

NEWS DESK



Mudslide: Parts of the northeastern coastline of Western Port are sinking and causing problems for the health of seagrass and other marine life.



Call for governments to protect bay coast

THE state and federal governments have been asked to take urgent action to protect the northeastern coast of Western Port.

They have been asked to set up and finance the management of a coastal reserve aimed at saving the bay's seagrass beds.

The reserve could be used as "environmental offsets for the expected impacts of the Port of Hastings expansion".

Emeritus Professor John Swan said there was no recognition of the importance of the coastline or plans to tackle "the serious problems that beset it".

Prof Swan heads the Western Port Seagrass Partnership, which wants the two governments to establish a

working party "to plan the actions and timelines needed to establish this State Coastal Reserve and management plan".

The partnership has also suggested giving Melbourne Water control of the reserve.

"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 northeast sector of the bay, making conditions impossible for seagrass survival or recovery," Prof Swan said.

"These areas are vital habitat for the migratory birds covered by the Ramsar Convention and the winter feeding grounds for the endangered orange-bellied parrot.

"To lose these habitats on top of the massive damage done to seagrass meadows caused by sediment inputs to Western Port would be unforgivable."

Prof Swan said the federal government had signed the Ramsar Convention undertaking to protect the saltmarshes, while the state government was responsible for their management.

"We risk losing all the remaining coastal lands in public ownership and exposing private landholders to increasing seawater encroachments and personal losses and expense. It will only get worse with climate change modelling clearly predicting greater inundation episodes along this coastline."

"It is clearly time to plan for this in-

crease and to build it into a strategic plan to manage this coastline and all natural and artificial inlets that make up the estuarine areas."

Prof Swan said the governments needed to negotiate with landowners "and plan for an area of coast that can absorb these impacts and provide both improved habitat and a degree of protection and certainty for private landholders beyond the high impact areas".

"The state government should be examining environmental offsets for the expected impacts of the Port of Hastings expansion."

"Establishing a coastal reserve and acting on coastal erosion and habitat protection could provide such offsets and help achieve net environmental

gain for Western Port.

"It is the job of government to sort out the coastal management arrangements, but we note that the northern catchment streams and the massive drainage area of the Koo Wee Rup Swamp drainage area are all managed by Melbourne Water. So perhaps one way to achieve integrated catchment and coastal management, and bring in the engineering and scientific expertise needed for this task, is to extend Melbourne Water's responsibility to cover the coastal reserve."

"We encourage the Victorian government to trial such an approach along this coastline and to evaluate it as a broader model for adaptation."