

VICTORIA

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Victorian  
Auditor-General

# Audit summary of Soil Health Management

Tabled in Parliament  
5 October 2010

# Audit summary

Healthy soils support plant growth, decomposition and recycling processes, and resist erosion. They are fundamentally linked to the protection of natural assets, where soil health is primarily viewed as a threat, and productive land where soils are viewed as an asset. Continued levels of agricultural productivity depend on good soil health. Loss of agricultural productivity from declining soil health would have substantial economic implications for Victoria.

The audit examined how effectively and efficiently soil health programs have been implemented across private land, focusing on integrated soil health initiatives.

## Conclusions

The Departments of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and Primary Industries (DPI), along with catchment management authorities (CMA), have implemented soil health programs effectively.

However, clearer governance arrangements, greater coordination and better alignment of state and regional priorities would strengthen soil health management.

Currently, soil health responses are neither integrated, nor well coordinated; leading to a patchwork of unaligned and fragmented soil health projects across regions. While the projects have generally met their objectives individually, they have tended to focus on the delivery of outputs rather than achievement of outcomes. Consequently, it is unknown whether soil health programs have actually improved the health of Victoria's soil.

## Findings

There is no whole-of-government approach to soil health to guide planning, implementation and investment. No single agency is responsible for coordinating regional, multi-regional and state soil health projects across private land.

Roles and responsibilities lack clarity and transparency across regions due to the range of stakeholders involved, each with different mandates and priorities.

Individual soil health projects by DPI and CMAs have been well managed and delivered as planned across the state. Project objectives have generally been met. However, as a suite of activities there is little evidence that these projects have met the broad objectives set for soil health in regional and state strategies.

The effectiveness of the suite of soil health projects in improving soil health cannot be accurately reported as individual projects and their performance and reporting frameworks are output focused, little soil health monitoring occurs, and existing soil health data varies in quality and is fragmented and inconsistent. This finding reflects the broader findings of VAGO's *Performance Reporting by Departments* performance audit tabled in Parliament in 2010, which highlighted the lack of cost-effective evaluations and outcome-based reporting in general.

## Recommendations

| Number | Recommendation   | Page |
|--------|--|------|
| 1.     | <p>The Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Department of Primary Industries should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>develop an integrated statewide soil health framework to improve coordination of effort and alignment of priorities</li> <li>establish a cross-agency committee to oversee the development of the framework and the coordination and alignment of activities.</li> </ul> | 16   |
| 2.     | <p>The Department of Primary Industries and the Department of Sustainability and Environment should identify and agree on key soil health information and data needs and develop 'fit for purpose' monitoring and research programs to guide investment decisions.</p>   | 24   |

## Submissions and comments received

In addition to progressive engagement during the course of the audit, in accordance with section 16(3) of the *Audit Act 1994* a copy of this report, or relevant extracts from the report, was provided to the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the Department of Primary Industries, and the Corangamite, North Central and North East Catchment Management Authorities, with a request for submissions or comments.

Agency views have been considered in reaching our audit conclusions and are represented to the extent relevant and warranted in preparing this report. Their full section 16(3) submissions and comments however, are included in Appendix A.