

Western Highway Duplication – Rethinking Section 2B

Buangor – Ararat

An Occasional Paper on Smarter Infrastructure

Paper No. 1 – Introduction and Framing the Issue

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Contents

About KORS Inc. and this Paper

1. A Smarter, Safer, More Sustainable Choice

1.1 The Approved Southern Alignment

2.2 The Northern Option (TTM Alignment)

2. Context: Why Section 2B Matters

3. How Environmental Assessment normally works

4. The Problem: Accuracy of Evidence

5. Do Earlier Decisions Deserve Re-Examination?

6. Financial Responsibility

7. Construction Time and Safety

8. A Practical Opportunity

9. Community Support and the Question of Public Trust

10. A Request for Your Support

11. Our Message to Victorian MPs

Figures 1-8.

About KORS Inc and this Paper

KORS Inc. (Keep Original Route Supporters) is a community-based organisation of environmental advocates, locally concerned people and a landholder formed to promote a safer, lower-impact and more responsible alignment for the Western Highway Duplication between Buangor and Ararat. The group supports completing the safety improvements but argues that the approved southern deviation (“Option 1”) should be reconsidered. Since route selection in 2012-13, updated environmental and cultural heritage assessments have identified significantly greater impacts than originally understood on Option 1, including loss of native vegetation, threatened species habitat and Djab Wurrung cultural Heritage. KORS Inc proposes the Northern Option, an alignment that follows the existing highway corridor and delivers equivalent transport outcomes with lower cost, reduced construction risk, shorter build time and far less environmental and cultural heritage damage. The paper calls on Victorian MPs to support a short modern reassessment of the alignment choices.

1. A Smarter, Safer, More Sustainable Choice

The final stage of the Western Highway Duplication between Buangor and Ararat - **Section 2B** – can be delivered on two routes:

- **The approved southern alignment** – the first half of Option 1, a 5.7-kilometre greenfield deviation south of the existing highway (**Figure 1**). This route was chosen on outdated environmental data and planning priorities that are a decade out of date.
- **The Northern Option** – a 5.2-kilometre alternative to the deviation proposed by KORS Inc, developed to conceptual design stage by TTM Consulting (now Colliers), largely shadowing the existing highway corridor.

Updated environmental and cultural heritage assessments and comparative construction footprints indicates that **the Northern Option delivers the same transport benefits with dramatically lower impacts, lower cost, shorter construction time, and greater safety for workers and the public (Figure 2).**

This paper and later papers outline the issue and shows why a reassessment of Section 2B is warranted.

2. Context: Why Section 2B Matters

To improve safety and transport efficiency and capacity on this interstate highway, the duplication program from Ballarat to Buangor has mostly **renovated the existing highway** as one of the two carriageways.

However, **Section 2B breaks from that principle**. Rather than following the established road corridor, the approved 12.4 kilometres alignment diverts for 5.7 km into hilly farmland south of the existing road, destroying or desecrating:

- rare remnant native vegetation and large old trees (**Figure 3**),
- highly culturally significant DjabWurrung scarred and birthing trees,
- areas of rare Spring soaks,
- ridgelines and slopes that will be heavily cut into, visible for 16 kilometres to the south

Meanwhile, **5.2 kilometres of existing highway—normally reused in duplications—would be left unused** for the project and retained only for local access.

3. How Environmental Assessment Normally Works

The project proponent usually commissions environmental and heritage studies from specialists when studies are required for infrastructure projects going through an Environment Effects Statement (EES) process.

The EES process requires that the studies be exhibited publicly, submissions be received, and the studies and submissions reviewed by an independent panel before the Minister for Planning makes a final assessment.

This procedure¹ was followed for the Western Highway Duplication between Buangor and Ararat.

However, for this procedure to be credible and to result in good decisions, the technical evidence used for decision-making must be the best available.

4. The Problem: Accuracy of Evidence Used for Route Selection

Field investigations and reassessments, by Blue Devil Consulting, Ecology Australia, VicRoads' Ecology and Heritage Partners, On Country and Practical Ecology identified substantially greater environmental and cultural values along the deviating section of the approved "Option 1" than were understood at the time of route selection, including:

- significantly larger areas of native vegetation,
- extensive habitat of the rare and EPBC-protected Golden Sun Moth (**Figure 4**),
- critically endangered Box–Gum Grassy Woodland,
- culturally modified trees and DjabWurrung cultural landscape values (**Figure 5**).

These findings indicate that the environmental and cultural baseline used for route selection is now out of date and could be considered inappropriate. These impacts are largely avoided on the Northern Option (**Figure 6**).

5. Do Earlier Decisions Deserve Re-Examination?

Major infrastructure projects are frequently refined as new information becomes available. In the case of Section 2B, updated environmental and cultural heritage knowledge raises a reasonable policy question:

Should alignment decisions based on 2012 environmental data be reconsidered when better information now exists?

¹ The Biodiversity and Heritage Impact Assessment (Technical Appendix H) was prepared in August 2012 by Ecology & Heritage Partners. Document control records show VicRoads reviewed and commented on multiple drafts between 2010 and the final 2012 assessment was completed

This question is particularly relevant where:

- a lower-impact alternative alignment exists,
- extinction rates of native species are dangerously high,
- cultural heritage concerns remain divisive,
- Elder DjabWurrung women have expressed support for the Northern Option on this women's country and this route removes the problem,
- cultural values can be protected rather than cut through, and
- reconsideration could reduce cost, and construction time and safety.

We note that Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation, which no longer opposes Option 1, does not legally represent independent DjabWurrung people — this is a critical unresolved issue in the approved alignment. Government cannot ignore DjabWurrung voices.

Financial Responsibility

- The Northern Option's shorter, flatter, simpler, and lower-impact works significantly reduce total cost (road engineer's opinion).
- Savings offset redesign costs, planning adjustments and contract variations.

Construction Time and Safety

- The Northern Option requires approx. 3–4 weeks of additional design effort and several months in regulatory process but saves 6–12 months in construction time. If necessary, works on the western end of the section could recommence while this design work is done.
- Many fewer truck movements and interactions with live traffic greatly reduce worker risk.

A Practical Opportunity

As well as reducing environmental and cultural impact, the **Northern Option alignment** offers an opportunity to:

- maintain project safety and transport outcomes,
- improve public confidence in infrastructure decision-making.

Community Support and the Question of Public Trust

The Northern Option has support from:

- **over 15,000 KORS petitioners and most of the 217,000** petitioners supporting DjabWurrung people.
- DjabWurrung Elders who disagree with previous consultation processes,
- residents concerned about environmental loss and cultural harm.
- landholders whose land would be preserved rather than fragmented and overshadowed from above,

Our Message to Victorian MPs

Safety remains a priority and we support the completing the Western Highway Duplication for its expected safety benefits. This is not a call to halt the project—only to adopt the **smarter alignment**.

There is credible, verified evidence that Section 2B can be built faster, more safely, more cheaply, and with vastly lower environmental (see Environmental Paper) and cultural impact by adopting the Northern Option.

Re-examining the alignment using current environmental and cultural information would represent prudent infrastructure planning and responsible stewardship of public resources.

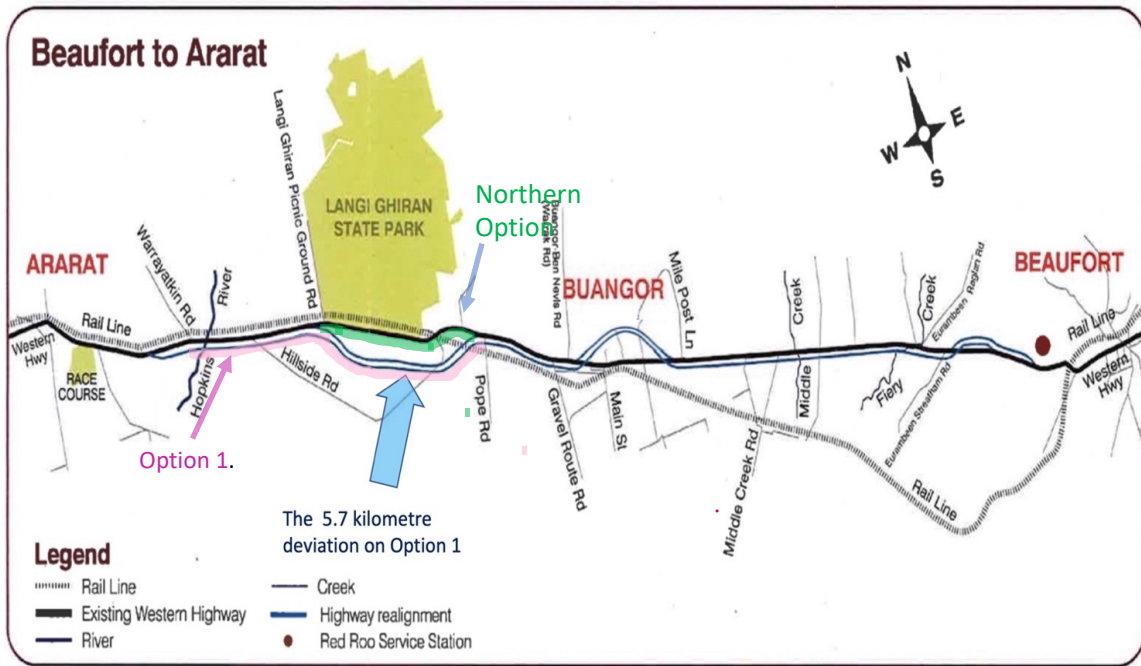
7. A Request for Your Support

We respectfully ask you to:

- Review the updated evidence presented in this paper and later papers.
- Encourage VIDA to revisit its alignment decision and undertake a short, modern reassessment of the Northern Option in respect of impact (Cultural Heritage and Environment using the full engineering scope to reduce impact on this alignment.) and price and construction time.

A safer-to-build, cheaper, flatter, less destructive, culturally respectful route is available.

Figures referred to in text and two additional figures, Figures 7 and 8.



Maps for illustrative purposes only. For more detailed maps contact the Western Highway Project.

Figure 1. Option 1's southern deviation, at blue arrow. (Map not to scale; adapted from the 2012 EES.)

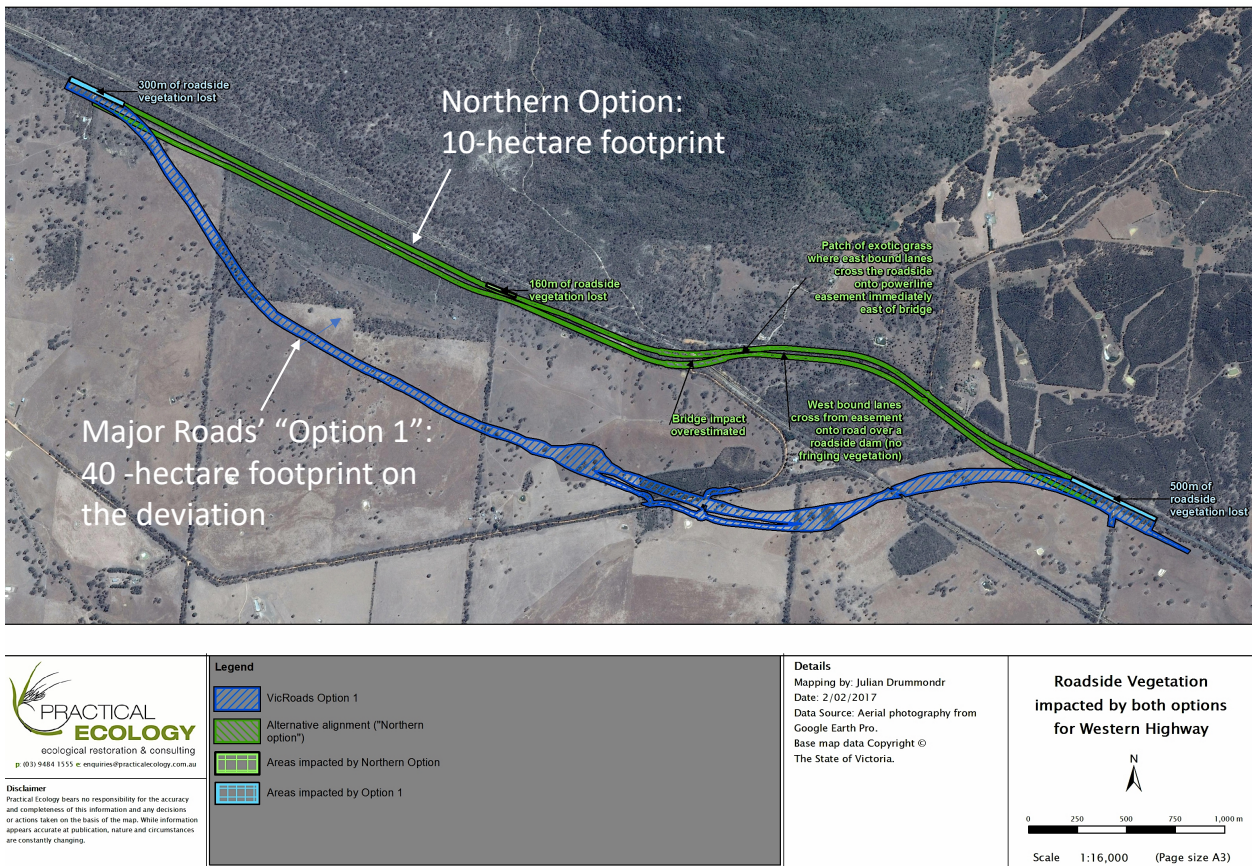


Figure 2: Northern Option conceptual alignment beside existing highway

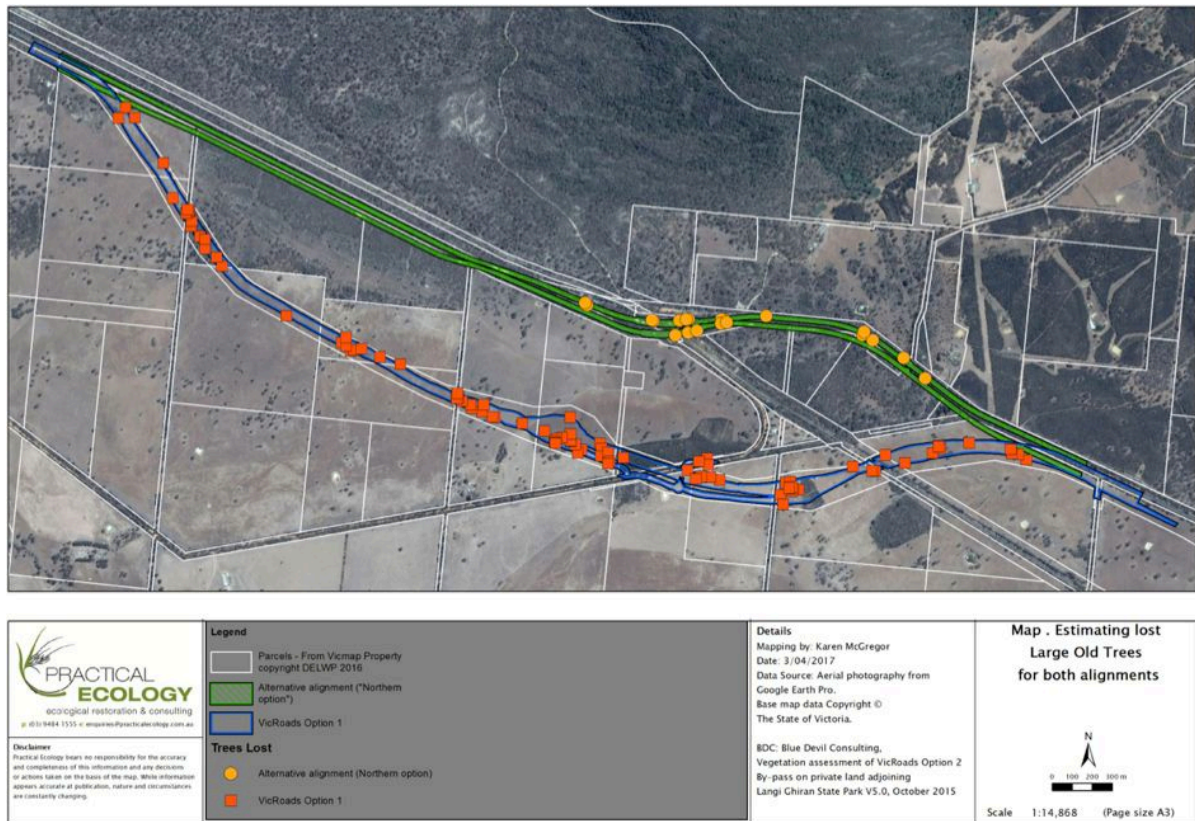


Figure 3. Comparative loss of Large Old Trees on the Northern Option and Option 1.

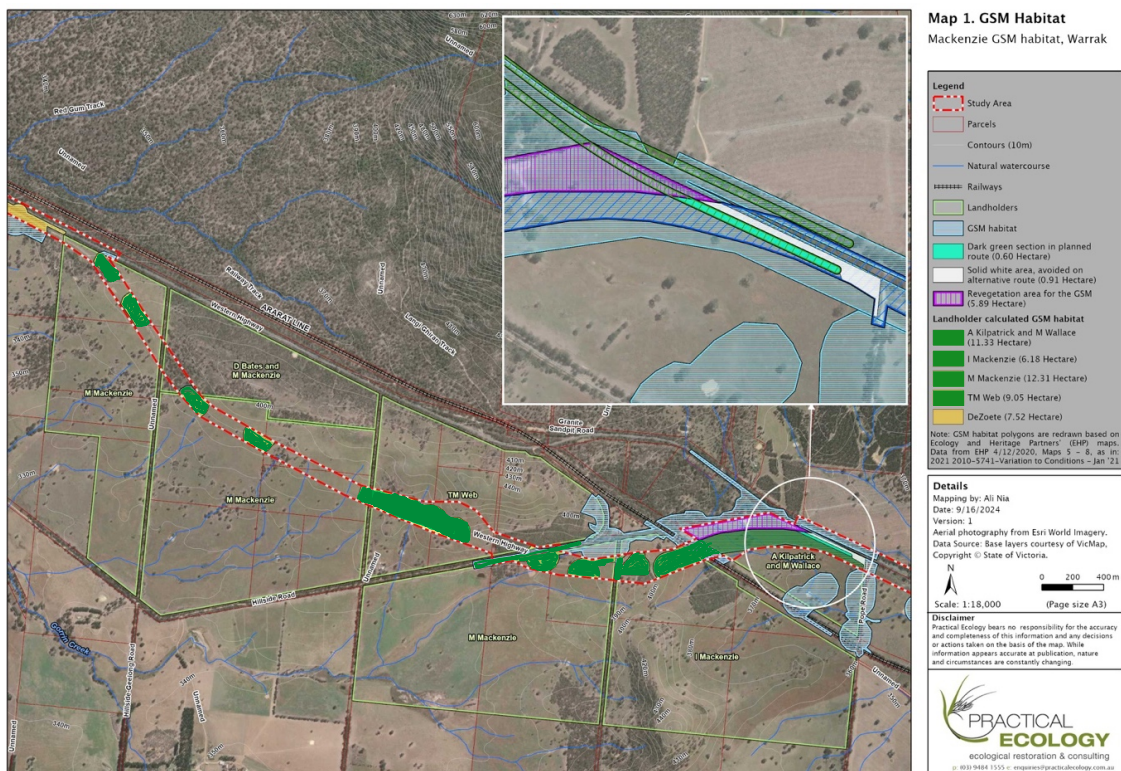


Figure 4. Golden Sun Moth habitat in green shading on Option 1. The deviation has 40.061 hectares on it vs. 2-3 hectares on the Northern Option (aqua shading and purple and green hatching).

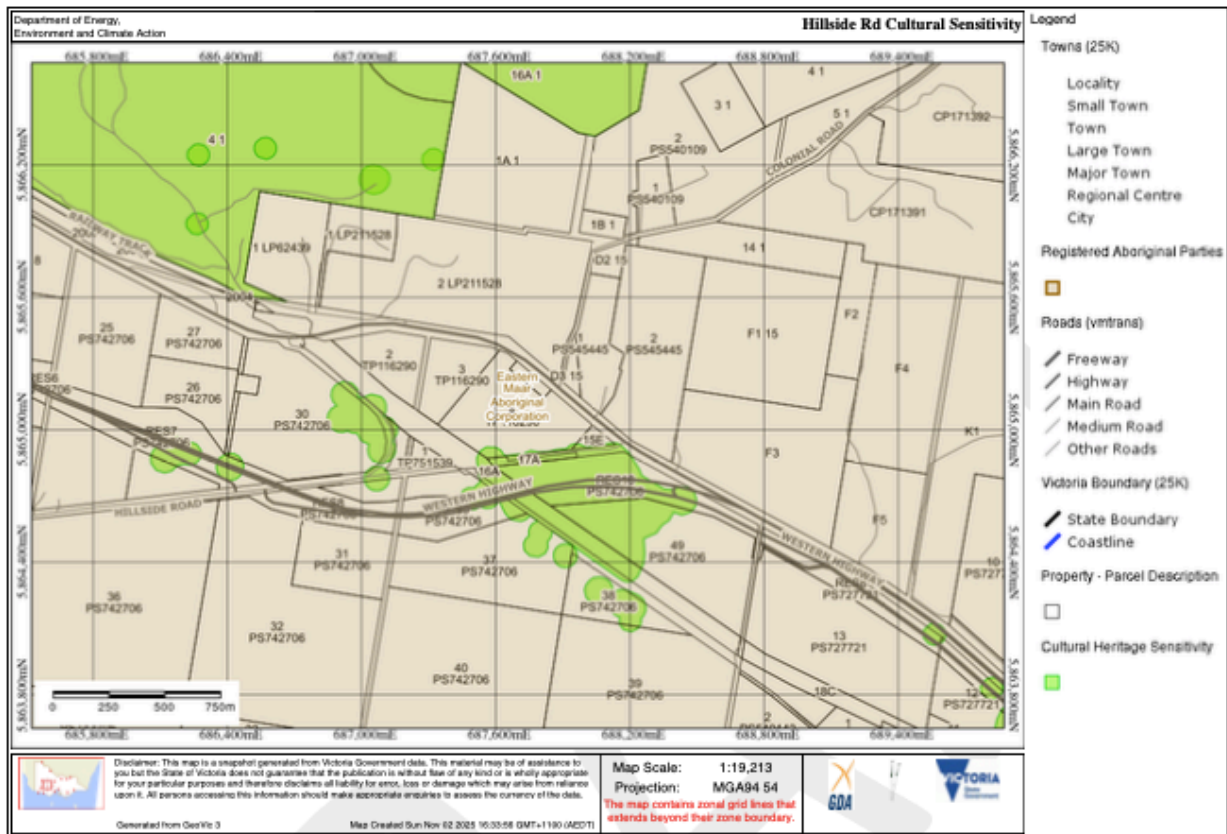


Figure 5. Areas of cultural sensitivity are shown in light green. The area with the eastern birthing tree (lower centre), cut through by Option 1 as shown, is avoided on the Northern Option.

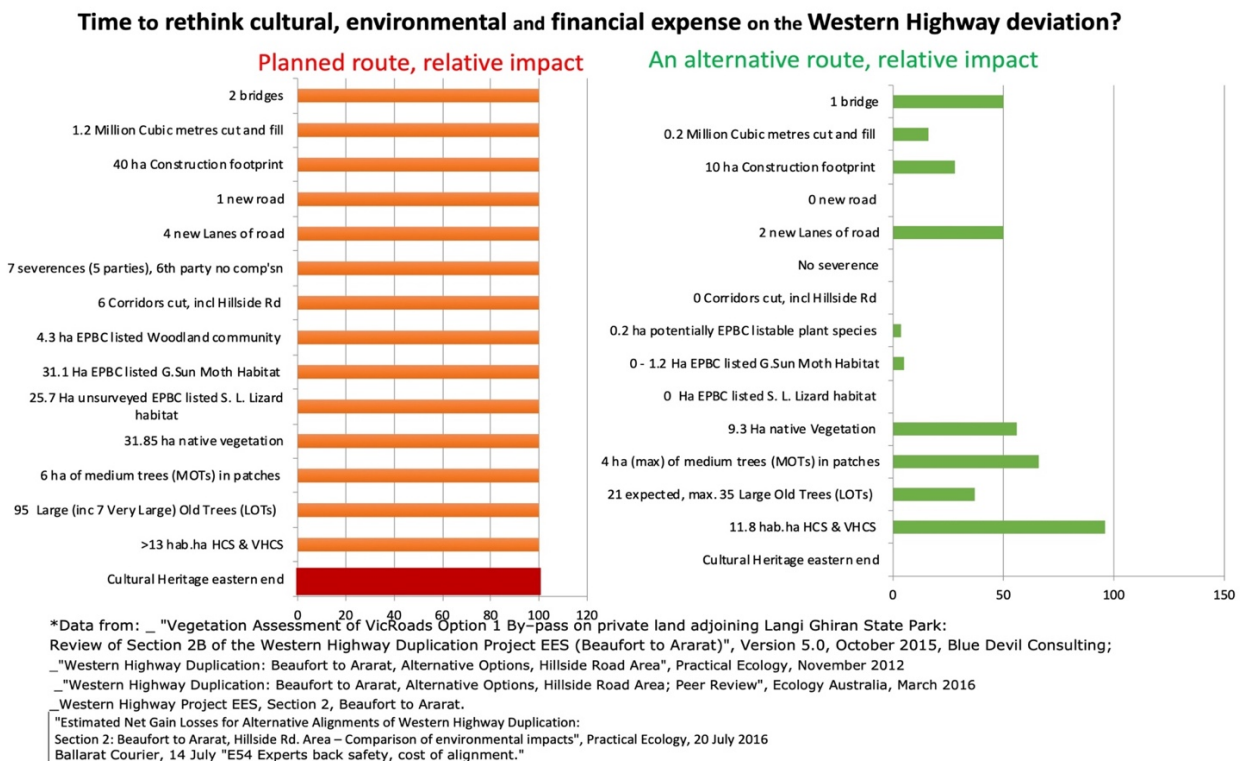


Figure 6: Comparative impact chart for 15 project aspects. (Note: some figures have been updated since the creation of this chart. Overall, the updates strengthen the case for the Northern Option.)



Figure 7. 1% of the large old trees felled on Section 2A



Figure 8. KORS asks for support from the Ararat Council in 2017, based on early information.