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# Farmers sceptical of Mitchell Shire concessions on landscape overlays

By [Andrew Miller](#)**Updated** August 20 2024 - 2:44pm, first published December 13 2023 - 6:00am

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Tooborac beef producer Lyndon Arnel, remains sceptical about changes flagged by the Mitchell Shire to its landscape study. Picture by Andrew Miller

Mitchell Shire Council has voted to endorse a contentious landscape study, paving the way for the introduction of planning overlays covering nearly 23,500 hectares of farming land.

But while councillors endorsed the Landscape Assessment Study (LAS), prepared by an independent consultant, they agreed to several changes.

The LAS is the first step in introducing Significant Landscape Overlays (SLOs), which primary producers believe will impose additional permit requirements on farmland.

"The endorsement passed subject to multiple last-minute conditions, including changes to native vegetation rules, exemptions for farm sheds, balancing rural amenity with agriculture, additional consultation with farming groups, and an impact assessment," lobby group Protect our Farms spokeswoman Rae Clark said.

"While these changes address some of the concerns we've raised, they were introduced without direct consultation and leave serious questions about how effectively they will be implemented."

Council voted four to three to endorse the LAS, with one abstention.

Ms Rae said council agreed to introduce additional steps the planning team would have to implement, before changes to the shire's planning scheme could be introduced.

"The fight isn't over – there are still major issues left unresolved."

She said the decision represented "a small step" forward for affected producers.

"Council has taken a band-aid approach by addressing only the most publicised concerns, without genuinely engaging with those most affected," she said.

"It remains to be seen whether council is truly open to working with a grassroots community group like Protect Our Farms or simply trying to placate the issue and move it along.

"Given the endorsement, there is a risk that these amendments to the LAS recommendations (including the SLOs) could be implemented superficially without real accountability."

She said the council had "consistently minimised" farmers' concerns.

"The lack of direct consultation leading up to the meeting further erodes trust," Ms Clark said.

She said while one councillor at the meeting had apologised for the mishandling of the process, a backdrop of broken trust made it difficult to gauge "whether these efforts are genuine or simply election positioning".

"My big hope is they will engage directly – clearly they need to listen to us and I am encouraged we will get more workable SLOs."

Tooborac beef producer Lyndon Arnel, said Tooborac, said the concessions were verbal and still had to go to the planning

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"One of the big arguments we have is the whole process is flawed," Mr Arnel said.

Three councillors voted against the motion, on the basis the process was flawed, which should have resulted in the LAS being dropped, he said.

"At the end of the job, yes, we got verbal assurances, but in the wash up, we have to see what it really means," he said.

"No one got what the real problem is, and the real problem is there is the potential for SLO's to be put over entire farms, not the areas where there needs to be protection.

"None of them have taken into account the real concerns of the community they are imposing this on, they have taken into account the view of the statutory authorities and environmental groups, but not the people who are having it imposed upon," he said.

Prime lamb and wool producer Therese Ryan, High Camp, said she was concerned the proposed new permit requirements placed further burden on farming communities, which were already under pressure.

She said there had been an effort to trivialise recent objections – "that is unfair and entirely due to council and planning, poor consultation and stubbornness," she said.

She questioned the methodology behind the original LAS, saying she hoped the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) would help Protect Our Farms to look into it.

Ms Ryan also urged council to follow the example of Hepburn Shire who she said actively engaged with its farming community when trying to introduce similar changes.

"Not only must previous and current submissions be taken into account, but the process must be open to new submissions especially from those who have not already lodged one," she said.

Mitchell Shire has been contacted for comment.

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