



TABLE 2: Agricultural Capacity

Land Class	Land System	Agricultural Use
Class 2 Agriculturally versatile land 9-11 month growing season	Whittlesea Alluvial plains	Intensive grazing, occasional cropping
	Mernda Gently sloping lowland hills	Intensive grazing, occasional cropping
Class 3 Sound grazing land but limited in versatility 8-9 month growing season	Wollert Basaltic plains	Grazing, occasional broadacre cropping
	Doreen Moderately undulating midland hills	Grazing and open woodland
	Arthurs Creek Moderately rolling midland hills with extensive lower slopes	Grazing, occasional cropping
Class 4 Capable of grazing under moderate to low stocking rates 7-8 month growing season	Springfield Moderately to steeply upland hills	Grazing and woodland

Sources: Jeffrey 1981, MMBW 1985, Phillips Agribusiness 1997



1.2.2 Alternative Farming Practices

It is challenging for rural residents to maintain a viable business based on traditional agricultural commodities. Viable agriculture as a part-time activity, supported by off-farm income, can be achieved. Farming can be viable and part time. It can also be diverse and sustainable.

For the past four years, Council has been involved in a program of growing Chinese herbs for the expanding Chinese and complementary herbal medicine market in Australia. Considerable research and development work has been done on a wide range of species, resulting in a short list of candidates for potential commercialisation. Five farm plots around the Whittlesea area are being trialled.

Whilst further work is needed before selected herbs can be recommended to growers for higher scale production, Council is now sufficiently advanced in the project to progress towards the development of a detailed Program Plan which outlines and provides a framework for the delivery of the Chinese Medicinal Herbal Program. Such a sector has the potential for interface areas since it does not rely on large allotments for commercial viability.

In Whittlesea, there has been a marked increase in the establishment of olive groves. This niche business contributes positively to the rural landscape.

However, as olives are a long term investment, it is still too early to say if this sector will become a high economic performer. At present, at least one landholder is marketing oil produced with some success, winning silver at the 2008 Royal Melbourne Show.

The harvesting of native grasses for seed also has the capacity to provide an alternate farm income. The Whittlesea Green Wedge contains extensive areas of native grasslands, particularly in the west and north west that could be farmed in this manner.

Organic farming enterprises, namely those associated with grazing, are another emerging agribusiness market that is in its infancy in the area. Landowners are investigating opportunities to join various components of the organic market.

This is seen to have great potential, especially due the municipality's proximity to Melbourne, the new Melbourne Wholesale Fruit and Vegetable Market, rail-freight services and Melbourne Airport

According to Regional Matters, bushfood industries in Victoria are an emerging market that has shifted from wild harvest methods to commercial crop production (DSE 2005c).

In 1995, the Southern Bushfood Association was established to support and promote species indigenous to southern Australia, such as mountain pepper and native mint. Private forestry enterprises within Victoria are also increasing, ranging from farm forestry to large-scale commercial plantations.

Case Study: Plains Tender, Mernda



The partnership between Corangamite Catchment Management Authority and a landholder in Mernda has led to a portion of Plains Grassy Woodland being fenced from stock grazing to encourage regeneration of native vegetation. Nearly four years on, the PlainsTender agreement has seen hollows and fallen branches being retained on site providing habitat for fauna, and significant regeneration of River Red Gums.



1.3 What the Community is Saying

Consultation was undertaken with residents and community groups through a series of community forums and supplemented by workshops with government departments and agencies with an interest in the Whittlesea Green Wedge.

Despite the range of opinions expressed, a common thread can be drawn from the feedback received:

- **Rural residents want to give living on the land a go, but it is becoming tougher.** Issues such as lack of farm succession and limited support from government are becoming increasingly important. Farming on the urban-rural interface has a greater variety of pressures and less access to assistance than in regional locations.

Refer to the *Community Views Final Report* for a detailed summary of community responses.

1.4 Issues

The main areas requiring action in order to secure and promote the ongoing productive capacity of the Whittlesea Green Wedge for sustainable agriculture into the future are:

- Limited understanding by the community of the role of farmers in contributing to food production, land management, revegetation and scenic rural landscapes

- Concern over the viability of many existing traditional rural enterprises in the municipality due to the combination of lack of intergeneration succession, increasing whole of farm costs (e.g. rates, employees, soil and crop improvements, remediation works), climatic change and expectations of urban neighbours.
- Lack of support to foster the area as the food bowl of northern Melbourne
- Unequal treatment of farmers in peri-urban areas as opposed to regional areas (e.g. restricted funding opportunities)

This is not an exhaustive list, but rather an overview of the current key areas requiring action. The government has announced it will examine the ability for interface councils to spilt their municipality into urban and rural areas for state government funding purposes which may help ameliorate some of these concerns

1.5 Planning Provisions

Many rural activities are supported within the green wedge zones. Through the State Planning Policy Framework of the Victorian Planning Provisions, Clause 14.01-1 specifies objectives and implementation actions focussed on agriculture.

Within the Local Planning Policy Framework, the Municipal Strategic Statement refers to the values of agricultural land at Clause 21.02-01. The Local Planning Policy at Clause 22.02 relates to the 'Rural Land Character Areas, Siting, Use and Development Policy'.

Specific zones within the Whittlesea Planning Scheme relevant to the productive capacity of Whittlesea Green Wedge include:

- *Green Wedge Zone (GWZ) seeks to encourage sustainable farming activities and a variety of productive agricultural uses.* Many farming activities, such as crop raising and extensive animal husbandry, are 'as of right' and do not require a planning permit unless an overlay requires one. A permit is required for the use and development of a dwelling. The minimum subdivision size is specified as either 40 or 80 hectares.
- *Green Wedge A Zone (GWAZ) seeks to ensure use and development promotes sustainable land management practices.* Many farming activities require a permit under the provisions of this zone. A permit is required for the use and development of a dwelling. The minimum subdivision size is specified as either 8 or 12 hectares.
- *Rural Conservation Zone (RCZ) seeks to provide for agricultural use consistent with the conservation of environmental and landscape values of the area.* Most forms of agriculture and any new dwellings require a planning permit. The minimum subdivision size is 40 hectares.



1.6 Planning Guidelines

Within the context of broader green wedge values, the following provides a guide for Council in its decision making regarding rural productivity and agribusiness:

- *Agriculture* should be viewed flexibly with a wide interpretation of primary production activities in order to support local economic development. Subject to planning approval, this should include the ability to sell local produce at the farm gate and appropriate signage that respects the local amenity and landscape.
- *Land use and development* within the GW and GWA Zones should be compatible with surrounding agricultural activity.
- Any *new dwelling* proposed should be in accordance with planning provisions and located appropriately in relation to adjoining farm properties.

1.7 Incentives And Programs

Sustainable food production and rural productivity is encouraged and supported by several programs initiated by the City of Whittlesea. This includes the following:

- *Sustainable Land Management Rate Rebate Scheme* to encourage and support good land management practices on large rural properties (annual)
- *Environmental Works Grants* for the protection and enhancement of native vegetation on private land (annual)
- Annual *weed mapping programs* that now includes criteria such as land use, typical stocking rates and enforcement related activities.
- Introduction of a *pest plant local law*
- Support and education programs for the community, local Landcare, farmers and environment groups.
- Employment of two *Sustainable Land Management Officers* available to provide onsite advice.

Council's *Local Conservation Strategy* is currently under review and due for release, retitled as the *Environmental Sustainability Strategy*, in 2011.

The Port Phillip and Westernport CMA plays a key role in the coordination and administration of environmental funding within the Port Phillip and Westernport region. Refer to the website for details <http://www.ppwcm.vic.gov.au/funding-grants.aspx>.

1.8 Actions

Refer to Part 3: Action Plan for the full range of actions proposed to sustain the Whittlesea Green Wedge into the future.

In summary, key actions proposed include:

- Investigate options for the employment of an Agribusiness Officer to provide business support to farmers
- Explore opportunity for a publicity campaign to highlight the value of farming to our communities
- Investigate further options for altering Council's farm rate to better support agribusiness on the rural fringe
- Promote and support the production of local food through initiatives such as farmers markets
- Explore opportunities for undertaking a land capability study to identify best suited agricultural enterprises
- Review planning provisions relating to agribusiness and the right to farm.

