

REPORT



Protecting & Supporting Melbourne's Strategic Agricultural Land

Engagement Findings Report

Final Report, 3 July 2019

capire

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Executive summary	1
1 Introduction	5
1.1 Project background	5
1.2 Community and stakeholder engagement	5
1.3 Report purpose	5
1.4 Key definitions	6
1.5 Project scope	6
1.6 Engagement limitations	7
2 Engagement approach	8
2.1 Objectives	8
2.2 Engagement activities	8
2.3 Communication and promotional tools	10
3 Participation	12
4 Engagement findings	15
4.1 Initial reactions to the project	17
4.1.1 The role of Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas	17
4.1.2 Initial reactions to the project	20
4.2 Feedback on the draft criteria	21
4.2.1 Overall likely effectiveness of the criteria	21
4.2.2 Have we got the right criteria?	22
4.2.3 Overall importance of criteria	27
4.3 Key local and regional factors to consider	28
4.3.1 South West Region	28
4.3.2 West and North West Region	29
4.3.3 North Region	30
4.3.4 North East and East Regions	31
4.3.5 South East Region	32
4.4 Desired outcomes of the planning response	33
4.5 The use of planning controls to manage agricultural land	39
4.5.1 Current planning system controls	39
4.5.2 Benefits and constraints of using planning controls	39
5 Engagement evaluation	41
Appendix A: Draft Criteria for discussion purposes	44
Appendix B – Areas of investigation based on draft criteria	45
Appendix C - List of organisations who participated	46

Executive summary

Project background

From February 2019 to May 2019, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) undertook a stakeholder and community engagement process for the Protecting and Supporting Melbourne's Strategic Agricultural Land project (Plan Melbourne Action 17).

The Victorian Government is committed to protecting the long-term future of agriculture in the green wedge and peri-urban areas of Melbourne (see Figure 3) by identifying strategic agricultural land, protecting the right to farm and improving planning decision-making processes.

The first step to deliver on this objective is to identify and map strategic agricultural land in Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas. To do this, a set of draft criteria were developed to guide the assessment and identification of strategic agricultural land.

The focus of the engagement process was to introduce the project to all Victorians, test the draft criteria with stakeholders and community members, and start a conversation about what the planning response should achieve.

Who participated

All Victorians were encouraged to provide their input about how to define strategic agricultural land and how it should be protected. There was focus placed on reaching farmers and people who work in or are associated with the agricultural industry.

Approximately 816 people joined the conversation either through a community workshop, the government and government authorities' workshop, one-on-one meetings, and the online submission form or written submission (see Figure 1).

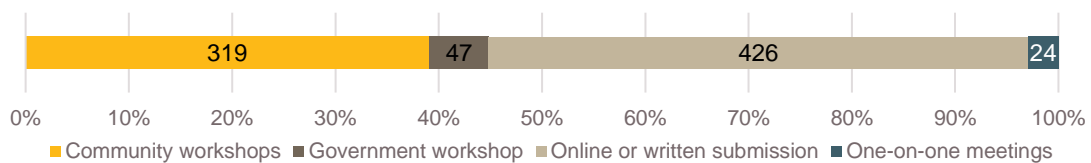


Figure 1: Summary of participation by engagement activity

The relationships people had to the project illustrated a good mix of representation across the engagement. The most common types of relationship identified by participants were:

- farmers who own land and/or live in the green wedge or peri-urban areas
- interested community members who own land and/or live in the green wedge or peri-urban areas and who are also part of a community group or organisation.

Participants were also asked what region of the green wedge and peri-urban areas they had an interest in or owned/lived on/managed land in. Participants were able to select more than one area. Regions that were most represented were:

- all the peri-urban and green wedge areas around Melbourne (21 per cent)
- South East region (26 per cent)

Key engagement findings

It was made clear through the engagement that Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas are valued by the community for their agricultural land, natural landscapes and biodiversity.

Over 90 per cent of participants indicated that they understand why strategic agricultural land in the green wedge and peri-urban areas should be protected. There were also some consistent messages raised by participants regarding the overall project approach, as outlined below.

Planning controls are only one part of the solution. Much of the feedback received through the project discussed outcomes that a planning response cannot solely deliver. For example, ongoing support for farmers and for future farmers was consistently raised.

Land conditions are not static. Many participants expressed concern about basing the assessment on current land uses and conditions. Comments illustrated how land conditions can change over time and that the focus needs to be on how we can make land productive in the longer-term.

Is this project thinking long-term enough? There were many comments expressing the desire for all agricultural land to be considered strategic. This was often raised in relation to whether enough agricultural land was being protected to meet the needs of a growing population.

Regarding the draft criteria, participants were positive overall in their feedback, but many comments suggested opportunities for further refinement. When asked whether the proposed criteria will effectively determine whether agricultural land is strategic now and in the future 48 per cent agreed or strongly agreed (compared to 28 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed). However, there was a high proportion (24 per cent) who were unsure.

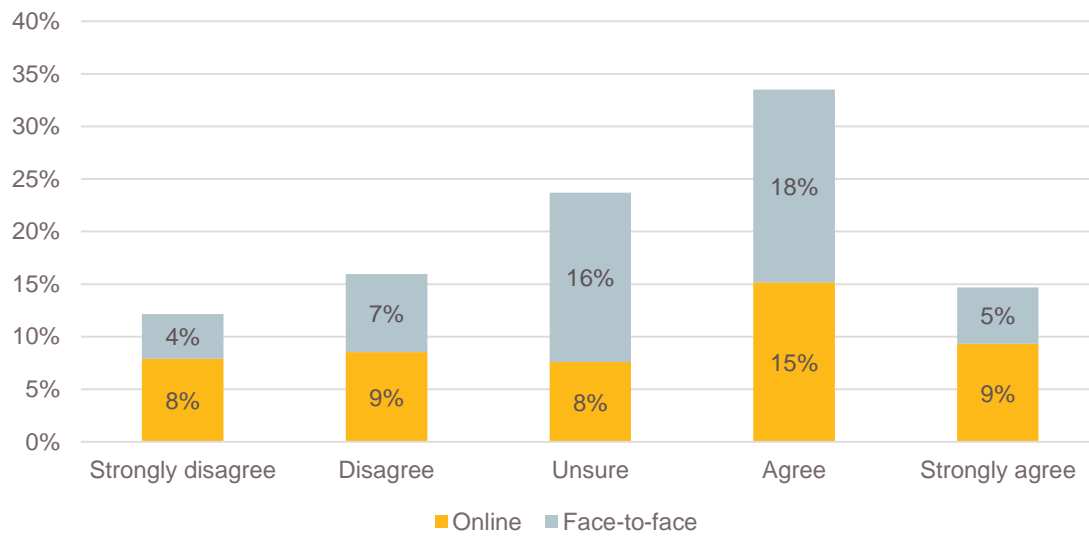


Figure 2: Levels of support regarding the overall likely effectiveness of the draft criteria

When looking at the different relationships participants had to the project, there were some notable trends as outlined below.

- those who identified as 'interested community members' were more likely to agree or strongly agree (53 per cent of this cohort)
- those who indicated that they 'work for or represent the property industry' were more likely to disagree (53 per cent of this cohort)
- those who identified as 'a farmer in the peri-urban or green wedge area' were more likely to be unsure (26 per cent of this cohort).

Water and land capability were the most talked about criteria

Comments shared in relation to the draft criteria were predominantly focused around the Water Access (130 comments) and Land Capability criteria (103 comments).

Feedback on the Water Access criteria illustrated that water access is an essential element for assessing strategic agricultural land. Discussion focused around different water sources and how one water source may be valued over another. For example, not all water sources are equal in quality, cost and accessibility. Access and use of recycled water were the most discussed topics regarding alternative water sources.

Feedback on the Land Capability criteria indicated that participants felt it was too restrictive by focusing on soil-based agriculture. Participants were also concerned about the potential impacts on land not considered as having high-value soil.

Feedback on the Resilience and Adaptability criteria (50 comments) illustrated the high importance people place on considering climate change, particularly in relation to how the green wedge and peri-urban areas can play a part in mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Feedback on the Existing Land Use and Integration with Industry criteria (57 comments) highlighted the need to include provisions for supporting and encouraging complementary industries (such as food processing and tourism) on surrounding lands. Comments also

suggested greater guidance and clarification is required regarding what land uses may be allowed within strategic agricultural land, and under what circumstances.

There were three key suggestions for additional criteria (or elements to include in existing criteria):

- Economic viability
- Future technology and innovation
- Access to transport infrastructure and networks.

Participants were asked to explore the desired outcomes of what they want the planning response to achieve. A range of planning response outcomes were identified, that a planning response cannot solely deliver on. Analysis of comments identified six key desired outcomes:

1. Prioritise the ability to farm and preserve agricultural land in areas identified as having high agricultural value.
2. Integrate other government policies and initiatives with planning processes to support the continued use of strategic agricultural land for farming.
3. Regulate land uses surrounding strategic agricultural land to maintain farming operations and the quality of agricultural land.
4. Support the economic viability of farm businesses.
5. Protect the environment by recognising the environmental and natural value of this land and promote sustainable farming practices.
6. Clarify acceptable uses and development on strategic agricultural land including how to meet the requirement for 'ancillary' uses and land used 'in conjunction with' other uses.

Participant evaluation of the community workshops were positive overall. 79 per cent of participants that offered feedback agreed that the information provided at the workshops was clear and relevant, while 71 per cent felt that the workshops were well run and facilitated. 73 per cent of participants that provided feedback also felt that they were able to provide appropriate input into the project.

There was strong feedback that the community and stakeholders want to continue to be engaged as the project progresses.

1 Introduction

1.1 Project background

Over the coming decades, Melbourne will continue to experience increasing demand for housing and services due to population growth. This will increase pressure on local agricultural production, most of which occurs in Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas. These areas are vital for providing food for our growing city, supporting economies, and make an important contribution to Victoria's export industry.

The Victorian Government is committed to protecting agricultural land in Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas. This commitment was outlined in Melbourne's metropolitan planning strategy, *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050 (Policy 1.4.1 and Action 17)*, and confirmed by the Victorian Planning Minister prior to the 2018 Victorian election. To deliver on this commitment, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) is undertaking work to define and identify strategic agricultural land and strengthen controls in the planning system to protect and support these areas.

DELWP worked with Agriculture Victoria and Deakin University's Centre for Rural and Regional Futures to better understand the suitability and capability of land in the region. This understanding is important for assessing the potential value of land for agriculture. It also helps to identify which land requires fewer inputs to produce high-value commodities. From this work DELWP developed draft criteria to identify strategic agricultural land (provided in Appendix A). The draft criteria consider the naturally-occurring features of the land such as soils, landscapes and rainfall, as well as current land uses, access to water, location of important infrastructure and links to processing and supply industries.

1.2 Community and stakeholder engagement

From February 2019 to May 2019, DELWP undertook stakeholder and community engagement to test and refine the draft criteria with the community, agricultural industry, local government and key authorities. This was the first phase of engagement for this project.

The findings from the engagement will inform the updated criteria and mapping of strategic agricultural land and the approach adopted to protect and support these areas. The updated criteria, maps and planning response options will be subject to further engagement (phase two) with impacted stakeholders and community.

The planning response is expected to be implemented in 2020.

1.3 Report purpose

The purpose of this report is to detail the engagement approach and findings for the first phase of engagement.

This report has been prepared by Capire Consulting Group (Capire). Capire supported DELWP with the design and delivery of the engagement program. Capire acted as independent listeners in this process, and were responsible for reviewing and analysing the data collected through the engagement and writing up the findings.

1.4 Key definitions

The following key terms have been defined to support conversations about protecting and supporting Melbourne's strategic agricultural land. These definitions were included in the project [Fact Sheet](#) and [Engagement Pack](#).

- **Strategic agricultural land:** Areas of land identified from a combination of features including: soils, landscapes, rainfall, access to water, resilience to climate change, infrastructure investment and integration with industry, that make it highly valuable for agricultural production.
- **Green wedge:** The non-urban areas of metropolitan Melbourne that are currently protected by laws and include agricultural areas, bushland, water supply areas, tourism and recreation use, natural resources and other non-urban uses.
- **Peri-urban areas:** Land beyond the green wedges but within 100km of central Melbourne. The areas are predominantly rural with small townships.
- **Commercial agriculture:** Commercial businesses that grow and produce food and fibre with the intention of making a profit. Food and fibre production are the main sources of income.
- **Planning controls:** Legislative or public policy instruments that guide the use, development and overall future of land. The purpose of planning controls is to make sure that decisions about how a piece of land is used or developed is in the best interests of the whole community, both now and in the future.

1.5 Project scope

The project scope is focused on green wedge and peri-urban areas within 100km of central Melbourne (see Figure 3). Currently this area grows 10 per cent of Victoria's gross value agricultural production and contributes \$3.3 billion to the economy.

There is significant competition for the use of this land as it is seen as an attractive location for urban development and new houses. This can result in the permanent loss of agricultural land and associated business.

This project aims to protect and support strategic agricultural land in the area described above. The engagement was designed to identify land with the greatest agricultural potential, along with ways that the planning system can support the long-term agricultural productivity of these areas.

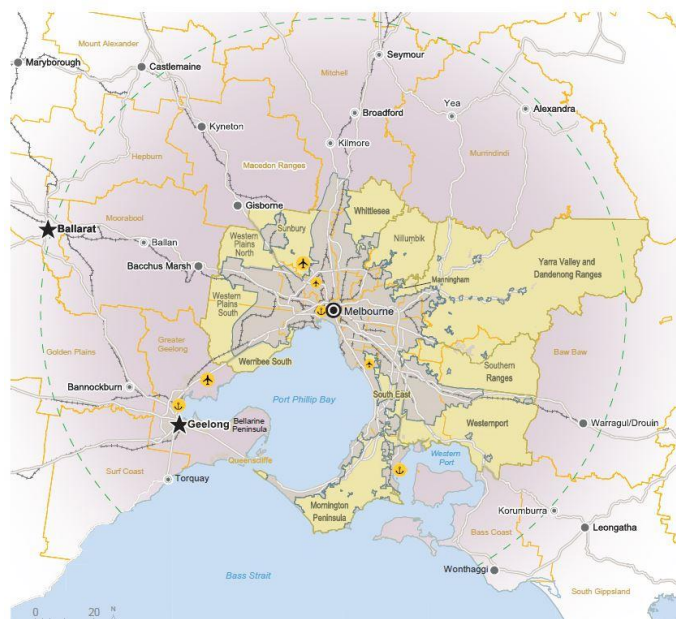


Figure 3: The area of this project – outside the urban growth boundary and within 100km from central Melbourne

1.6 Engagement limitations

There are some limitations of the engagement process and reporting analysis that should be acknowledged. These are outlined below.

- The information in this report does not necessarily reflect the views of a representative sample of the community. People who participated in the engagement process self-selected to take part in the project. The overall results therefore should not be regarded as a representation of the views of a statistically validated sample of the community.
- It is possible that participants may have taken part in multiple engagement activities. For example, they may have completed the online submission form and attended a workshop. Therefore, their views may have been captured more than once.
- In some instances, participants did not answer all questions. This meant that some questions received fewer responses than others.
- Participants were not individually profiled across all engagement activities meaning that in some instances the data (such as workshop outputs) is aggregated, and includes summaries of 'group discussions' rather than responses from individuals. This has restricted analysis of comments by stakeholder type in some circumstances.
- In response to participant needs and feedback, one of the engagement questions was altered during the engagement process. Following the first workshop at Bacchus Marsh, the question '*what are your initial reactions to the project?*' was added. Therefore, this question has not been answered by all participants.
- There was a significant amount of technical background information for this project. While this information was available online and presented at all workshops, it cannot be guaranteed that all participants read this information. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that all participants had an equal understanding of the project and engagement process.
- As part of the online engagement, participants were asked to self-select which region they were most interested in or owned/lived on/managed land in. While regions were listed in the engagement materials (as per Figure 5), a map with clear regional boundaries was not provided. Therefore, there may be some overlap between the regions that participants identified with and commented on as part of the online engagement.

2 Engagement approach

2.1 Objectives

The objectives of this engagement program were to:

- Build a shared understanding of the importance of and pressures on agricultural land in the peri-urban and green wedge areas of Melbourne, now and into the future.
- Foster support for the need to protect strategic agricultural land.
- Verify and adapt regional-level agricultural information at a local level with community, stakeholders and other technical inputs.
- Test, refine and expand (if necessary) the criteria for determining strategic agricultural land and the currently identified areas, including key assumptions and inputs.
- Identify local concerns, challenges and opportunities regarding the protection of strategic agricultural land, building on past experiences and known challenges.
- Understand what outcomes community and stakeholders want the planning response to achieve in relation to the protection of strategic agricultural land.

These objectives were developed collaboratively with internal DELWP project team members and key project partners. The engagement activities and questions were designed to achieve each of these objectives.

2.2 Engagement activities

All Victorians were encouraged to provide their input about how to define strategic agricultural land and how it should be protected. Engagement activities ran from late February 2019 to May 2019. Table 1 outlines each of the engagement activities and when they occurred.

The engagement activities were tailored for different audiences and were designed to enable participants to make informed contributions. All engagement activities were designed to collect data that will help DELWP to refine the criteria and maps and commence drafting planning options.

Table 1: Engagement activities and tools

Activity	Description	Details
Local government and government authorities' workshop	<p>Before public engagement commenced, a workshop was held with planning and agricultural representatives from local government and government authorities.</p> <p>The workshop helped to promote the project, sought feedback, requested participants' input in identifying relevant stakeholder groups, and encouraged them to promote the engagement to their communities.</p>	9.30am – 12.30pm, Monday 25 February, at Flagstaff Gardens.

Activity	Description	Details
	Liaison with local governments continued after the workshop to ensure relevant stakeholder groups were identified and targeted as part of promoting the engagement program.	
Community workshops	<p>Six regionally based workshops were held for community and external stakeholders. Each workshop ran for two hours and was held on a weekday morning or evening.</p> <p>The focus of the workshops was to identify local issues that may impact the identification of strategic agricultural land, test and refine the criteria, and explore outcomes sought by stakeholders from protecting strategic agricultural land through the planning system.</p> <p>Each workshop was attended by 50-60 people.</p>	<p>Bacchus Marsh – 6pm to 8pm, Wednesday 27 March 2019</p> <p>Mornington – 6pm to 8pm, Thursday 28 March 2019</p> <p>Koo Wee Rup – 10am to 12pm, Tuesday 2 April 2019</p> <p>Kilmore – 6pm to 8pm, Wednesday 3 April</p> <p>Yarra Junction – 6pm to 8pm, Thursday 4 April 2019</p> <p>Marcus Hill – 6pm to 8pm Wednesday 1 May 2019</p>
Website	<p>There was a project page on Engage Victoria available to all Victorians. This page was a hub of communication and information about the project and engagement activities.</p> <p>On the page, people could learn about the project, view the maps and criteria, access background information and technical reports, RSVP for workshops, and provide input through a submission form.</p>	The website was open for public input for 10.5 weeks from Tuesday 12 March 2019 to Friday 17 May 2019.
Engagement pack	<p>To encourage engagement discussion beyond the community workshops, stakeholders and community groups were able to download an engagement pack and host their own conversation.</p> <p>The engagement pack included the same maps, background information and criteria that were presented at the workshops. A feedback form in the same format as the online submission form was part of the pack.</p> <p>The engagement pack also included tips about how to host a discussion and how to submit feedback.</p> <p>The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) Mornington Peninsula Branch held an information night for the project at which they used the engagement pack to guide the conversation. Attendees took the submission template home on the night to complete and submit in their own time. Approximately 25 people attended.</p>	<p>The engagement pack was made available for 10.5 weeks from Tuesday 12 March 2019 to Friday 17 May 2019.</p> <p>VFF Mornington Peninsula Branch Information Night 6pm to 8pm - Friday 12 April 2019, at Baxter Community Hall.</p>

Activity	Description	Details
<p>One-on-one meetings</p>	<p>Ten one-on-one meetings were held with interest groups and peak bodies or government authorities. Each one-on-one meeting went for one hour and included a presentation from DELWP, reviewing the maps and criteria and collecting feedback.</p> <p>Many of these meetings enabled DELWP to foster relationships with the organisations which will support further engagement for this project.</p>	<p>Victorian Planning, Authority Tuesday 26 March 2019</p> <p>Australian Energy Market Operator, Monday 1 April</p> <p>Tourism Victoria, Wednesday 3 April 2019</p> <p>Victorian Farmers Federation, Thursday 11 April 2019</p> <p>Property Council of Victoria, Thursday 11 April 2019</p> <p>Victorian Farmers Market Association, Tuesday 16 April 2019</p> <p>AusVeg Victoria, Wednesday 17 April 2019</p> <p>Werribee Farmers, Wednesday 1 May 2019</p> <p>Australian Horse Industry Council, Tuesday 28 May 2019</p> <p>Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Earth Resources Policy and Programs, 11 April 2019</p>

In parallel with the broader engagement, DELWP led engagement activities with Traditional Owner groups who look after or have connection to land within the project area. Engagement with Traditional Owner groups is still ongoing and has not been included in this report.

2.3 Communication and promotional tools

Table 2 details the communication and promotional tools and activities that were undertaken to support the engagement. While all Victorians were able to contribute, the priority was reaching

out to farmers and people who live or work in the study area or are associated with the agricultural industry.

Table 2: Communication and promotion activities

Tool	Description	Reach
Email promotion	<p>Significant effort was made to reach out via a targeted DELWP email to potentially impacted community members, interested groups and key stakeholders to ensure they were notified about the project and opportunities to provide input.</p> <p>All email communication included a link to the Engage Victoria website, and an attached Fact Sheet.</p>	<p>Emails were sent to more than 150 peak bodies and community groups including the VFF, Landcare groups, residents' and ratepayers' associations, environmental and sustainability groups, and business associations.</p>
Briefing pack	<p>A briefing pack was created and shared with all local governments and government authorities within the project area. The pack was also sent to all Victorian Members of Parliament (MPs) within the project area.</p> <p>The intent of this pack was to support local government, authorities and MPs to communicate and promote the project and engagement process.</p> <p>The pack outlined the project and the engagement program and provided templates for social media and email promotion.</p>	<p>All local councils and Victorian MPs in the study area (outside the UGB and within 100km of central Melbourne) were sent the briefing pack (100+ councils, authorities and MPs).</p>
Traditional and social media promotion	<p>DELWP approached newspapers about publishing stories about the project and engagement process, including the Victorian Country Press Association, local Leader newspapers, and Moorabool News.</p> <p>A media release was circulated about the project on Thursday 14 March from the Minister for Planning, the Hon Richard Wynne MP.</p> <p>DELWP published 13 social media posts about the project and engagement opportunities.</p>	<p>Articles were published in Stock and Land, the Herald Sun, Southern Peninsula News, The North Central Review, the South Gippsland Sentinel-Times, The News (Mornington Peninsula), and The Free Press (Kilmore).</p> <p>Overall, over 72,500 people saw the social media posts, with 385 engagements (likes, comments, shares) and 573 clicks on posts (to either EngageVic or to attend a workshop).</p>
Project phone number	<p>DELWP staff members answered phone calls from community members enquiring about the project. The phone number was provided in all project materials, allowing community members to register for workshops over the phone and ask questions about the project.</p>	<p>The number of phone calls received was not recorded.</p>

3 Participation

Approximately 816 people participated in the project across the engagement activities.¹ Table 3 provides a breakdown of participation by engagement activity. The following section provides a summary of stakeholder types and region of interest.

Table 3: Participation by engagement activity

Engagement activity	Participants (approximately) ²
Local government and government authorities' workshop	Total: 47
Community workshops	Total: 319*
Bacchus Marsh	54
Mornington Peninsula	48
Koo Wee Rup	49
Kilmore	54
Yarra Junction	55
Marcus Hill	59
Online and written submissions (including engagement pack submissions)	426
One-on-one meetings	24

*Please note, the number of workshop attendees above is based on people that 'signed in' upon arrival at the workshops, and does not capture attendees who chose not to sign in. The number of attendees that chose not to sign in is estimated at an additional 10-20 participants per workshop. As specific information was not recorded about the number of additional attendees, it has not been included in the figures above.

Relationship to project

Participants were asked through workshop registrations and the online submission form to identify their relationship to the project. A total of 11 options were offered, and participants were able to select multiple relationships. The following stakeholder group combinations were large contributors to the engagement:

- a farmer who owns land and/or lives in the green wedge or peri-urban areas
- an interested community member who owns land and/or lives in the green wedge or peri-urban areas, and who is also part of a community group or organisation.

¹ Note on total participation number: participants were able to contribute to multiple engagement activities. The total tally is the number of participants at each event and who provided an online or written submission.

² The participants numbers are approximate for the community workshops as not all participants registered and/or attended on the evening.

Figure 4 below provides an overview of multiple relationships participants identified as having to the project.

A farmer in the peri-urban or green wedge area	314										
Involved in food processing/manufacturing	51	67									
Part of a community group or organisation	121	34	259								
Work for a government or a government authority	17	4	23	101							
Work in the agricultural industry	133	42	75	12	169						
Own land in the peri-urban and green wedge area	227	46	149	19	118	347					
Live on agricultural land in the peri-urban or green wedge area	193	41	113	10	107	200	223				
An interested community member	119	33	166	29	89	171	122	295			
Work for or represent the property industry	13	4	8	0	8	18	9	13	67		
A local Member of Parliament or Councillor	7	1	7	7	3	7	5	4	0	18	
A Traditional Owner, or represent a Traditional Owner or Aboriginal group	3	2	3	1	3	5	2	7	1	0	10
	A farmer in the peri-urban or green wedge area	Involved in food processing/manufacturing	Part of a community group or organisation	Work for a government or a government authority	Work in the agricultural industry	Own land in the peri-urban and green wedge area	Live on agricultural land in the peri-urban or green wedge area	An interested community member	Work for or represent the property industry	A local Member of Parliament or Councillor	A Traditional Owner, or represent a Traditional Owner or Aboriginal group

Figure 4: Matrix of different relationships participants identified as having to the project

An analysis of participants' relationship to the project and participation in engagement activities revealed that interested community members that are not part of a group or organisation were more likely to engage in the community workshops rather than complete the online submission

form. However, participants who identified as interested community members and who are also part of a community group or organisation were more likely to participate online.

Those participants who identified as representing a community group or organisation were asked to identify their group or organisation at the workshops. A full list of these identified groups and organisations is provided in Appendix C.

Participant interest in different regions

Online participants were asked what region of the green wedge and peri-urban areas they had an interest in or owned/lived on/managed land in. Participants were also provided the option to select all areas. As illustrated in Figure 5, the areas that received the most interest were:

- all the peri-urban and green wedge areas around Melbourne (24 per cent)
- South East Region (23 per cent).

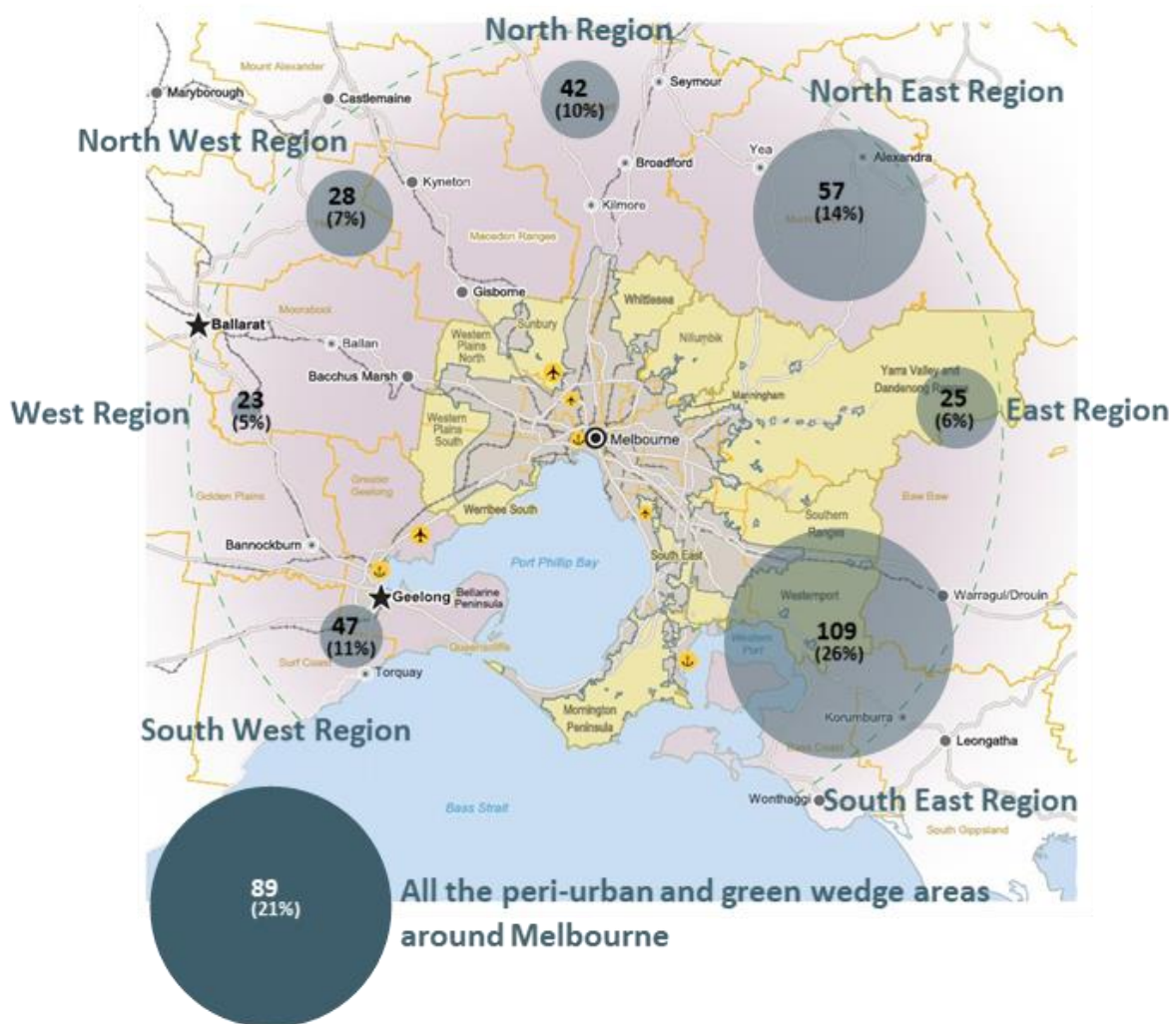


Figure 5: Region of interest for online participants (n=420)

4 Engagement findings

The following section details the findings of the stakeholder and community engagement. The findings have been reported on by the engagement questions under the following headings:

1. How the green wedge and peri-urban areas support Melbourne, along with general reactions to the project

Engagement questions reported on this section:

- *How do you think the green wedge and peri-urban areas support the Melbourne and Victorian community?* (online and government workshop)
- *What do you see as the biggest challenges for agricultural land management in the green wedge and peri-urban areas of Melbourne?* (online)
- *'What are your initial reactions to this project?'* (community workshops).

Relevant engagement objectives:

- Build a shared understanding of the importance of and pressures on agricultural land in the peri-urban and green wedge areas of Melbourne, now and into the future.
- Foster support for the need to protect strategic agricultural land.
- Identify local concerns, challenges and opportunities regarding the protection of strategic agricultural land, building on past experiences and known challenges.

2. Feedback on the proposed criteria

Engagement questions reported on in this section:

- *Have we got the right criteria?* (online, community workshop, and government workshop)
- Level of agreement that *the proposed criteria will effectively determine whether agricultural land is strategic in the future* (online and community workshops)
- *How important are each of the proposed criteria?* (online and community workshops).

Relevant engagement objectives:

- Verify and adapt regional-level agricultural information at a local level with community, stakeholders and other technical inputs.
- Test, refine and expand (if necessary) the criteria for determining strategic agricultural land and the currently identified areas, including key assumptions and inputs.

3. Key local and region-specific factors to consider

Engagement question reported on in this section:

- *What local or regional factors should we know about when assessing whether agricultural land is strategic?* (online and community workshop).

Relevant engagement objectives:

- Verify and adapt regional-level agricultural information at a local level with community, stakeholders and other technical inputs.

4. Desired outcomes of the planning response

Engagement questions reported on in this section:

- *What do you want the planning response to achieve?* (online, community workshop and government workshop).

Relevant engagement objectives:

- Understand what outcomes community and stakeholders want the planning response to achieve in relation to the protection of strategic agricultural land.

5. The use of planning controls to manage agricultural land

- *How do you currently manage agricultural land through the planning system and how effective is this approach?* (government workshop)
- *What are the benefits and constraints of using planning controls to protect strategic agricultural land?* (government workshop).

Relevant engagement objectives:

- Understand what outcomes community and stakeholders want the planning response to achieve in relation to protecting strategic agricultural land.
- Identify local concerns, challenges and opportunities regarding the protection of strategic agricultural land, building on past experiences and known challenges.

4.1 Initial reactions to the project

4.1.1 The role of Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas

Participants identified many ways that green wedge and peri-urban areas support the community in Melbourne and Victoria more broadly. Through the analysis it was clear that Melbourne's green wedge and peri-urban areas are seen as predominantly providing:

- high-value agricultural land
- natural landscapes and biodiversity.

Within each of these overarching values, more specific values were identified. These have been summarised below in descending order of how frequently the value was described (under each theme):

High-value agricultural land

- providing land for farming and food production
- providing fresh, local food and food security for Melbourne
- reducing food miles, transport costs and carbon emissions by enabling food to be produced close to markets
- providing employment opportunities for regional and urban communities in agriculture, and generally boosting the Victorian economy.

Natural landscapes and biodiversity

- providing environmental and biodiversity assets, including clean air ('Melbourne's lungs'), waterway and catchment health, wildlife corridors, and carbon sinks
- supporting the liveability of Melbourne by containing urban sprawl and reducing the urban heat island effect
- providing physical and mental health amenities for urban populations including accessible and green open space, and 'breathing space' from built form in urban areas
- preserving access to country and protecting Aboriginal culture and historical sites
- retaining desirable tourist destinations and supporting the tourism economy.

"I think the green wedge and peri-urban areas are vital to Melbourne's liveability and sustainability. They provide a 'green lung' to help counter the ever-growing pollution caused by the increasing volume of traffic in Melbourne. Crucially, green wedge and peri-urban areas need to be safe-guarded for both agriculture and natural habitat preservation." – online participant

“Both the green wedge and peri-urban rural areas provide the lungs and in a lot of cases the recreation open space and limited agricultural produce for Melbourne and the Victorian Community. The criteria and reasons for such land has been explained through numerous planning studies, planning amendments and legislative acts. The development of the green wedges dates back to the 60's and 70's when governments really were into long term planning and agencies like the MMBW were able to implement the State Policy. Don't reinvent the wheel, just uphold what is already in place.” – online participant

“These are vital areas for agriculture which provide local, fresh produce direct to customers. This has increased health benefits for customers families, reduces food miles which in turn reduces pollution on a variety of levels... from reducing pollution from fuel to reducing packaging and plastic waste. Most of the farms within these regions are small family businesses which help support their local communities and create jobs.” – online participant

Within the online submission form, participants were asked ‘do you understand why protecting agricultural land around Melbourne for food production is important?’. At the end of the community workshops, participants were asked to record their level of agreement with the statement ‘I understand why strategic agricultural land in the peri-urban and green wedge area should be protected’. As illustrated in Figure 6 and Figure 7, the responses to these questions illustrated a high level of understanding in relation to this topic. However, due to the nuanced differences in the style of questioning, the data has been reported on separately. Both questions support the engagement objectives to build a shared understanding of the importance of and pressures on agricultural land around Melbourne, and to foster support for protecting strategic agricultural land.

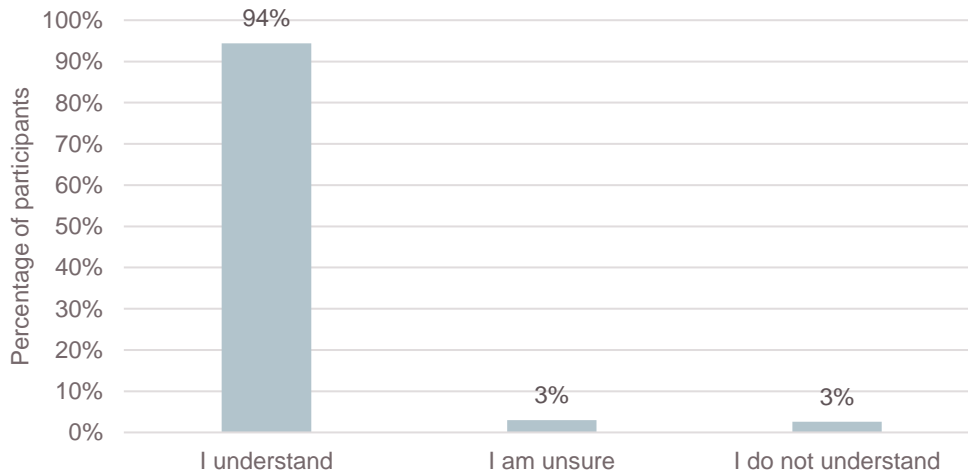


Figure 6: Online participant responses to the question 'Do you understand why protecting agricultural land around Melbourne for food production is important?' (n=312)

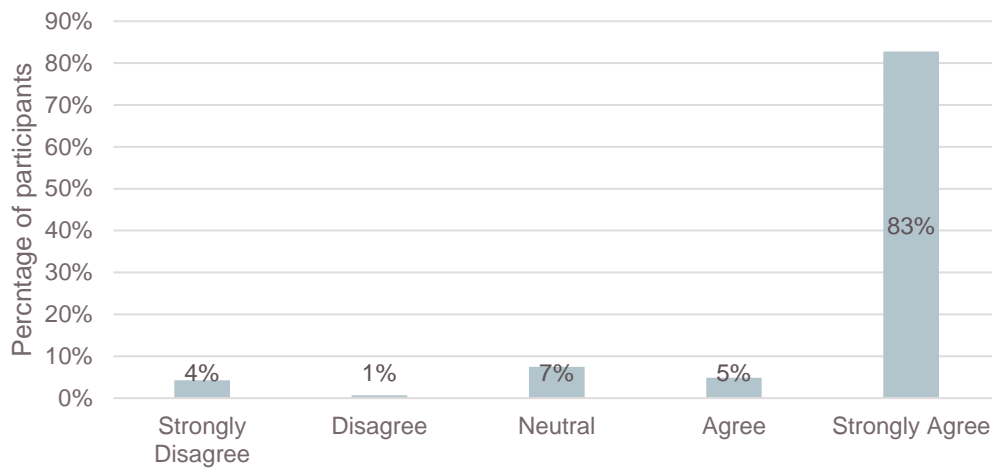


Figure 7: Workshop participant responses to the statement 'I understand why strategic agricultural land in the peri-urban and green wedge areas should be protected' (n=307)

Overwhelmingly, participants acknowledged the growing pressure on agricultural land throughout green wedge and peri-urban areas. Competing land uses were discussed, along with pressures on land values and availability due to property developers, 'land bankers' and lifestyle/hobby farms. Participants also highlighted growing land use conflicts, suggesting that hobby farmers and people in new residential areas tend to complain about noise, dust and other amenity issues caused by agricultural activities.

4.1.2 Initial reactions to the project

Responses to the question *'what are your initial reactions to this project?'* were focused around direct feedback on the project and its intent. Responses included levels of support and concerns about the project.

Overall the number of supportive comments was similar to the number of concerned comments across all participant feedback. Table 4 provides a summary of the reasons why participants were supportive of or concerned about the project.

Table 4: Reasons why participants were supportive of or concerned about the project

Support	Concern
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It will prevent urban encroachment in agricultural areas, protecting highly productive regions. encroachment. • Providing certainty will be very beneficial to farmers and the agricultural industry. • This project re-prioritises agriculture in the planning of Melbourne and Victoria (many feel this is long overdue). • It may help minimise competing uses in the area. • Protecting food production will be very important to ensure food security for a growing population in Victoria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmers in the green wedge and peri-urban areas are struggling to make a viable living from agriculture, and protecting this land for agriculture will not change that. • Water costs and rates are already too high for people to farm viably in these areas. • This project is too little too late; costs are already too high, land is too fragmented, and urban development has expanded too far for enough high-quality land to be protected. • Land within 100km of Melbourne is facing too many pressures. It would be better to protect agricultural land further out. • Identifying only some agricultural land as strategic will weaken the value and controls on other agricultural land. • Farmers should have the right to make decisions about their property and have the choice to sell it for residential land if farming is not viable. • This project will not support agriculture due to a history of discussing this issue with little effective action taken.

"This project is too little, too late. The horse has bolted." – Kilmore Community Workshop participant

"If you can't make a living off it – why make it farm land? Rates are too high, land not viable (Council rates 25% of gross income)" – Koo Wee Rup Community Workshop participant

4.2 Feedback on the draft criteria

The draft criteria prepared by DELWP indicate the key considerations in determining the strategic significance of land for agriculture as well as the areas that would potentially be identified as strategic agricultural land using those draft criteria. The draft maps and criteria were shared online and at the workshops. In giving their feedback, participants were asked to consider the likely effectiveness of the criteria, whether the criteria were right, and their level of importance.

4.2.1 Overall likely effectiveness of the criteria

Many participants agreed or strongly agreed (49 per cent) that the proposed criteria will effectively determine whether agricultural land is strategic now and in the future. Fewer disagreed or strongly disagreed (27 per cent). There was a high proportion of people who were unsure (24 per cent).

When looking at the different relationships people had to the project there were a couple of notable trends with regards to the level of agreement with whether the draft criteria would be effective:

- those who identified as 'interested community members' were more likely to agree or strongly agree (53 per cent)
- those who identified as 'work for or represent the property industry' were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree (53 per cent)
- those who identified as 'a farmer in the peri-urban or green wedge area' were more likely to be unsure (26 per cent).

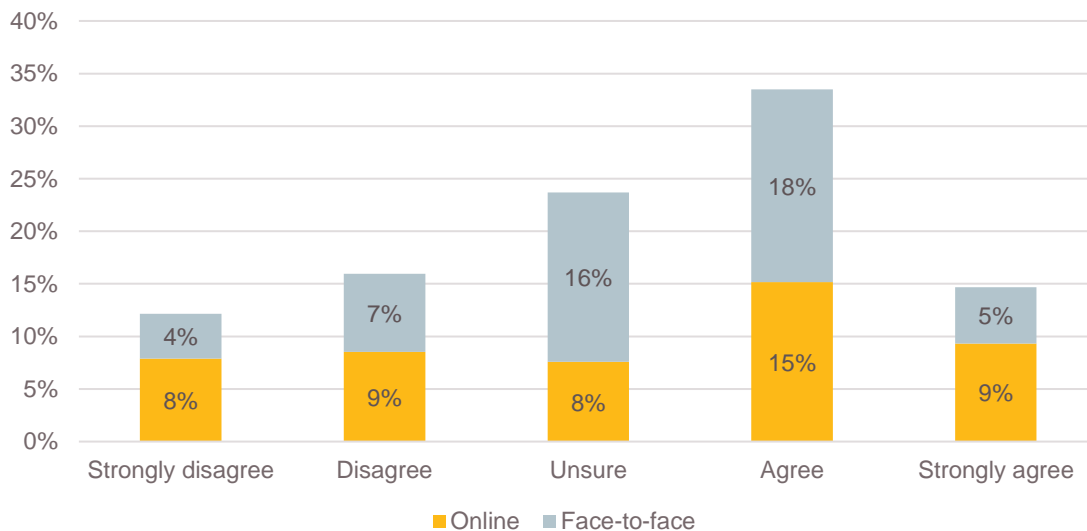


Figure 8: Participants' responses to whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'The proposed criteria will effectively determine whether agricultural land is strategic now, and in the future' (n=633).

4.2.2 Have we got the right criteria?

Participants were positive overall about the draft criteria with more people answering 'yes' than 'no' to the question '*have we got the right criteria?*'. Overwhelmingly, however, people reported that the criteria were partially correct. Specific comments shared in relation to this question were predominantly focused around the Water Access and Land Capability criteria. There were also comments about the exclusion criteria and additional considerations for refining and expanding the criteria.

Feedback on Land Capability criteria

Proposed Land Capability criteria: Naturally fertile land with minimal constraints and highly capable for intensive, soil-based agriculture

The Land Capability criteria was one of the most discussed criteria in response to the question '*have we got the right criteria?*', with 103 comments relating specifically to the Land Capability criteria. The following points summarise the key messages raised in the feedback relating to Land Capability:

- Concerns around measuring and **valuing soil quality** was consistently raised in the feedback on the Land Capability criteria. Many participants expressed concern that too much focus was being placed on particular soil-based agriculture and did not recognise that different soil conditions can be good for different commodities e.g. saline soils can successfully produce wheat, lucerne and sorghum.
- Approximately 10 participant comments discussed how **soil conditions are not static** and can be changed over time with different management methods and innovative technology.
- Some participants commented about the **impact on land that is not considered strategic** and whether such land would not be provided with enough protection from urban encroachment.

"We agree it is important to prioritise and protect naturally fertile land for agriculture, however the criteria shouldn't preclude the option to also protect land where soils may have been depleted but can be rehabilitated over time to support sustainable intensive soil-based agriculture." – Online participant

"Land capability' needs to be measured positively to optimise potential for food production. Designating agricultural land as higher or lower in value fails to recognise that all land has potential to support a food enterprise, which contributes to the local economy and climate resilience. The assessment should be framed so as to protect and identify the best use of all agricultural land in order to meet Melbourne's food needs." – Online participant

"Concern that grazing land classed as not strategic and the fear is that local council will allow subdivision and reduce grazing land available." – Yarra Junction Community Workshop participant

Feedback on Water Access criteria

Proposed Water Access criteria: Farmland with access to a secure water supply

Water Access criteria was the most commented on criteria in relation to the questions 'have we got the right criteria?'. Approximately 130 comments were made regarding the Water Access criteria.

Many of the participant comments focused on the different water sources and how one water source may be valued over another. For example, not all water sources are equal in quality, cost and accessibility.

Access and use of recycled water was the most discussed topic in relation to alternative water sources. Overall, participants wanted to see greater emphasis placed on recycled water as an option but identified further considerations, including:

- the need to understand current infrastructure provision to support recycled water access
- potential for improving recycled water access in the future through improved infrastructure
- addressing the affordability of recycled water as an alternative water source for farms, as treating water can be expensive
- the quality of recycled water and recognising that it is not always suitable.

Regarding access to groundwater, some participants raised concerns around overuse and that it is not an infinite resource. Some participants suggested that licences for groundwater and dams should be prioritised and streamlined for farmers.

"More investment needed to improve the quality of recycled water, so it can be widely utilised. Benefits to the AG industry outweigh the cost of implementing water improvements initiatives." – Kilmore Community Workshop participant

"There is not currently a strategic position on utilisation of groundwater." – East/North East Government Workshop participant

Other overarching messages that came through the participant comments in relation to the Water Access criteria were:

- the need to consider affordability of water in general, but also the cost of water related infrastructure
- reliability of water and how this is measured, particularly regarding rainfall and what happens to water access when restrictions are in place
- access to quality water, including examples where high-quality water is required but also how varying levels of quality can be used for different farming practices
- how infrastructure provision is determined and the future capacities and opportunities to extend infrastructure.

Victorian water authorities also provided feedback regarding water access, highlighting that the location of strategic agricultural land must consider future water infrastructure planned for different regions. Water authorities confirmed that they could provide detailed information and maps regarding existing and future water infrastructure, along with information about water quality. Another key theme emphasised by water authorities was the need for a holistic and sustainable approach to water management, waterway health and biodiversity. Planning outcomes regarding strategic agricultural land should respond to existing water management policies and declared catchment areas.

Feedback on Resilience and Adaptability Criteria

Proposed Resilience and Adaptability criteria: Land that is resilient to the potential impacts of climate change

Approximately 50 participant responses specifically referenced Resilience and Adaptability in their feedback on the draft criteria.

Responses relating to Resilience and Adaptability were generally of a broad nature. The overarching message from participants was that it is important to consider climate change in identifying strategic agricultural land in the green wedge and peri-urban areas of Melbourne.

According to responses, the criteria should consider accurate predictions of increased flooding events, bushfires, extreme temperatures and decreased rainfall. Participants felt that the criteria should also consider (coastal) inundation, protecting biodiversity and mitigating climate change rather than just 'living' with and adapting to climate change.

Participants discussed the importance of accurate and thorough modelling. The criteria should also be reviewed regularly and adapt to longer-term changes in climate, while responding to climate change predictions. There was a level of uncertainty in participant responses about the impacts of climate change in the future.

Participants suggested the criteria should consider agricultural innovation and technology, renewable energy sources, and broader growing methods including greenhouses.

"Reassessment of strategic agricultural land needs to factor in climate change. Need flexibility in future, have a review process if climate continues to change and influence prime growing areas." – Koo Wee Run Workshop participant

"Yes, but do we have the right information behind the criteria? For example, climate modelling. Needs to be thorough and adapted." – Koo Wee Run Workshop participant

"Climate resilience: temperature extremes are as important if not more important than average temperatures." - Government Workshop participant

Feedback on Existing Land Use and Integration with Industry Criteria

Proposed Existing Land Use and Integration with Industry criteria: Land that is currently used for intensive agricultural purposes or supports the viability of an agricultural area

Existing Land Use and Integration with Industry was commented on 57 times.

Concern was raised by participants that the criteria is too limiting. Participants emphasised that complementary industries such as food processing, tourism, and hospitality should be encouraged and supported on surrounding land. Participants also raised questions such as, 'what if land in the area is not an agricultural enterprise?' or 'is no longer farmable', expressing the need for flexibility in the criteria and the need for clarity. Participants also expressed desire for clarity around the definitions of 'industry clusters' and 'intensive agriculture'.

Participants called for more flexibility around uses that might be allowed within areas of strategic agricultural land, and asked for the recognition of other uses such as timber harvesting, equine industry and (beef and sheep) grazing. It was evident in participant responses that more guidance and clarification is required about permitted land uses and their implications on future of strategic agricultural land.

"Value added industries, for example, tourism and cafes, play a role in making these areas profitable. Need value add to make business profitable." – Bacchus Marsh Workshop participant

"How agriculture interacts with other competing and complementary uses, for example, conservation, tourism." – Government Workshop participant

"Yes, but the criteria you suggest seem to relate mainly to horticultural pursuits. Other types of agriculture, such as grazing, ARE suited to the types of terrain you have deemed "less suitable" (providing the land is carefully managed)." – Online participant

Other considerations – exclusionary criteria

Proposed other considerations and exclusion criteria: Factors that may prevent land from being classified as Strategic Agricultural Land

Participants were not asked specifically about exclusionary criteria. However, there were approximately 80 comments received in relation to having exclusions.

Most of these comments were focused on excluding land based on size and extent of area. Views were mixed: some participants supported the exclusion of small lots (as suggested in 25 comments), while others indicated concern about this (22 comments). For those in support, the rationale tended to be around the belief that large farms were more financially sustainable and economically viable. Those participants that expressed concern highlighted the following issues:

- impacts on people being able to subdivide their property for financial reasons
- some commodities can be highly productive on small lots.

Several participants discussed the exclusion of land based on current land use and noted that some existing high-value land could be missed. This includes comments shared around excluding land within the current Urban Growth Boundary (UGB).

"The exclusion criteria may be too rigid - land zones for other purposes (port related uses) may be more valuable for agriculture." – Mornington Peninsula Workshop participant

"We should look at systems to aggregate farms - farm gates etc. Lot size should not exclude them from the assessment now, because this could change in the future." – one-on-one discussion

"I do not believe that the Rural Conservation Zone (RCZ) can be considered as applicable for genuinely encouraging and supporting agricultural purposes. Given that the RCZ provides for ...agricultural use consistent with the conservation of environmental and landscape values of the area."
– online participant

"Some people are making a good living on five acres - intensive horticulture - soil and water - good margin." – Yarra Junction Workshop participant

Suggestions for additional criteria

Following a review of the comments in relation to the question *'have we got the right criteria?'* several considerations for additional criteria emerged. These suggested additions could be either new criteria or included in existing criteria. The three emerging criteria were:

1. Economic viability
2. Future technology and innovation
3. Access to transport infrastructure and networks.

Economic viability was raised most consistently (directly commented on 63 times). Many participants wanted to see the economic viability of farms included in the criteria. The key elements they outlined that impact viability were:

- council rates
- the ease of transporting goods to market
- costs of inputs and services such as water and electricity
- ability to raise money for investing in equipment and soil improvement
- declining terms of trade
- the cost for moving farm equipment as a result of VicRoads restrictions.

The next most mentioned addition was **access to transport infrastructure and networks** (37 comments). They highlighted that transport infrastructure is needed to get produce to market and some areas had greater access than others. The Epping Wholesale market was listed as an example where the market is far from the Mornington Peninsula's agricultural areas, and transport infrastructure is heavily congested. Comments also explored how the criteria should consider opportunities for future improvements to transport links (for example setting aside land for strategic transport networks) and upgrading road capacity.

Future technology and innovation was also suggested by participants as an additional criteria (28 comments). Many participants expressed concern that the draft criteria focuses too much on traditional farming practices and did not allow flexibility for future practices that would make farming more efficient and improve soil capability.

"The future of this area is intensive agricultural sheds; this needs to come into the criteria and projects. Because the value of the land and all of the input costs means you have to be very intense, and therefore you need access to affordable water." – one-on-one discussion

"Access is not fixed and can be modified by improving roads/trains etc." – East/North East Government Workshop participant

"Where are the considerations for economic links i.e. access/transport to markets, transportation logistics?" – Bacchus Marsh Workshop participant

4.2.3 Overall importance of criteria

Participants were asked to rate how important they felt each of the criteria were. As illustrated in Figure 9, the criteria that received the highest importance rating was Water Access, with 73 per cent (446 participants) selecting 'very important'. Land Capability also received a high importance rating with 58 per cent (352 participants) selecting 'very important'. This is reflective of the volume of comments and feedback given on the Water Access and Land Capability criteria.

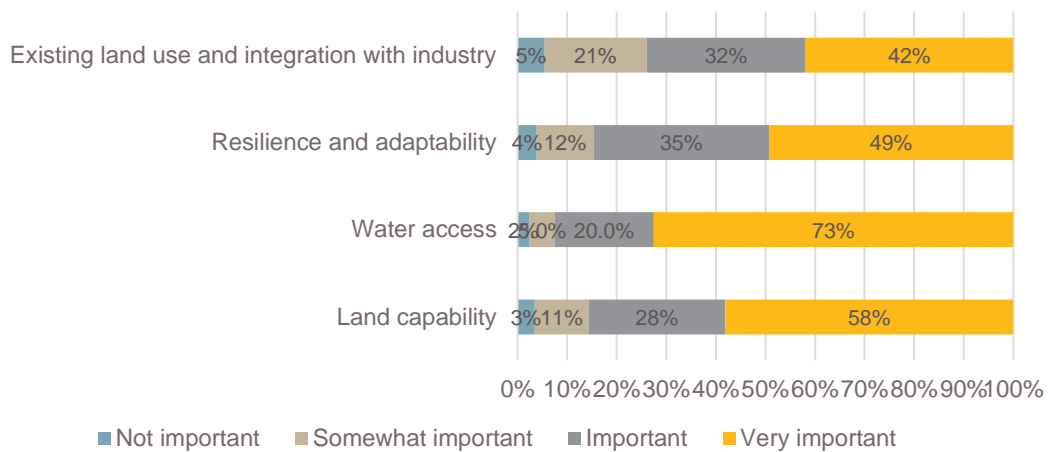


Figure 9: Overall importance of criteria

4.3 Key local and regional factors to consider

During community workshops and through the online submission form participants were asked ‘what local or regional factors should [DELWP] know about when assessing whether agricultural land is strategic?’ Across the region-specific comments, variation arose because of the themes participants in each region tended to focus on most. There were also some references to localised considerations. The following section summarises findings by region.

4.3.1 South West Region

Participants who attended the Marcus Hill workshop or who focused on the South West Region in their online or written submission identified specific regional considerations. These related to the suitability of land, water access, land value, urban growth, and water access and quality.

The **suitability of land** was discussed by participants in relation to identifying strategic agricultural land. During the workshop, participants identified that farming on the Bellarine Peninsula and in the South West Region can be limited because of the viability of the land for intensive farming, varying land quality, and small lot sizes in the area. Online feedback about the South West Region echoed concerns that mapping included some areas that should not be considered strategic agricultural land.

“RCZ areas impacted by proposed SAL overlays in Surf Coast are highly fragile, low agricultural quality with minimal capacity for increased intensity of agricultural production. These areas are also very small in lot size (1-10ha)”- Marcus Hill workshop participant.

Managing **urban growth** and defining urban boundaries in alignment with urban planning controls was highlighted as a key concern in the South West Region, particularly near Torquay. One comment mentioned that integration with other planning frameworks including the Surf

Coast Shire Rural Hinterlands Strategy, precinct structure plans, and the VicRoads Eastern Link Road project should be considered in the process of identifying strategic agricultural land.

Upgrading existing infrastructure, in particular roads, was identified as necessary for land to be viably farmed. This was considered important by participants in the South West Region because of access to markets, agritourism, and movement of machinery around the area.

The **impact of land values on the viability of farming** was identified as a concern. Current and potential future increases in land value and decreasing availability of agricultural land was regularly raised by participants in the Bellarine Peninsula and South West.

Water access and quality was raised as important by some participants. Some participants were concerned about the long-term sustainability of groundwater management, and also suggested that groundwater licencing should prioritise farmers. Availability and use of recycled water was also considered a critical issue regarding water access. One submission suggested consideration of the proposed Western Irrigation Network, which could feed into the criteria as it will impact access to water in the South West Region.

4.3.2 West and North West Region

Participants who attended the Bacchus Marsh Workshop or who focused on the West and North West Regions in their online or written submission generally focused on the application of the criteria particularly in relation to identifying suitable land and also access to quality water. Economic viability and policy integration were themes that also emerged through the comments.

Participants expressed some concern about the **application of the criteria** and how criteria have not adequately captured valuable agricultural land at a local level particularly in the Hume area, and around Ballan and the Brisbane Ranges. Comments mentioned the need to define what land is suitable for agriculture, and recognise that different conditions can support different crops or management practices. Participants also noted areas that should be excluded such as the Parwan Employment Precinct, Parwan Station Precinct, and the Merrimu Precinct. Land around Melbourne's Tullamarine airport was also identified as a concern.

Regarding **water access**, participant comments focused on accessing quality water, with many participants mentioning the Western Irrigation Network project. Comments indicated issues relating to:

- whether the water network had been adequately considered in the assessment
- water salinity and pollutants can impact crops and require the use of chemicals
- the desire for water quality to be fit-for-purpose and at least meet Class A standards
- the need to limit industrial waste entering water systems to improve water quality
- the increasing cost of water
- a desire to see this issue given further consideration.

Economic viability was identified by participants in these regions, who were concerned about rising costs of doing business in the agricultural sector. Comments highlighted the need for farmers to be supported to be viable and sustainable in the long-term.

Policy integration was raised as a key issue. Several participants commented on the need to integrate State-level planning controls to protect strategic agricultural land with localised policy and planning, particularly at a local government level where more localised knowledge and approaches are being applied to land use planning. State-level planning controls, for example, should consider land use conflict between agricultural and urban uses, along with existing constraints and policies, such as approved structure plans.

"Farmers need to be supported to be viable and sustainable - otherwise they have no choice but to subdivide." – Bacchus Marsh Community Workshop participant

"Irrigation district desperately needs review, boundaries aren't right." – Bacchus Marsh Community Workshop participant

"The Bacchus Marsh and Werribee systems are relatively expensive water, with costs increasing for users as land leaves the supply system. This water often has impacts on crops which needs correction with agricultural chemicals." – Online participant

4.3.3 North Region

Participants who attended the Kilmore Workshop or who had a relationship with the North Region in their online or written submission broadly focused on the application of the criteria to determine what land is strategic, Access to Water criteria, transport infrastructure, and planning.

In relation to the **application of the criteria** in this region, concern was expressed around the size of lots, particularly in the Whittlesea area where some participants suggested lot sizes are too small. There was some commentary on the need to consider how smaller lots could be consolidated, but also concern about whether that is achievable. It was also suggested that smaller lots do not pose a barrier if appropriate agricultural practices and uses are employed. Some strategic agricultural land identified in this region was questioned for its suitability, due to areas with hard ground, rocks, and poor access to water and transport.

Several comments mentioned **water access** in this region and identified some key considerations:

- water availability is a problem with low rainfall being experienced
- the Kilmore wastewater treatment plant is already providing recycled water and should be considered
- the Goulburn River should be recognised more
- the wastewater treatment plant near Craigieburn Bypass has not been mapped
- Lancefield bore water should be considered as a water source.

Transport access and infrastructure was raised through several comments from the North Region. In particular, participants raised concern about existing road capacity, their ability to

support truck movements and also access to move livestock across roads. Several comments supported exploring rail access to reduce pressure on the road network and also support employee access. Major road and arterials were reported to restrict or 'land lock' agricultural land in some cases, with suggestions that road planning should be integrated with strategic agricultural land strategies. Areas around the northern corridor and the Hume Highway were identified as having good access to Sydney and the Melbourne markets, due to their proximity to key transport infrastructure and routes.

The issue of **soil capability** was also raised as an issue in the North Region, with participants emphasising rocky, dry conditions. Some other standalone comments from the North Region included:

- the Kyneton and Seymour abattoirs are valued supporting services that complement local agricultural businesses
- development outside the UGB is inflating land values and leading to conflicting land uses
- there is a need to consider Traditional Owner knowledge of the region.

"Connection to Melbourne via road and rail. Farm workers are often sourced from a wider area so easy access for those workers is of high importance." – online participant

"Land size matters for agriculture. Areas that are too small to provide for economically viable farming are not worth protecting for their strategic value - as any value they may potentially have will be outweighed by the economic reality - which is they are not able to be sustainably farmed." – online participant

4.3.4 North East and East Regions

Participants who attended the Yarra Junction Workshop or who focused on the North East or East Region in their online or written submission cited current land uses, the process of assessing the suitability of land for agriculture, and preparing for a changing climate as important local issues.

Participants in these regions were concerned about the process of **determining land suitable for agriculture**, and the types of agriculture that should be considered valuable. Comments were made about the different types of farming that can be carried out (and in some places already are) on land not considered strategic. For example, some dry and rocky areas may not be considered valuable agricultural land under the proposed criteria, and yet may be good for certain types of cattle grazing, vineyards or hydroponics. Specific locations were discussed including Arthurs Creek, Strathewen, and Doreen, where participants identified existing agricultural activity, potential for sustainable agriculture and proximity to growing markets as reasons these areas could be considered strategic.

Participants discussed the need for a **greater understanding of current land uses**, including understanding the history of the land and learnings from previous farming generations.

Comments also mentioned the need to consider options to improve land conditions for agriculture and also that some farming does not rely on good quality soil.

Participants commented on the **impacts of climate change** and the need to focus efforts on regenerative management practices. Many of these comments were also in relation to recognising all agricultural land as valuable.

Other comments raised outside of these key themes included:

- Road congestion is a major barrier for agriculture in this region, which limits access to markets and movement of workers. They also highlighted that there are no accessible saleyards in the North East and East regions.
- Many comments were made about the potential designation of areas in Kangaroo Ground as strategic agricultural land. Participants highlighted that water access from the Yarra River is vulnerable to reduced rainfall and that much of the land in Kangaroo Ground has been bought by land speculators.
- Wineries and tourism are important industries in these regions. Land for these industries needs to be valued.

“Historical use, including that by indigenous peoples is a start, but perhaps most important is a knowledge of advances in food production techniques and land usage. There is a vast amount of research throughout the world that takes into consideration sustainability, soil restoration, climate change, population expansion, reduction or elimination of biocides, human and animal nutrition and integration with natural environment.” – online participant

“There should be an emphasis on conserving or restoring biodiversity in the green wedge. Land should be assessed for agricultural purposes in a way which aligns with this aim. Giving some agricultural land a higher 'strategic' status could lead to existing agricultural areas coming under rezoning pressure. All agricultural land in and around Melbourne should be protected.” – online participant

“Local or regional factors to be considered relate to the productive capacity of the area, the area required to be productive, and the access to markets and/or support industries. The presence of support industries (labour, packaging, transport, etc) may mean that a site incapable of producing a potato crop or market garden due to lack of soil and water (most of Kangaroo Ground and Panton Hill) could instead host other forms of perennial agriculture with an attached retail outlet or route to direct market. Alternately, two hectares of glasshouse ornamentals could also be viable.” – online participant

4.3.5 South East Region

Participants who attended the Koo Wee Rup Workshop or who focused on the South East Region in their online or written submission broadly highlighted location advantages and disadvantages, water access (particularly recycled and ground water), biodiversity, climate change and land fragmentation as key local issues.

Participants commented on the **location advantages** (and in some instances challenges) for this region. Comments recognised that proximity to transport, secondary industries, markets, quarries and processing plants support agriculture in the region. Conversely, participants cited transport congestion, urban growth pressures, challenges associated with a limited ability to move farming machinery between properties, and impacts on the 'right to farm' due to a lack of buffers between agricultural and residential land as disadvantages for the region.

Water access was a dominant theme discussed by participants from this region, particularly **recycled water and ground water access**. Comments mentioned the need for more pipes and improved efficiency of current pipelines to make the most of recycled water. Participants also discussed recognising the cost of the infrastructure and the significant distance it is required to reach some areas. Some participants noted that reduced access to ground water also prevents people from being able to build their own dams.

Biodiversity and the impacts of climate change were discussed by participants in this region, who specifically mentioned how revegetation and recognising the value of Traditional Owner practices can improve climate resilience. Participants also wanted to know how sea level rise and inundation around Western Port Bay is being considered.

Some participants talked about the **land fragmentation** and small lot sizes in this region. This was in relation to the growing pressure to scale up agricultural activities to be financially viable. Comments were also made about the challenges faced by farmers due to land banking and a lack of land on which to expand and scale up operations.

"We get the sense that this criteria is focused and informed by large scale agriculture, but many of the farms that operate in peri-urban Melbourne are small and micro-farms on smaller pieces of land. Get to know this sector – their needs, challenges, strengths, as it is very different to large agriculture. Consider the diversity of the farming sector instead of being informed only by the big end of town."
 – online participant

"Current water pipelines from Somers to Mt. Martha is under-utilised. Some water is going straight to the sea at Gunnamatta." - online participant

"Days of ground water are gone." – online participant

4.4 Desired outcomes of the planning response

Responses to the question, *'what do you want the planning response to achieve?'*, identified a range of outcomes that the community would like the planning response to protect strategic agricultural land to achieve. It is important to note that much of the feedback received against this question reflected a desire for outcomes that a planning response cannot deliver alone.

The analysis of comments identified six key desired planning outcomes:

1. prioritise the ability to farm and preserve agricultural land in areas identified as having high agricultural value (176 comments)
2. integrate other government policies and initiatives with planning controls to support the continued use of strategic agricultural land for farming (112 comments)
3. regulate land uses surrounding strategic agricultural land to maintain farming operations and land quality (99 comments)
4. support the economic viability of farm businesses (96 comments)
5. protect the environment by recognising the environmental and natural value of strategic agricultural land and promote sustainable farming practices (76 comments)
6. clarify acceptable uses and development of strategic agricultural land including how to meet the requirement for 'ancillary' uses and land used 'in conjunction with' other uses (75 comments)

Each of these outcomes is described in more detail below.

Prioritise the ability to farm and preserve agricultural land in areas identified as having high agricultural value

The term 'right to farm' was consistently heard through the engagement along with having planning mechanisms that support this to be achieved, including:

- strengthening planning objectives in the relevant rural zones
- reducing regulations for buildings and work associated with farming and tree removal
- prioritising the use of agricultural land for farming over residential development, airports and extractive industries.

Whilst the above themes were most strongly represented in the feedback relating to this outcome, additional commentary provided by participants to support this outcome included:

- a desire to regulate and enforce how strategic agricultural land is used on a site-by-site basis, for example, by requiring that a minimum percentage of land be used for agricultural production
- a desire for policy and initiatives that encourage expansion of farms on strategic agricultural land
- the planning responses should not only protect strategic agricultural land, but should also promote, enable and improve land
- the project study area should be applied more widely
- educate the broader community about farming operations and the value of agriculture to Victoria by notifying potential land owners in rural areas of the impacts of farming such as noise and dust (for example, through vendor statements).

Integration of other government policies and initiatives with planning controls to support the continued use of strategic agricultural land for farming

This theme captures a series of other policies and initiatives participants identified as being necessary to further protect strategic agricultural land. Many of these suggestions cannot be directly responded to by the planning system alone. However, these important considerations include suggestions for:

- creating a shared understanding and objectives across government departments and relevant agencies of their role in supporting farming and preservation of strategic agricultural land
- providing land management support to farmers, including weed and feral animal management
- providing incentives and financial support to existing farmers and agricultural businesses
- support research and practices that improve animal welfare
- provide incentives for strategic agricultural land to be returned to farming, helping to address issues such as those caused by 'land banking'
- fostering innovation within the agricultural sector and diversification of food production
- increasing regulation including tariffs for imported products, ensuring sustainable management of groundwater that prioritises licences for farmers, and improving biosecurity protection and ensuring sustainable management
- providing education for the agricultural industry on sustainable farming practices, including what to grow and where
- allowing freer movement of farm vehicles on public roads.

Regulate land uses surrounding strategic agricultural land to maintain farming operations and land quality

This theme seeks to prevent land use conflicts that can limit the ability to farm, by regulating and providing buffers between strategic agricultural land and other sensitive land uses. Participants suggested possible uses to be considered within buffers including industrial uses, tourism, residential development and rural lifestyle properties. Participants were divided as to whether these land uses should be permitted because they may negatively impact agricultural land. Participants also identified planning mechanisms to protect strategic agricultural land such as:

- removing third party review rights to object to planning applications on strategic agricultural land
- adopting an 'agent of change' principle to protect farming operations
- reducing urban sprawl of settlements by implementing permanent settlement boundaries.

Some responses also suggested that land surrounding strategic agricultural land should be used for open space, native habitat and wildlife corridors by mandating these outcomes or by

government gaining ownership of this land. In relation to these land uses, farming operators said that poor land management of adjoining land is a challenge which needs regulation and enforcement. Buffer areas should be located on land surrounding strategic agricultural land, rather than within the strategic agricultural land itself.

Support the economic viability of farm businesses

This theme seeks overarching confidence for long-term investment in the agricultural industry by making farming viable and providing incentives or subsidies for farmers to continue to invest in their business. Mechanisms suggested to achieve this include controlling rates and taxes, and clustering farming businesses with the industries that support them. Such initiatives may also help to incentivise the identification of agricultural land, rather than it being seen as an impediment.

Participants also raised concerns around defining certain land as having higher agricultural value than other land, and how this would impact property values. Some landowners expressed concerns about their superannuation and finances being dependent on their land value and future intentions to subdivide and sell their land. Participants also indicated a desire for planning controls that prohibit both speculative land purchasing and land used as rural lifestyle properties to prioritise protection of strategic agricultural land.

Ten participants also suggested compensation should be provided for any financial losses that related policies or outcomes of the project may cause.

Protect the environment by recognising the environmental and natural value of strategic land and promote sustainable farming practices

Responses within this theme recognised a contrast between preserving agriculture and preserving the environment and biodiversity in the study area, and highlighted concerns about how planning outcomes might prioritise one of these factors over another. Participants also expressed a desire to ensure that the natural and environmental value of potential strategic agricultural land is considered as part of any planning response.

There was varied feedback on the right to remove native vegetation to prioritise agriculture in areas of strategic agricultural land, and comments about whether native vegetation offsets justify any removal. Participants raised questions about whether these areas should prioritise agriculture or the natural environment.

Participants considered that land most resilient to climate change should be included as strategic agricultural land. Likewise, areas that are predicted to become more fertile or valuable in the long term due to climate change should also be included as strategic agricultural land. There was also a desire to consider 'worst case scenarios' such as oil shortages or drought to ensure food can be produced locally and under different constraints.

Participants also suggested incentivising environmentally sustainable farming practices, creating conservation areas for landowners that do not want to farm, and minimising farming practices which harm the environment. Concern was also raised that increased agricultural activity in declared water catchments could result in excess nutrient and contaminant runoff and negatively impact waterways and potable water supplies.

Clarify acceptable uses and development for strategic agricultural land, including how to meet the requirement for 'ancillary' uses and land used 'in conjunction with' another use

Feedback relating to this theme represented a broad desire for land uses permitted on strategic agricultural land to be clearly defined in the planning scheme. Some participants also sought greater certainty about when uses or development can be considered as 'ancillary' to agriculture, and clarity around acceptable conditions for land to be used 'in conjunction' with an agricultural use according to the Victoria Planning Provisions (Clause 64.02). While participants felt that agriculture should be the primary land use in strategic agricultural areas, they also wanted flexibility regarding land use regulations, allowing a range of other 'ancillary' uses to occur on their properties. However, participants also wanted land use regulations to be clear and robust enough to avoid 'loopholes'. For example, there was much debate about whether the following activities should be considered a primary agricultural use within these areas:

- equine related uses
- timber harvesting
- tourism
- food and drink premises
- farmgate operations
- nurseries
- horticulture
- rural lifestyle properties
- services to support the community such as schools and child care
- renewable energy
- market gardens.

Some participants favoured the inclusion of land uses such as tourism and market gardens to better support farming businesses. There was some concern raised around developments such as greenhouses and hydroponics, and whether they are the best use of strategic agricultural land with high quality soil. More specifically, some participants suggested that types of acceptable agricultural products to be produced on strategic agricultural land should be defined to include food (livestock, fruit and vegetables), fibre, and raw materials.

Outside of these six dominant themes, participants identified a variety of other outcomes (listed in order of the volume of comments):

- an effective **long-term policy response** that successfully provides protection for strategic agricultural land, confidence for investment in farming, and that considers sustainability of the land and emerging technological advancements (51 comments)
- **engaging with the community** for the life of this project and into the future on possible changes to strategic agricultural land to understand impacts on the broader community (45 comments)
- investment in **infrastructure** to support farming with a particular focus on availability and resilience of water infrastructure (recycling, irrigated, treated) and corresponding transport routes (43 comments)
- **reduced regulation** to enable farming operations to continue as-is by reducing the number of government departments that farming operators need to engage with; while enabling simpler pathways for planning approvals and planning scheme amendments (42 comments)

- prioritisation of **food systems** with a focus on local production and local processing (39 comments)
- **local planning responses** that acknowledge the nuances of each region whether this is reflected as schedules to a zone or overlay, local policies, alignment with Green Wedge Management Plans, precinct-based responses, or land uses which are in character with the area (38 comments)
- **inappropriate subdivision sizes and fragmentation** of high value agricultural land will be prevented. Participants suggested that this could be implemented through restructure overlays or tenement controls (28 comments)
- support for **succession planning** within families and for the industry more broadly, with suggestions for incentives for people to choose farming as a profession (22 comments)
- **flexibility** for the planning response to be altered according to different pressures that may emerge in the future and, greater flexibility in the planning scheme (17 comments)
- **support for decision makers** (including resources, training about agricultural land, land title restrictions and access to expert advice such as advisory panels) to ensure that the protection of strategic agricultural land is achieved (17 comments)
- allowance for a **variety of lot sizes** to support different kinds of farming and agricultural industries (17 comments)
- regulation of **'as of right' dwellings** on agricultural land. Different responses were received on whether the right for a dwelling on agricultural land 'as of right' is appropriate, should be tied to a subdivision size, and whether dwellings should only be permitted once an agricultural use has been established (16 comments)
- prioritisation of **commercial farming over 'hobby farms'** (16 comments)

4.5 The use of planning controls to manage agricultural land

The government workshop asked additional questions relating to the current use and effectiveness of planning controls, and also the benefits and constraints of these planning controls to protect strategic agricultural land. This section summarises the outcomes of the conversations.

4.5.1 Current planning system controls

Local government workshop participants discussed how they use planning controls to protect strategic agricultural land, and the effectiveness of the approach. The controls used include:

- zones (such as Green Wedge Zone (GWZ), Rural Conservation Zone (RCZ), Special Use Zone (SUZ), Rural Activity Zone (RAZ) and Farming Zone (FZ))
- overlays (such as Environmental Significance Overlay (ESO))
- plans (such as Green Wedge Management Plans (GWMP) and Land Management Plans), and
- policies (such as rural dwelling and subdivision policies, and rural zones policies).

Many participants also discussed the impacts of the broader political system on planning controls. Some participants stated that the role of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), councillor involvement and the interaction between state and local government impacted how effective planning system controls are.

Five participants found that the current planning system can effectively manage strategic agricultural land. Some participants who find the controls effective were describing a zone (two comments discussed the GWZ and the SUZ); one described a GWMP as effective; and two further comments stated that the political system and interaction between state and local government was effective.

20 participants said that the current planning system does not effectively protect strategic agricultural land. Participants' comments about ineffective controls largely related to political constraints such as councillor relationships, community objections, community awareness, interpretations of the planning scheme, and ministerial intervention. Two participants said that zones are not strict enough or required more regular review. Others mentioned poor compliance, or the lack of policies as the reason for ineffective planning controls.

4.5.2 Benefits and constraints of using planning controls

In further discussions about the constraints of using planning controls to protect strategic agricultural land, participants identified that planning controls are limited in what they can achieve (18 comments). For example, participants highlighted the political nature of implementing planning policy, due to factors such as VCAT costs and intervention, local politics and state-wide inconsistency of implementation. There can also be financial and resourcing constraints that can prevent landowners from effectively participating in planning processes. Governments and authorities can also be constrained by limited resources and funding to effectively implement and enforce planning policies.

Participants who identified benefits (three comments) said that zones, overlays and subdivisions are effective and flexible.

22 participants made suggestions about how to improve planning controls to better protect strategic agricultural land:

- introducing new zones or overlays to prioritise agricultural land use (this may include agricultural overlays, or an agricultural zone)
- referring to experts such as advisory groups, or agricultural specialists to help guide planning decisions
- delivering financial imperatives and strategies that foster the agricultural industry, such as supporting the growth and operation of agricultural markets, while providing long-term land leases for farmers at affordable prices
- controlling regional town growth (through applying regional town growth boundaries)
- creating a state-wide approach to protect strategic agricultural land (through a strategy for agriculture, a more robust policy framework or integration with other strategies such as housing strategies).

5 Engagement evaluation

Workshop participants provided feedback through individual evaluation forms. Overall, 310 people completed the form which asked participants whether they agreed or disagreed with the following three statements:

- the workshop was well run and facilitated
- I was able to give appropriate input about protecting strategic agricultural land around Melbourne
- the information presented was clear and relevant.

The evaluation results (illustrated in Figure 10) showed that:

- There was a high level of agreement that the workshops were well run and facilitated (59 per cent agree and 20 per cent strongly agreed).
- Most participants said that they could give appropriate input (57 per cent agreed and 14 per cent strongly agreed).
- Most participants agreed the information was clear and relevant (61 per cent agreed; 12 per cent strongly agreed).

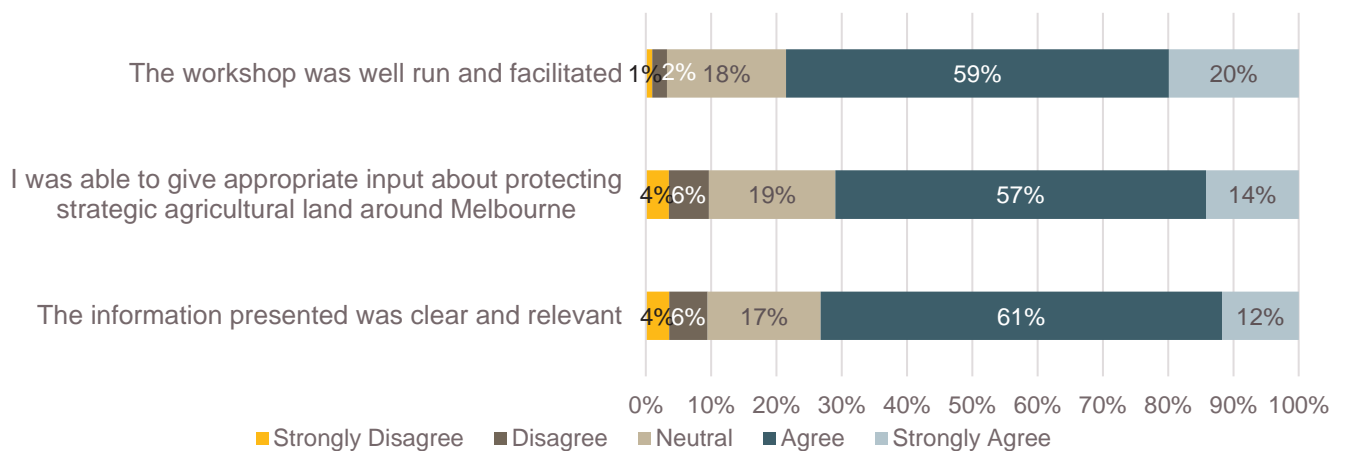


Figure 10: Evaluation results (n=310)

Participants were also invited to provide further comments about the workshops. Overall, 204 people chose to provide further comments. Many participants gave feedback about the engagement process, facilitation and agenda as well as recommendations for future and further engagement.

Many used the evaluation comments as an opportunity to comment on the project content. However, participants who attended the Bellarine workshop largely commented about the engagement process and timelines of online engagement.

Comments on facilitation, agenda, promotion and venues

A lot of comments about the facilitation were positive. Some people suggested that the agenda need to include more time for answering questions, or that they did not feel there was enough time to cover such a complex topic. Some participants suggested that venues were too loud, and that there were AV issues.

"An excellent session plus a great opportunity to 'bounce' ideas with other table members." –
Morningside Peninsula Community Workshop participant

"They did a good job at balancing the high emotional context of land ownership and agriculture. Emotional intelligence and empathy is important and was adequately expressed. Take it slower perhaps." – Bacchus Marsh Community Workshop participant

Some participants made comments about the event promotion, including suggestions that:

- the engagement be promoted more widely
- evaluation forms ask how people heard about events, to inform future promotional channels
- letters be posted directly to farmers and landowners in the study area.

Information available

While most participants agreed that the information presented was 'clear and relevant', some provided further comments suggesting that the following could be improved:

- level of detail provided in mapping
- using area-specific presentation material, examples and maps
- providing better definition of key terms
- using plain English during presentations that the audience could understand
- providing information ahead of time.

"Really informative session. Lots of opportunities for input. Really good to have maps to work with." –
Koo Wee Rup Community Workshop participant

Engagement process and timing

Some participants made comments about the engagement process and future engagement. Suggestions to improve the process included ideas to:

- undertake more in-depth engagement through hosting more workshops (with more people and in more locations)
- establish a planning committee with local community members

- continue to engage with and update the community and stakeholders as the project progresses.

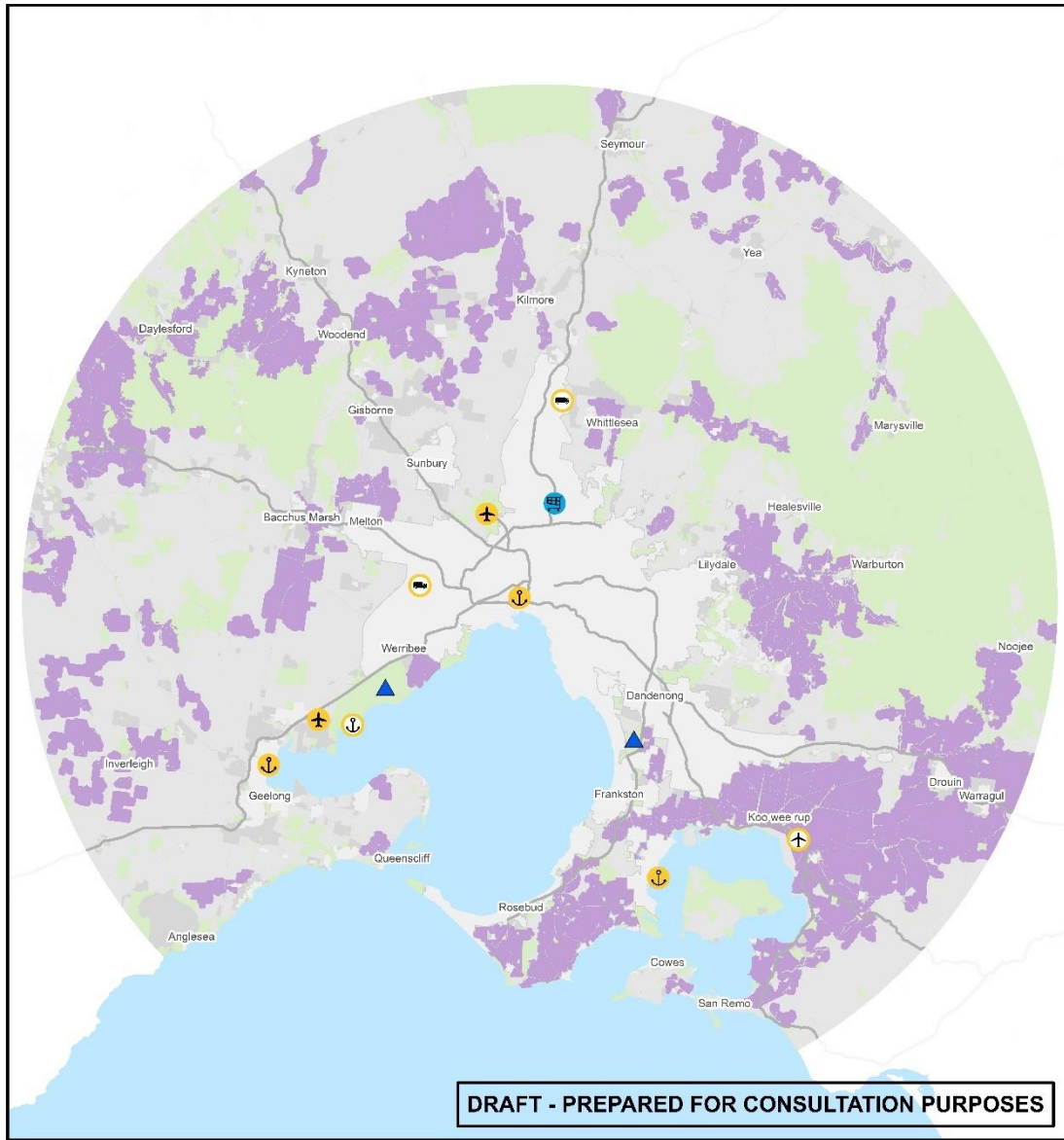
“Very well done. It is important that the Government take great heed of the inputs and comments made.” – Kilmore Community Workshop participant

Appendix A: Draft Criteria for discussion purposes

The following draft criteria were released for discussion as part of the engagement.

LAND CAPABILITY	
Naturally fertile land with minimal constraints and highly capable for intensive, soil-based agriculture	<p>Land identified as highly capable for intensive, soil-based agriculture, taking into account the following characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality soil: soils that are high value due to their year-round and multi-purpose properties. • Niche soil: soils that are particularly good for certain crops and support niche industries. • Suitable terrain and landscapes: land with minimal slope, rock outcrop, and no presence of coastal acid sulphate soils, salinity or other noxious components. • Reliable rainfall: areas with reliable long-term natural rainfall that provides adequate supply for agricultural production. • Low risk of land degradation: Land with very low risk of land degradation such as flooding risk, inundation, land slips and erosion hazard.
WATER ACCESS	
Farmland with access to a secure water supply	Access to irrigation infrastructure: access to existing irrigation infrastructure that provides a reliable water source for agricultural regions. Green wedge and peri-urban irrigated areas include Werribee and Bacchus March irrigation districts.
	High potential for access to alternative water sources: Areas identified as having potential future alternative water access or areas in proximity to major waste water pipelines and key sewerage treatment plants with potential capability to supply recycled water in the future.
	Access to good quality groundwater: access to a verified source of good quality groundwater found in Groundwater Management Areas and Water Supply Protection Areas.
RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY	
Land that is resilient to the potential impacts of climate change	Climate resilience: Highly versatile agricultural areas suitable for producing a greater range of cropping, horticulture and pasture purposes both currently and under forecast climate scenarios for 2030, 2050 and 2070.
EXISTING LAND USE & INTEGRATION WITH INDUSTRY	
Land that is currently used for intensive agricultural purposes or supports the viability of an agricultural area	Existing intensive higher-value agricultural land use: Areas that currently support intensive soil-based agricultural industries including dairy, horticulture, viticulture and general cropping.
	Post-farm-gate processing and value adding: Areas that support industries with critical links including processing plants and major packing houses.
	Industry clusters: areas where industries have successfully clustered to achieve significant efficiencies.
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS - EXCLUSIONS	
Factors that may prevent land from being classified as Strategic Agricultural Land	Limited size and extent of area: The size and extent of the area identified as potential Strategic Agricultural Land is a scale and size that is unlikely to support sustainable agricultural production.
	Poor Access: locations that are too remote to existing markets, labour and transport, including airports and logistics facilities.
	Land set aside for other purposes or land use values: Land already allocated for another defined use in planning schemes or set aside for conservation purposes. Only Zones with an agricultural purpose are eligible to be included in SAL (i.e. Farming Zone, Rural Activity Zone, Green Wedge Zone, some Special Use Zones (Cardinia), and the Rural Conservation Zone).

Appendix B – Areas of investigation based on draft criteria



Investigation Areas for Potential Strategic Agricultural Land

Legend

- Strategic Agricultural Land
- Urban Growth Boundary
- Urban Area
- Public or Commonwealth Land
- Other excluded Planning Zones
- Area within 100km of Melbourne
- State-significant road corridor
- ✈ Transport gateway - major airport
- ⚓ Transport gateway - seaport
- 🚚 Interstate freight terminal (indicative)
- ✈ Transport gateway - possible airport (indicative)
- ⚓ Transport gateway - possible seaport (indicative)
- 🏢 Melbourne Wholesale Market - Epping
- ▲ Wastewater Treatment Plant

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Planning Information Systems
Job ID: 96225-22-1 Strategic Agricultural Land - SAL with context
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Appendix C - List of organisations who participated

This list includes all the organisations that were listed through the workshop RSVP process and those who provided submissions. Note, not all groups listed their name if they completed an online submission.

Anseed	Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions	Melton City Council
Australian Energy Market Operator	Dominion Property Group	Mitchell Shire Council
Australian Horse Industry Council	Economic Development – Tourism Victoria	Moorabool Landcare Network
Australian Pork Limited	Elite Property Group	Moorabool Shire Council
Agribusiness Yarra Valley	Ethos Urban	Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network
Agriculture Victoria	Food & Agribusiness Network G21 Region	Mornington Peninsula Shire Council
AuSPICA - Australian Seed Potato Industry Certification Authority	Foodprint Melbourne	Municipal Association of Victoria
AusVeg Victoria	Frankston City Council	Murrindindi Shire Council
Bangholme Rural Land Holders Association	Friends of Coastal Banksia Woodlands Trust for Nature	Nillumbik Environment Action Group
Barwon Water	Friends of Nillumbik	Nillumbik Shire Council
Bass Coast Landcare Network	Friends of the Glenfern Green Wedge	Open Food Network
Bass Coast Shire Council	Geelong Environment Council	Orchard End Farm and VFF Cardinia
Baw Baw Shire Council	Geelong Landcare Network	Peninsula Health Community Health
BEAM: Mitchell Environment Group	Gippsland Water	Peninsula Vinecare
Bellarine Community Council	Gisborne Landcare	Pentland Hills Landcare Group Inc
Bellarine Landcare Group	Golden Plains Shire Council	Peri-Urban and Green Wedge Group of Councils (PUGWGC)
Bellbrae Residents Association	Green Wedge Protection Group - Nillumbik	Plan-It Rural
Bessie Creek and Ararat Creek Landcare	Green Wedges Coalition	Planning Institute of Australia
Beveridge Williams	Greens bush to Arthur's Seat Biolink	Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority
Cardinia Environment Coalition	Hepburn Shire Council	Property Council of Australia
Cardinia Rate Payers Association	Housing Industry Association	Protected Cropping Australia
Cardinia Shire Council	Hume City Council	Ratepayers of Werribee South
Cement Concrete and Aggregates Australia	Insight Planning	Regional Development Victoria
Central Highlands Water	Interface Councils	Scotchman's Hill
Chorus Consulting	KLM Spatial	Secretariat for International Landcare
City of Casey	Linked Solutions	Soil Science Australia
City of Greater Dandenong	Macclesfield Landcare	Somers Residents Association
City of Greater Geelong	Macedon Ranges Shire Council	Somers Village Community Association
City of Kingston	Main Creek Catchment Group	South East Water
City West Water	Make Property Group	South Gippsland Landcare Network Board
Construction Material Processors Association	Melbourne Food Alliance	South Gippsland Shire Council
Corangamite Catchment Management Authority	Melbourne Water	
Deep Creek Landcare	Mesh Planning	

Southern Rural Water	Sustainable Population Australia:	Victorian Farmers Market
Spiire	Victoria and Tasmania Branch	Association
State Member for Bass	University of Melbourne	Warburton Timber
State Member for Eildon	Urbis	Western Port Catchment
State Member for Melton	Victorian Agribusiness Council –	Landcare Network
State Member for Yan Yean	Deputy Chair	Western Water
Strategic Policy Advice Victoria	Victorian Farmers Federation –	Whittlesea City Council
Surf Coast Inland Plains Network	Bellarine Peninsula Branch	Wyndham City Council
Surf Coast Shire Council	Victorian Farmers Federation –	Yarra Ranges Rural Advisory
Sustain: The Australian Food	Central Branch	Committee
Network	Victorian Farmers Federation –	Yarra Ranges Shire Council
	Mornington Peninsula Branch	Yarragon District Community
		Association