



# Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 Practice Note: Significant Ground Disturbance

This Practice Note provides guidance about the meaning of **significant ground disturbance** as it relates to requirements to prepare Cultural Heritage Management Plans under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*\*.

The Practice Note covers:

- when a Cultural Heritage Management Plan is required
- why significant ground disturbance should be assessed
- what significant ground disturbance means
- who needs to provide proof
- how to determine significant ground disturbance
- who can determine this
- what is the role of the responsible authority
- how Aboriginal cultural heritage is protected in areas of significant ground disturbance.

## Background

The *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* (Act) and *Aboriginal Heritage Regulations 2007* (Regulations) provide protection in Victoria for all Aboriginal places, objects and human remains regardless of their inclusion on the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register or whether they are located on public or private land.

## When is a Cultural Heritage Management Plan required?

A Cultural Heritage Management Plan is required for an activity (i.e. the use or development of land) if the activity:

- is a high impact activity
- falls in whole or in part within an area of cultural heritage sensitivity.

The terms 'high impact activity' and 'cultural heritage sensitivity' are defined in the Regulations.

A Plan must also be prepared when an activity requires an Environmental Effects Statement, or when the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs requires.

High impact activities are categories of activity that are generally regarded as more likely to harm Aboriginal cultural heritage. Most high impact activities provided for in the Regulations are subject to a requirement that the activity results in significant ground disturbance. The term 'significant ground disturbance' is defined in the Regulations.

Areas of cultural heritage sensitivity are landforms and land categories that are generally regarded as more likely to contain Aboriginal cultural heritage. A registered Aboriginal cultural heritage place is also an area of cultural heritage sensitivity.

If part of an area of cultural heritage sensitivity (other than a cave) has been subject to significant ground disturbance that part is not an area of cultural heritage sensitivity.

If a Cultural Heritage Management Plan is required for an activity it must be approved before the sponsor can obtain any necessary statutory authorisation for the activity and/or before the activity can start. For more information about Cultural Heritage Management Plans see Aboriginal Affairs Victoria's (AAV) website ([www.aboriginalaffairs.vic.gov.au](http://www.aboriginalaffairs.vic.gov.au)).

### **Why should significant ground disturbance be assessed?**

It is important to assess significant ground disturbance when considering whether a cultural heritage management plan is required because:

- A Cultural Heritage Management Plan does not need to be prepared for a high impact activity if all the area of cultural heritage sensitivity within the activity area has been subject to significant ground disturbance.
- Some types of activity will not be a high impact activity, meaning a Cultural Heritage Management Plan would not need to be prepared, if the activity does not cause significant ground disturbance.

The Regulations specify the landforms and land categories that are areas of cultural heritage sensitivity. Areas of cultural heritage sensitivity are displayed in a series of maps available on AAV's website. The areas delineated on these maps however do not take account of the past history of land use and development that may have caused significant ground disturbance in localised areas.

### **How is significant ground disturbance defined?**

'Significant ground disturbance' is defined in r.4 of the Regulations as meaning disturbance of –

- (a) the topsoil or surface rock layer of the ground; or
- (b) a waterway –  
by machinery in the course of grading, excavating, digging, dredging or deep ripping, but does not include ploughing other than deep ripping.

The words 'disturbance', 'topsoil', 'surface rock layer', 'machinery', 'grading', 'excavating', 'digging', 'dredging', 'ploughing' (other than deep ripping) are not defined in the regulations and therefore have their ordinary meanings.

The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) has determined that the words "topsoil or surface rock layer" include the former topsoil or former surface rock layer if that topsoil or surface rock layer is a naturally occurring surface level that is readily ascertainable and does not include the current topsoil or current surface rock layer if established by the mere filling of the land.

Ploughing (other than deep ripping) to any depth is not significant ground disturbance. Deep ripping is defined in the regulations to mean 'ploughing of soil using a ripper or subsoil cultivation tool to a depth of 60 centimetres or more'. None of the words used in this definition are defined, and therefore have their ordinary meanings. VCAT has determined that a ripper or subsoil cultivation tool must be distinguished from conventional ploughs or topsoil cultivation tools such as disc ploughs or rotary hoes which are not sufficient to show significant ground disturbance.

Deep ripping will result in significant ground disturbance regardless of the degree of disturbance caused to the topsoil or surface rock layer of the ground.

### **Who needs to provide proof that land has been subject to significant ground disturbance?**

The burden of proving that an area has been subject to significant ground disturbance rests with the applicant for a statutory authorisation for the activity (or the sponsor of the activity). The responsible authority may assist by providing the applicant access to any relevant records it has about past land use and development.

### **How can a sponsor determine whether significant ground disturbance has occurred?**

The responsible authority should require evidence of support for claims that there has been significant ground disturbance of an area. The levels of inquiry outlined below provide some guidance about what information should be required to satisfy a responsible authority (depending on the circumstances of each case) that significant ground disturbance has occurred. The levels of inquiry are listed in order of the level of detail that may be required. An assessment of whether significant ground disturbance has occurred should be dealt with at the lowest possible level in order to avoid unnecessary delay or cost to applicants.

Little weight should be given to mere assertions by applicants or land owners that an activity area has been subject to significant ground disturbance.

#### *Level 1 – Common knowledge*

The fact that land has been subject to significant ground disturbance may be common knowledge. Very little or no additional information should be required from the responsible authority.

For example, common knowledge about the redevelopment of a petrol station with extensive underground storage tanks.

#### *Level 2 – Publicly available records*

If the existence of significant ground disturbance is not common knowledge, a responsible authority may be able to provide assistance from its own records about prior development and use of land, or advise the applicant about other publicly available records, including aerial photographs.

These documents may allow a reasonable inference to be made that the land has been subject to significant ground disturbance. In such event, no further inquiries or information would be needed by the responsible authority. The particular records and facts relied upon should be noted by the responsible authority as a matter of record.

For example, a former quarry site subsequently filled, but where the public records show the area of past excavation.

#### *Level 3 – Further information*

If 'common knowledge' or 'publicly available records' do not provide sufficient information about the occurrence of significant ground disturbance, the applicant may need to present further evidence either voluntarily or following a formal request from the responsible authority. Further evidence could consist of land use history documents, old maps or photographs of the land or statements by former landowners or occupiers. Statements should be provided by statutory declaration or similar means.

For example, the construction of a former dam on a farm.

#### *Level 4 – Expert advice or opinion*

If these levels of inquiry do not provide sufficient evidence of significant ground disturbance (or as an alternative to level 3), the applicant may submit or be asked to submit a professional report with expert advice or opinion from a person with appropriate skills and experience. Depending on the circumstances, this may involve a site inspection and/or a review of primary documents. If there is sufficient uncertainty some preliminary sub-surface excavation or geotechnical investigation may be warranted.

An expert report should comply with VCAT's practice note on expert evidence.

The responsible authority must be reasonably satisfied that the standard of proof presented by the applicant shows that all of the land in question has been subject to significant ground disturbance.

A level 1 or 2 inquiry will commonly provide sufficient information as to whether or not the activity area has been subject to significant ground disturbance, and a level 3 or 4 inquiry should not be required as a matter of course.

There will be cases when the responsible authority is simply not persuaded or where there remains genuine doubt about significance ground disturbance regardless of the level of inquiry. In these circumstances the default position is that a Cultural Heritage Management Plan is required. This is in line with the purpose of the Act and Regulations to provide for the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage in Victoria.

### **Who can provide expert advice about significant ground disturbance?**

A person needs to have expertise to decide, based upon an inspection of the land or interpreting primary documents, whether the land has been subject to significant ground disturbance.

A cultural heritage advisor may not necessarily have this expertise. Under section 189 of the Act, an advisor must have a qualification directly relevant to the management of Aboriginal cultural heritage such as ‘anthropology, archaeology or history’ or have extensive experience or knowledge in relation to the management of heritage. An advisor appropriately qualified in archaeology may be able to assist where excavation is required to determine significant ground disturbance.

Other experts such as a land surveyor, geomorphologist or civil engineer could also have the necessary expertise (depending on the circumstances). For example, a civil engineer should have the qualifications and experience to determine the extent of previous engineering works along a watercourse or road, and therefore the extent of significant ground disturbance.

### **What is the role of the responsible authority?**

The responsible authority determines whether a Cultural Heritage Management Plan is required for an activity. It may require the applicant to provide information to satisfy it that an area has been subject to significant ground disturbance.

Evaluating information relating to the occurrence of significant ground disturbance may be critical in deciding whether a Cultural Heritage Management Plan is required and therefore whether a statutory authorisation can be granted. This question should be resolved at an early stage in planning a proposed development. Applicants for statutory authorisations and the responsible authority should therefore seek to agree at an early stage about whether a Cultural Heritage Management Plan is required. In the event of a dispute this can be brought without delay to VCAT for resolution. The responsible authority should take care to document the steps taken in each case.

### **What if Aboriginal cultural heritage is discovered in an area determined to have been subject to significant ground disturbance?**

It is possible that there are Aboriginal cultural heritage places, objects or human remains within areas determined to no longer be areas of cultural heritage sensitivity due to significant ground disturbance. It is also possible that Aboriginal cultural heritage could be harmed by activities which do not amount to high impact activities.

These Aboriginal places are still protected under the Act. In particular, it is an offence under sections 27 and 28 of the Act to harm Aboriginal cultural heritage unless acting in accordance with a Cultural Heritage Permit or approved Cultural Heritage Management Plan (regardless of whether a Plan was required).

*\* This Practice Note is based on VCAT's determination about significant ground disturbance. For further details see VCAT, Reference No. P1020/2008 – Mainstay Australia vs Mornington Peninsula SC and Reference No. P1204/2010 – Colquhouns & Ors vs Yarra SC.*