

Vanishing Western Port marshes muddy the waters

BY CAMERON LUCADOU-WELLS

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A CONSERVATION group has called for urgent protection of disappearing seagrass meadows and saltmarshes in Western Port's wetlands.

Western Port Seagrass Partnership is lobbying the state and federal governments to create a coastal reserve in the bay's north-east corner, a rural conservation zone east of Koo Wee Rup.

"Every year up to a metre of coastline is slumping into the bay, with resultant serious loss of saltmarsh habitat and thousands of tonnes of mud entering the north-east sector of the bay," WSPSP president John Swan said.

Emeritus Professor Swan said the threatened loss of vital habitat for migratory birds and winter feeding-grounds of the endangered orange-bellied parrot, on top of the damage to seagrass meadows, would be "unforgiveable".

Secretary Doug Newton said the group had reluctantly gone public because after three years of lobbying, neither government was taking action on the Ramsar Convention-listed habitat.

"It's not an area that's very easily accessed, so it's a case of out-of-sight and out-of-mind. If the governments do nothing, it's going to disappear. One problem is no one can tell us who is managing the areas. It's a big mess."

Mr Newton said the coastal erosion had spread from public land to adjoining farm properties. "A number of farmers have dumped concrete rubble to create a temporary bund."

Possible solutions could include creating inlets that would offset the high tidal peaks, offshore islands to attenuate waves and planting mangroves to stabilise the shore, he said.

A Department of Sustainability and Environment spokesman said the department was "in the early stages of investigating the possible use of artificial reefs and mangrove revegetation" to determine whether they were effective at reducing the erosion.

The federal government didn't respond before deadline.



Soiled bay: Western Port's north-eastern salt marshes are beset by erosion. Picture: Tim Ealey