



RADIO INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Victorian Country Hour 20 August 2024

Transcript prepared from recording available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/vic-country-hour/victorian-country-hour/104223622> Edited for grammar and punctuation

[Warwick Long]

Let's go to the Mitchell Shire now... Planning overlays on thousands of hectares of farmland in what would be the fastest growing shire for population in the state over the coming decades were put to a vote last night. So the Mitchell Shire, think Wallan, Kilmore, Broadford, Seymour, Pyalong and many more little towns surrounding that area was deciding on what's called a significant landscape overlay to land identified as regionally significant. Farmers in that area argued that it would put restrictions on their ability to farm and could even stop things like them being able to plough land or plant crops. So what happened last night?

Rae Clark from the newly formed group Protect Our Farms can join you and tell you what's happened at that meeting last night. Rae Clark, welcome back to the Country Hour.

[Rae Clark]

Thanks Warwick, hi.

[Warwick Long]

Were you worried about these changes, there was the vote last night at the Mitchell Shire Council Council meeting. What were you worried about and what happened?

[Rae Clark]

Well, we were worried that Council was going to rubber stamp the endorsement of the landscape study and empower the planning team to go ahead and prepare amendments to the Mitchell Planning Scheme to bring into force the proposals in the study which are these significant landscape overlays which have got permit requirements in them that are just unworkable for everyday farming.

[Warwick Long]

And what ultimately happened at the meeting? Were your worst fears realised or was there some movement there?

[Rae Clark]

We were very surprised. Over the last three weeks Council's been out and about in the media saying nothing to worry about, nothing to worry about, calm the farms, storm in a teacup, people are misunderstanding. And so we sort of waited to see which Councillor would actually even introduce this motion. And instead of introducing the motion as it was in the papers, Councillor Stephens introduced that she had two amendments to the motion. So one of her amendments was that they endorse the study subject to a whole lot of amendments and the other was that they defer it to a whole lot of amendments. Now her amendments I think it was about three pages long and she read them out verbally.

Now the video is now up but I've been going off the written notes that I've made. So I will be reviewing the video but right now this is based on the notes I took at the time which was obviously tricky because she's reading out I think it was three pages and we didn't have anything in front of us. So they're going to change the wording about native vegetation to make it very clear that there are exemptions that farmers need such as for regrowth.

So that is absolutely key and something we've been asking for months and being told is unnecessary so it's very welcome that they've done this last minute back flip on it. They're also apparently going to introduce some sort of new exemption that it doesn't matter how big your shed is as long as you need it for agricultural use then it wouldn't apply. They're going to introduce as in the objectives "rural amenity" and agriculture which is actually really key and something that's totally missing from the study itself.

They said they would do an impact study and there was lots of discussion about how poor the process had been that they'd heard that the consultation hadn't been good enough and they're now going to engage with groups and they're named Landcare and the Victorian Farmers Federation that are strong links to farmers. They didn't say they were going to engage with us.

[Warwick Long]

I bet that's frustrating given you've led the charge here.

[Rae Clark]

No not really. You know we're very happy to engage and it's not really about us but it more just raises questions of is this genuine or is this just there's an election coming and we just want to calm everyone down? I mean we pointed out that they hadn't engaged with VFF and Landcare so to be very fair they're now saying they'll engage with these groups but just having it it's great that they've done it it's great that they didn't just endorse it, as it was put to them.

[Warwick Long]

So did it pass?

[Rae Clark]

It did pass and look it passed four to three so there were three councillors that voted to defer it but there were comments like this is making us "hostages to fortune" and we need to sort this out beforehand and the councillors that voted for it were very worried that there's a new council coming in that they would need to get up to scratch that it's going to add all this extra time. It was so confusing that one of the councillors actually at one point asked what are we voting on what's the motion which really shows that the process of making that significant an amendment at the 11th hour is very problematic.

[Warwick Long]

So for you and the farmers that were campaigning around here and I note that you were there with signage and so forth to sit in on the meeting last night is this the a good outcome the right outcome what does ultimately this decision passing from council mean for you?

[Rae Clark]

Yes, look this is a good first step. I guess our big concern is they've basically given a rubber stamp for it to move to the next stage subject to them doing all these different things that were read out but there's no built-in accountability measure from them so that's where we'll come in. We'll be trying to work with council. We'll be picking up the phone and seeing if they'll actually take our input. All of these changes that they've now done are things we've been asking for for months and they've only done it now because of all of this attention, so we really want to ensure that it does happen properly. The fact that it's already been endorsed doesn't mean they can just do a superficial effort but that they really do it properly and I guess the other thing is so many councillors commented on the never-ending stream of emails that's still coming and the phone calls they were getting even yesterday which is such a credit to the community who've really made such an effort to email and to speak up to ring and it shows how important everybody's voice is.

[Warwick Long]

We're short on time, but Rae Clark thanks very much for giving us the update today, after the meeting last night.

[Rae Clark]

Thanks Warwick.

[Warwick Long]

That is Rae Clark from the group Protect Our Farms which has been campaigning with the Mitchell Shire particularly about those significant landscape overlays that they said would impact farming operations there. I did try and reach out to the Mitchell Shire and have someone on particularly before the meeting. but no one was available. A statement did come from the organisation yesterday saying in response to submissions and concerns raised at community drop-in sessions and structured meetings that they revised some of the provisions to minimise impacts on farming operations and it's proposed to exempt things like buildings and farming efforts from requiring a planning permit like agricultural buildings, farm access tracks, post and wire fences for solid fencing below one metre in height and livestock yard fencing, water tanks and open-sided agricultural structures.

We'll reach out to them now. This decision has been made to see if further discussions could happen on this to find out exactly what these changes mean and what they mean for Mitchell Shire.