

70km pipeline route to affect 170 landholders

Darren Gray and Orietta Guerrero

February 20, 2008

'The Age'

IT WILL snake for 70 kilometres through private farmland and crown land and be protected by a corridor about 100 metres wide. It will be sunk more than one metre underground, so that grazing and other farm activities can continue above it.

The controversial \$750 million north-south pipeline, Victoria's next major infrastructure project, will closely follow the path of the Melba Highway from Yea to Yarra Glen just outside of Melbourne, Water Minister Tim Holding confirmed yesterday as he revealed the pipeline's preferred route.

The pipeline will affect about 170 private landholders as it brings water from the Goulburn River near Yea to Sugarloaf Reservoir in the hills to Melbourne's north-east to boost the city's drinking water supplies by 75 billion litres per year.

Affected landholders could be eligible for three forms of compensation for having the pipeline run through their property. They will be paid a form of rent while work is under way on their land, a fee so that a 15-metre-wide easement is created to cover the pipeline (which gives water authorities access to the pipeline), and they can apply for compensation if they believe their farm or property revenue has been diminished by the pipeline.

Applications for payments will need to be made to, and will be independently assessed by, the Valuer-General of Victoria.

Mr Holding indicated it might not be necessary to compulsorily acquire any land for the pipeline because the vast majority of it could be delivered via the creation of easements. "It's a very well-used process ... we think that we'll be able to work co-operatively with the vast majority of landholders," he said.

Meanwhile, more details of the pipeline's impact on the environment emerged yesterday when the State Government released a 192-page Project Impact Assessment report that found 75 threatened animal species and 37 threatened flora species could potentially be found in the pipeline area.

But Mr Holding, touring the company (Tyco) in Melbourne's north that will manufacture the pipe, again dismissed calls for an environmental effects statement, saying it was not necessary. Selection of the corridor followed more than 35,000 hours of environmental and technical investigations by a team of more than 140 specialist staff, he said.

The Government made some concession on the environmental front when it announced the establishment of a four-person committee asked to review the Project Impact Assessment study and report to Planning Minister Justin Madden on any potential environmental impacts of the project. Public comments on the Project Impact Assessment report will be accepted until March 18.

The State Opposition's country water spokesman, Peter Walsh, said the Government's environmental investigation did not go far enough. "It doesn't look at any of the environmental impacts in the Murray Darling Basin from taking water from the Goulburn Valley to (send to) Melbourne," he said.

Melbourne Water project director Rod Clifford said it was hoped the first pipes would be laid in late May. Water is expected to flow down the pipeline to Melbourne in 2010. He also said that by choosing the Melba Highway route, the number of affected properties had dropped from 300 to 170.

Dixons Creek winemaker Graeme Miller worries he could be one of the 170 landowners. He fears the pipeline could cut across the front gate of his vineyard on the Melba Highway and that massive earthworks will blight his views and keep away tourists whom his business increasingly relies on. About 60% of his wine sales are made at the cellar door. "Access to our property is going to be severely disrupted," Mr Miller said.

Also of concern is the potential for phylloxera aphid, the plant-sucking insect that destroys grapevines — first detected in the grape-growing area two years ago — to be spread during construction. Under quarantine protocols still in place, unwashed machinery cannot be moved from one property to another.

"If they manage to inadvertently bring phylloxera into our place, then we're pretty much finished," Mr Miller said. "I'm 68. I'm not going to replant my vineyard