Cerberus: November update to signatories

Commonwealth officers responsible for the Cerberus divestment said they would engage once our joint submission was lodged. They have. Correspondence began with the environmental team at Cerberus, who brought in Defence's environmental team for the site. The Department of Finance then took over.

Finance has begun the work that will decide the scope of its due diligence. That scope is still open. Everything else this month follows from that.

What Finance has said

Finance stated existing Defence material will inform the initial due diligence and the identification of information gaps. Finance will use the result to set the scope of any further due diligence. No future owner or use has been set. Finance is engaging the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water and the National EPA throughout. Finance and Defence are engaging the Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation on cultural values.

Finance stated the due diligence will inform the divestment pathway. The scope of that due diligence therefore decides what the Commonwealth knows before a pathway is chosen.

The due diligence gap list is where the scope is decided. What the Defence material cannot describe becomes a gap. To close that gap, we put four matters to Finance where we are not aware of current information:

1) **The condition of the divestment land**. The most recent published ecological assessment of the site is 1975.
2) **The land's contribution beyond its boundary**. No assessment has examined Cerberus's role in connecting Mornington Peninsula National Park, the seven foreshore reserves of the Western Port coastal corridor and the inland biolinks identified in Landcare's Linking the Mornington Peninsula Landscape vision.
3) **The receiving environment**. We are not aware of a published baseline for the tidal creeks, saltmarsh and Hanns Inlet receiving PFAS from the site. Current risk findings rely on access restrictions that a change of ownership would remove.
4) **Town planning**. No Victorian zone applies while the Commonwealth holds the land, and no party has stated the zone the State would apply after disposal. Plan for Victoria maps the land as green wedge. The Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme uses the land as the break between Somers and Crib Point–Bittern. A residential outcome would require a change to the urban growth boundary ratified by the Victorian Parliament. The interface with the retained base and range also needs a planning framework. No divestment boundary has been released, so the area affected cannot yet be assessed by any party.

Planning is the one matter Finance cannot hand to another agency. The zone the State applies on transfer decides what the land becomes and what the land is worth. The land's use and value cannot be established until the planning status is known. The submission's planning analysis was prepared with Jonathon Fetterplace, a town planning consultant who works across all three levels of government. The signatories would welcome the State's planning authorities and the Mornington Peninsula Shire among the agencies Finance engages.

Save Westernport President, Jane Caregie, discovered Finance appointed KPMG as its Strategic Industry Partner to coordinate due diligence, valuation and market advice. KPMG's credibility issues are public. The due diligence will need to be seen to have integrity. The 17 signatories play an oversight role. KPMG's appointment works in our favour.

On 21 October Finance said the next round of community engagement is expected before due diligence and divestment strategy development begin. A later reply did not repeat that commitment and set no timeframe. Finance will consider meeting organisations once the process has progressed.

At Defence, Elena Petrovska is leading engagement on environmental matters and has confirmed a Phase 2 engagement focused on the environment. No date has been given. We have asked whether Phase 2 happens before or after the divestment pathway is set.

A precedent

On 8 November the Commonwealth decided to transfer the Angophora Forest at HMAS Penguin in Mosman to the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust. The bushland went to a public custodian instead of the market. The community made a difference. We can too.

Where our representatives stand

I sent our submission to political representatives requesting a response.

Senator Murray Watt and Senator Katy Gallagher have not yet responded.

Zoe McKenzie MP (Liberal), Federal Member for Flinders, and Frank Schiefler, Liberal candidate for Hastings, met me on 4 November at McKenzie's electorate office. McKenzie's public position is to stop the sale. Her view is that Cerberus base personnel are aligned with our joint submission. She offered to raise the submission in Canberra and asked to be copied on my Commonwealth correspondence. We are non-partisan, so Paul Mercurio MP and Cr David Gill are copied on the same correspondence.

The office of Paul Mercurio MP (Labor), Member for Hastings, replied that a State commitment on zoning is premature before the election. Caretaker conventions do not prevent a party announcing election policy.

Trust for Nature's CEO, Corinne Proske, introduced me to State Government Land Policy leaders. They are engaged with our work on Australian and United States precedents for military land divestment. They have asked to meet.

Mornington Peninsula Shire lodges its own submission. The Council meeting is tonight, 10 November. Raia Flinos covered the joint submission across the Mornington Peninsula News Group papers on 19 October.

The Great Southern BioBlitz, Friday 27 to Monday 30 November

Our Commonwealth submission proposed a three-layer audit of the corridor. The audit establishes Cerberus's ecological importance as an anchor for the coastal corridor and its inland biolinks, and the extent of PFAS impact on the receiving environment.

Layer two of the corridor audit brings in community involvement. Western Port schools take part in class on the Friday and the Monday. Families take part across the weekend. Observations are photographed and uploaded to iNaturalist. Verified records go to the Atlas of Living Australia and can be lodged with the Victorian Biodiversity Atlas.

A child's beetle photograph becomes a state record a planner must consider.

Children carry a passport. Bronze, silver and gold are earned by how many different kinds of living thing a child records. Ritchies IGA Balnarring is supporting the rewards, claimed at the store counter with a completed passport, up to 14 December.

Primary schools and young families across Western Port now have their own way into the Cerberus question. A parent who would not read a Commonwealth submission will stand in a reserve while a child photographs a fungus. That record goes into the same evidence base our submission asks the Commonwealth to use.

The children learn how community action works. Neighbours asked for a decision to be made on evidence, then went out and gathered the evidence themselves. These children are doing the gathering.

Attached are the parent summary and the children's passport.

Three small things

Put the parent summary in your next newsletter or member email. This paragraph can be pasted straight in:

The Great Southern BioBlitz runs from Friday 27 to Monday 30 November. Children and families across Western Port will photograph and record living things in our reserves, and the records go to the Atlas of Living Australia. Every child who takes part earns a reward from Ritchies IGA Balnarring. The attached summary explains how to join.

If a candidate visits your group before 28 November, ask one question. Will you support conservation or green wedge zoning at Cerberus, and oppose any change to the urban growth boundary there?

Residents' own submissions carry weight with the Commonwealth, in each resident's own words. My last email attached a one-page guide for members. I can send it again to anyone who asks.

Write while the scope is open

The gap list is being written now. Send an email from your committee now to divestment.program@finance.gov.au, asking for an independent baseline nature audit of Cerberus and the corridor before any pathway is decided.

I will send another update next month with a roadmap on the nature audit and the Commonwealth due diligence process.

Greg McLardie
On behalf of the submission's signatories