
1. Executive summary

The Mallacoota Ocean Access Boat Ramp is proposed at Bastion Point, approximately 1.5 km south of Mallacoota in East Gippsland and 520 km east of Melbourne. In 2000 the Minister for Planning determined that an Environment Effects Statement was required to provide a framework for considering potential impacts of the proposal. A planning permit application for removing native vegetation associated with the project was called in by the Minister for Planning.

An existing boat ramp at Bastion Point is approximately 40 years old and is used by recreational fishers, commercial Abalone divers and fishers and for other uses such as fisheries patrols and servicing Gabo Island. The ramp is intensively used during the summer and Easter holiday periods by recreational fishermen.

The existing ramp has a number of issues related to traffic and parking, ramp slope, ramp width, general ramp condition and weather protection. According to estimates it is currently usable for about 25% of the time.

Ocean access via the Mallacoota Inlet mouth occurs at times but this is reliant on the inlet mouth being open and can be a hazardous transit due to inlet and sea conditions.

The debate regarding improved ocean access at Mallacoota has been under way since at least the 1980s, and possibly longer. It is a divisive issue that has caused considerable angst at times in town between those who support larger development proposals at Bastion Point and those who would prefer a minimal upgrade of the current ramp or no change at all.

The East Gippsland Shire Council is the proponent for the proposals in the EES. The exhibited options in the EES included; an upgraded ramp with breakwaters at the current ramp site; a new ramp about 100 m further south with one breakwater, and a new ramp about 150 m south of the existing ramp with one breakwater. Following exhibition of the EES, further options were presented to move the access roads to the new ramp proposals from the top of the embankment down on to the beach front to reduce impacts on vegetation and Aboriginal heritage.

The Council's preferred option is a new ramp at the Option 3 site, 150 m south of the existing ramp.

As a result of the exhibition of the EES, 482 submissions were received, with 87% objecting to the new ramp proposals and/or supporting an upgrade of the current ramp. As a result of exhibition of later options, a further 75 submissions were received (supplementary submissions from some of the original submitters).

The major issues raised in submissions (not necessarily in order of significance) were:

- Aboriginal heritage;
- Landscape values;
- Character and amenity;
- Coastal processes;
- Social impacts;
- Economic issues;
- Recreational use;
- Safety (relating to the current ramp and new proposals);
- Native vegetation removal; and
- Policy support for proposals.

The Panel appointed by the Minister for Planning sat for 14 days in Mallacoota and Melbourne and heard from approximately 70 submitters and a large number of expert witnesses.

The Panel has considered all the material put before it and assessed it against the evaluation objectives in the Assessment Guidelines developed for the EES. On these issues the Panel concludes as follows.

Policy framework

The Panel does not consider the policy framework is as supportive of the development proposals as put in the Hearing by the Proponent. The Panel considers that the key, relevant parts of the policies stress boating safety (including not providing facilities where inexperienced people may get into difficulty) and environmental sustainability.

Safety and efficiency

The new ramp proposals would provide a better facility at the actual launch and retrieval point but the Panel has serious concerns in relation to the safety of all the new proposals in relation to facility entry and exit.

Coastal processes

The Panel considers there is unlikely to be significant impacts on Mallacoota Inlet but the Panel has serious concerns in relation to sediment movement affecting the safety and usability of the Option 3 proposals.

Marine Ecology

The Panel considers that impacts on marine ecology could be managed during project development.

Character and amenity

The Panel considers that the impact of the breakwaters in the new proposals will have considerable impact on the wilderness and landscape values of Bastion Point and an overall net detriment to tourism.

The social impacts in Mallacoota are dependent on which option is chosen and whichever group feels disaffected is likely to experience ongoing social impact.

Cultural heritage

The Panel has concluded that the 'beach road' options will significantly reduce impacts on Aboriginal sites but that impacts on other cultural heritage values (such as Aboriginal 'sense of place') will remain.

Terrestrial ecology

Vegetation removal for the beach road options is significantly less than for the cliff top road options and could be managed within the Native Vegetation Management Framework.

Economic impacts

The economic case for the project is very weak and likely to have a benefit cost ratio well below 1. There are a number of significant remaining uncertainties in the assumptions that further undermine the economic case.

On the issue of overall societal benefit, the Panel has concluded that the case for the development options is not strong. Weighing up all the different issues and considerations for ocean access at Mallacoota, the Panel has concluded that on balance the development proposals should not proceed. This is not a case where National, State or regional imperatives demand that the proposal proceed for the greater good of the community. This is a local issue where the balance and weighting is much finer and the Panel concludes

that refinement and improvement of the existing boat ramp at Bastion Point provides a much better environmental, economic and social outcome.

The Panel recommends:

The environment effects of Options 1, 2 and 3 as exhibited, Options 3a and 3b, and Option LS1 are such that there is no overall societal benefit in progressing these options further and they should be discarded.

The Panel considers that 'Do nothing' is not an acceptable option and, within its terms of reference, has suggested that an upgrade of the existing ramp and parking be undertaken, and it has provided a suggested scope for such works.