lot of broken trust and a strong sense that this is a done deal no matter what farmers say," she said.

"However, I'm hopeful that Thursday evening marked a shift in council's approach, and that these concessions signal a willingness to truly engage with us moving forward."