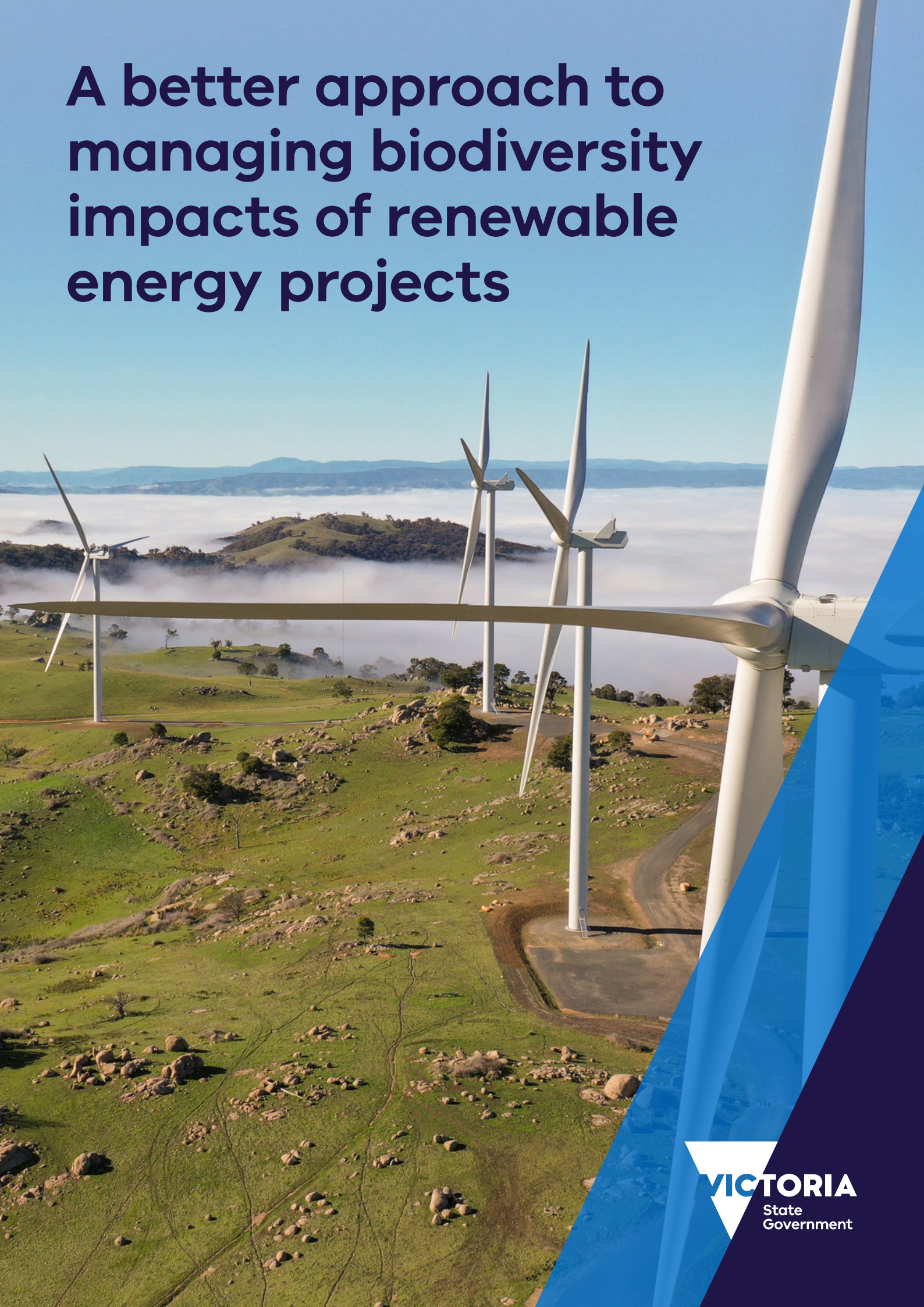


A better approach to managing biodiversity impacts of renewable energy projects



Cover image

Iberdrola Cherry Tree Wind Farm,
Taungurung Country.

The Victorian Government acknowledges Aboriginal Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays respect to their cultures and Elders past and present.

© The State of Victoria Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, April 2024

Creative Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence, visit the [Creative Commons website](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

You are free to re-use the work under that licence, on the condition that you credit the State of Victoria as author. The licence does not apply to any images, photographs or branding, including the Victorian Coat of Arms, and the Victorian Government and Department logos.

ISBN 978-1-76136-630-7 (pdf/online/MS word)

Disclaimer

This publication may be of assistance to you but the State of Victoria and its employees do not guarantee that the publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.

Accessibility

To receive this document in an alternative format, phone the Customer Service Centre on 136 186, email customer.service@delwp.vic.gov.au, or contact [National Relay Service](http://www.accesshub.gov.au/) (www.accesshub.gov.au/) on 133 677. Available at [DEECA website](http://www.deeca.vic.gov.au/) (www.deeca.vic.gov.au).

Contents

Joint Ministers' Foreword	2
Context	4
Better information, tools and guidance to mitigate biodiversity impacts	6
How we will work with industry	8
Next Steps	8



Joint Ministers' Foreword

Climate change is a critical issue for Victoria and the world. The intensity and frequency of Victoria's extreme weather is increasing, resulting in more frequent and intense bushfires and storm events. Alongside losses and damage to homes, businesses and infrastructure – including the poles and wires that carry our electricity – there are significant challenges for safeguarding Victoria's unique biodiversity into the future.

The need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions has never been more important and the Allan Labor Government is taking strong and lasting action on climate change. We also need to transition to renewable energy as coal-fired generation retires to keep the lights on.

Renewable energy will play the central role in achieving our 2045 net-zero emissions goal. With over two-thirds of Victoria's emissions coming from the energy sector, renewable energy provides the largest opportunity to cut our emissions. The transformation of the electricity sector from coal-fired power to renewables is already well underway and accelerating.

An exponential increase in the scale and pace of new renewable energy projects and associated infrastructure is anticipated over the next decade, ahead of planned closure of our ageing coal-fired generators. Wind and solar projects will lead the transition to clean renewable energy in Victoria, while making sure we meet our renewable energy and climate targets. Diverse energy sources, in more locations across our state, can also enhance the security and reliability of our energy system. Renewables are also the lowest cost form of electricity generation available and will help keep electricity prices down.

We are making strong progress towards our targets for renewable energy and have brought back the State Electricity Commission (SEC) – with a commitment to investing \$1 billion towards building 4.5 gigawatts of new renewable energy generation and storage projects – helping to accelerate the energy transition and drive down power bills. Our planning and investment in the electricity grid will transport clean energy from our new generators to homes and industry across the state.

In rapidly expanding renewable energy capacity we must ensure that robust environmental assessments identify and avoid, mitigate or manage impacts. We will improve upfront planning for renewable energy projects and provide clearer requirements for managing impacts. Our aim is to ensure predictable and efficient planning and assessment processes that support robust decisions.



Our plan is to better facilitate environmental assessments and approvals and support the energy transition by:

- closing identified gaps in scientific knowledge on impacts to key species of concern
- improving guidance on supporting biodiversity values
- accelerating planning approvals, providing investment certainty for Victoria's growing renewable energy industry
- clearly communicating regulatory requirements, considerations and processes to proponents and decision-makers
- implementing the Victorian Transmission Investment Framework to ensure timely coordination of investment in transmission, generation and storage infrastructure across renewable energy zones informed by land use assessments and stakeholder input
- improving stewardship of project assessments and approvals.

This statement outlines key actions we intend to take during 2024 to start to address critical knowledge gaps and regulatory uncertainties, and to improve the engagement and facilitation processes between government and industry that will support faster assessments and approvals. But we know longer term actions are required to establish the right settings to deliver renewable energy development while supporting biodiversity values, and we will continue to work with you on this.

We also want to work with you to identify where nature-based solutions can be implemented as part of renewable energy developments to deliver broader environmental outcomes.

Importantly, we want to do this in partnership with First Nations people, supporting meaningful steps towards self-determination. We acknowledge the deep spiritual connection of First Nations people to their Country and we will ensure their legal and cultural rights are recognised and upheld.

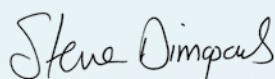
We are also working with the Commonwealth to coordinate and align environmental and regulatory processes – delivering more certainty to renewable energy developers.

The Energy, Environment and Planning portfolios are united in our commitment to closing biodiversity knowledge gaps that impede efficient assessment, providing better tools and guidance to support assessment processes and decisions, implementing renewable energy zones that coordinate and direct investment, and developing planning rules to regulate and facilitate the orderly approval of properly conceived, properly located and properly assessed projects.

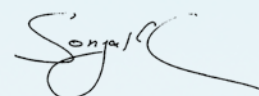
We look forward to working with you on the transformation of Victoria's energy system. We plan to keep you regularly updated on what we are achieving as we progress this important work.



The Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio MP
Minister for Climate Action
Minister for Energy and Resources
Minister for the State
Electricity Commission



Steve Dimopoulos
Minister for Environment
Minister for Tourism, Sport
& Major Events
Minister for Outdoor Recreation



The Hon. Sonya Kilkenny
Minister for Planning
Minister for the Suburbs

Context

We need to build more renewable energy

To ensure continued reliable and affordable energy, Victoria's energy sector is undergoing rapid and unprecedented change. So that the energy transition supports our state-wide emissions reduction targets, the Victorian Government has established an ambitious renewable energy target of 95% by 2035 and re-established the State Electricity Commission to drive the renewable energy sector. Energy from new and diverse energy sources, in varied locations, can help improve the resilience of our energy system, and support a reliable energy supply.

To achieve this energy transition in Victoria, by 2035 around 8.3 Gigawatts (GW) of new grid-scale renewable energy generation capacity and 6.3GW of energy storage capacity is required and over 1,000 kilometres of transmission lines must be constructed or upgraded. This will require a significant increase in the number of renewable energy projects and an accelerated pace of delivery across the state. For example, wind generation is anticipated to increase from 20% to around 60% of all energy generation by 2035.

Overall, renewable energy projects – by cutting greenhouse gas emissions and slowing climate change – help mitigate a key threat to biodiversity. But in some locations, renewable energy projects may pose a risk to our vulnerable species, that must be managed appropriately.

Projects should be built in the right place, at the right time. The Victorian Transmission Investment Framework is a new process to ensure timely coordination of investment in transmission, generation and storage infrastructure across renewable energy zones. These are areas across the state with abundant, high-quality renewable energy resources and connectivity to the grid.

We have a commitment that Victoria's biodiversity is healthy, valued and actively cared for

Protecting Victoria's Environment – Biodiversity 2037 is Victoria's plan to stop the decline of our native plants and animals and improve our natural environment. It presents a long-term vision for Victoria's biodiversity supported by two overarching goals – Victorians value nature and Victoria's natural environment is healthy.

The government has obligations under the *Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*, *Wildlife Act 1975*, *Marine and Coastal Act 2018* and the native vegetation removal regulations and the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* to protect threatened species and to manage impacts of land use or development on these species.

Since 2014, the government has invested nearly \$582 million in biodiversity and the natural environment. This represents the biggest ever commitment by a Victorian government to protect our natural environment. Recent examples of investment programs include the \$77 million BushBank program, \$20 million per year for the Protecting Biodiversity program, the \$13.5 million Nature Fund and the \$19.25 million Deer Control program.

The government is also working with the Commonwealth Government to identify opportunities for alignment and coordination between our regulatory frameworks through the national nature positive reforms. This includes investigating options for establishing regional planning pilots in priority areas for renewable energy development that will support faster and better approvals at both state and national level. We expect to announce more on this in the coming months.



Our planning system helps to implement these commitments and manage tensions

Projects must undergo planning and environmental assessments and approvals to ensure an appropriate balance is achieved in protecting Victoria's unique and threatened biodiversity, while incentivising and accelerating new renewable energy development.

A successful renewable energy transition requires an assessment and approvals framework that is clear, efficient and robust. The process should minimise adverse impacts while allowing benefits to be realised.

On 14 March 2024, the Premier announced reforms to accelerate planning pathways for renewable energy projects, to enhance the efficiency of the planning process by recognising these projects

as significant economic development. Renewable energy projects will now be eligible for a streamlined planning permit process under the Development Facilitation Program (DFP). Expanding the DFP to include renewable energy projects will cut planning permit timeframes by avoiding projects ending up in VCAT and the planning panel process.

The DFP assists energy proponents to access upfront planning and other regulatory approval requirements. It works across government to maintain a sector-wide approach that supports policy reform and timely industry guidance. It will stay across the pipeline to improve government's line-of-sight to upcoming projects and track issues emerging through the approvals process.

This statement outlines key actions the government will take to fill critical knowledge gaps and establish decision-support tools and guidance for the planning, design and siting of proposals to manage biodiversity impacts. These actions will enhance certainty for industry while protecting Victoria's unique biodiversity.



Better information, tools and guidance to mitigate biodiversity impacts

The government is taking action to improve our knowledge and understanding of biodiversity impacts and how best to mitigate them. This includes preparing a suite of new tools and guidance that will identify biodiversity values and clearly outline expectations for how to identify, assess and mitigate biodiversity impacts using a risk-based approach. This will help guide a proportionate approach to determining whether impacts are acceptable and enhance certainty and promote a more efficient and timely approval process.



By July 2024, we will release improved tools for mapping biodiversity risks

- This will include a new state-wide Biodiversity Values Map and supporting spatial tools that identify areas of biodiversity value to inform siting decisions, in particular areas that should be avoided, for proponents and decision makers.
- These tools will be publicly available to assist proponents to identify project sites with the minimum possible biodiversity impact.

By October 2024, we will complete targeted research to fill gaps in our understanding of the impacts of wind energy on at-risk bird and bat species and inform development of standards and mitigation measures

This program will:

- improve understanding of current mortality rates across Victoria and mortality risk factors from collisions with turbines
- help to determine the flight height of the Southern Bent-wing Bat to inform risk assessments of this key species
- identify characteristics of wetlands and their suitability for Brolga breeding sites, to inform assessments and develop recommended buffers
- bring together learning from international research, experience and best practice to assess risk and manage biodiversity impacts
- update the current 'species of concern' list to assess recently-listed threatened species and those at risk of becoming threatened due to wind energy projects
- provide guidance on minimum standards for pre and post-construction surveys and monitoring
- provide advice on design of pre-construction risk assessments
- improve understanding of the likely effectiveness and likelihood of success of potential mitigation options
- provide advice for development and application of Collision Risk Models and Population Viability Analysis.

By October 2024, we will publish new guidance to support siting, design and operation of renewable energy projects to better manage biodiversity impacts

- A new *Handbook for the development of renewable energy in Victoria* will list species of concern, potential mitigation measures and include a template for all future bat and avifauna management plans.
- We will also publish guidance for managing the impacts on specific species, including updated Brolga standards and targeted guidance for bats.
- Together these will update and clarify the government's regulatory approach, align it with global best practice and ensure that the requirements reflect the best scientific and spatial information.
- We will work closely with proponents to ensure transitional arrangements support implementation of new guidance in a way that considers different stages of project planning, assessment and approval. For proposals that have already started assessment and approval processes, existing regulatory requirements will continue to apply until new requirements are formally adopted (subject to any agreed transitional provisions).

Opportunity will be provided for you to have a say in coming months, as we develop the new tools and guidance. This work will be iterative – the tools and guidance will be updated as new information becomes available to ensure the best available evidence is used.

How we will work with industry

Working closely with industry is vital to the success of the renewable energy transition in Victoria.

The Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) administers the state's environmental assessment processes and planning approvals for renewable energy projects on behalf of the Minister for Planning. Specialist advice is available to support the delivery of these projects and to assist with approval pathways. The Development Facilitation Program will offer a service for industry to help map out planning approval pathways and resolve planning issues as applications are being assessed.

The Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) provides environment and biodiversity advice in the planning and environment assessment process via its new state-wide Planning and Environment Assessment team. To provide greater certainty to industry, DEECA has transformed its approach to advising on regulatory requirements and biodiversity impact considerations to better manage project referrals and improve timeliness and assurance.

To better support industry and the renewable energy transition, DTP and DEECA will:

- facilitate early and frequent engagement and discussions with proponents, prior to and throughout the operational life of energy infrastructure proposals
- work with proponents to develop adaptive mitigation and management measures and strategies that respond to outcomes on the ground
- provide accelerated planning pathways for eligible renewable energy projects under the Development Facilitation Program.

Next Steps

We understand that Victorians and the industry have a keen interest in how energy projects and supporting transmission infrastructure will be developed in our state. The government is committed to developing a set of requirements that will strike the right balance between renewable energy and biodiversity protection.



We will seek your input as we develop new support tools and guidance

DEECA and DTP will start engaging in early 2024. We will:

- work proactively and in partnership with First Nations people to support them to self-determine how they wish to participate with this process
- establish targeted stakeholder working groups to test ideas and tools to ensure they are designed to meet industry and government needs.

Further engagement will occur as we develop the *Handbook for the development of renewable energy in Victoria* and specific species guidance in mid-2024 prior to their finalisation and publication by October 2024. This will include a formal public consultation process.

The government will provide an update by the end of 2024 on how we are progressing these actions and achieving outcomes throughout the year.



Beyond 2024

The actions government has committed to in 2024 are an important start in building our understanding of biodiversity impacts and how best to mitigate them. But we know there will be longer term actions required to ensure planning and environmental assessment and approval processes are fit for purpose.

The initial actions outlined in this statement are focused on critical issues currently facing the onshore wind industry, particularly in relation to bird and bat impacts. There are broader challenges in balancing our transition to renewable energy with managing biodiversity impacts, and the government will continue to work with First Nations people, stakeholders and the community to assess how the new tools and guidance are working in practice. As new information becomes available, the tools and guidance will be updated to ensure the best available evidence is used. The government will also investigate the options for further streamlining planning and approvals functions to increase our ability to anticipate, consider, and evaluate risks, impacts, and stakeholder concerns.

As we continue to identify and progress actions, we will provide annual statements outlining the priority areas of focus for the year.



