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24 January 2011

The Hon Greg Hunt MP
PO Box 274
HASTINGS 3915

Dear Greg,

Re: Watershed Victoria Whale Watch program and Wonthaggi desalination plant

I am writing to you as co-ordinator of 'Whale Watch', a program initiated by Watershed Victoria in 2010. We met with you briefly before the Federal election to outline our concerns about the impact of the Wonthaggi desalination plant on migrating whales.

Since the Victorian government announced the desalination plant in 2007, our community has been very concerned about the lack of baseline data and comprehensive studies during the EES. It was rushed, incomplete and inaccurate.

Potential impacts on many EPBC listed species were glossed over. One which stood out was the statement by the Department of Sustainability and Environment that the Bass Coast was not an important habitat for whales. Federal Environment Minister Garrett chose to support this statement rather than commission independent research. '...the assessment demonstrated that whales were unlikely to occur in the area.' (pg 2 of the letter you received from former Minister Garrett. Sue Saliba has passed on a copy to me). Those of us who have lived here all our lives know otherwise.

Watershed Victoria initiated 'Winter Whale Watch' in May 2010 and up until the end of August, community members reported approximately 200 whale sightings between Phillip Island and Waratah Bay. These sightings have been recorded on a series of maps which are attached. One startling observation was the sharp reduction in whale sightings from late July. Our local newspaper reported that tunneling had commenced at Williamsons Beach in late July. At the same time a relatively large number of whales 'took up residence' at Waratah Bay, staying there for several weeks. During 2009 one of our members recorded sightings locally up until November.

Aquasure and the DSE have admitted there have been no further studies undertaken since the EES. When asked how Aquasure would ensure whales would not be impacted upon by offshore drilling operations (currently in progress), they replied they would have trained marine mammal observers watching, and would shut down drilling if whales came close to the jack-up barge. Asked how the monitors would detect whales at night, senior Aquasure officers could not answer.

Whale Watch data shows that, in fact, this coastline is very important habitat for EPBC listed Southern Right and Humpback whales, and that construction activities at the desalination plant may be having negative impacts. Clearly the project managers have not properly studied impacts on these species.

The enclosed maps are incomplete as this data was collected by community members many of whom did not have the knowledge and resources to provide detailed descriptions of species and behaviour. However its significance is undeniable. We believe Whale Watch should be conducted on an annual basis, and with more resources, could provide a great deal of important new data about whales and other marine life.

It is hypocritical of the Federal government to, on one hand, take such a strong anti-whaling stance at the I.W.C., yet support this desalination plant which could significantly impact the same species.

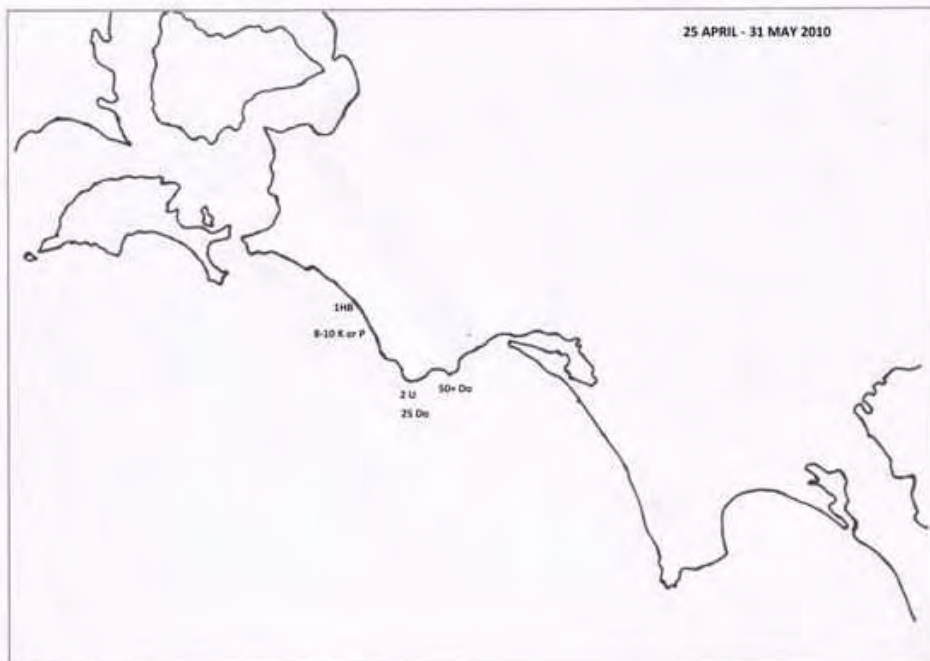
Would it be possible to meet with you to discuss our findings and possible future monitoring, and what action can be taken to guarantee the safety of our abundant whales. My contact details are above.

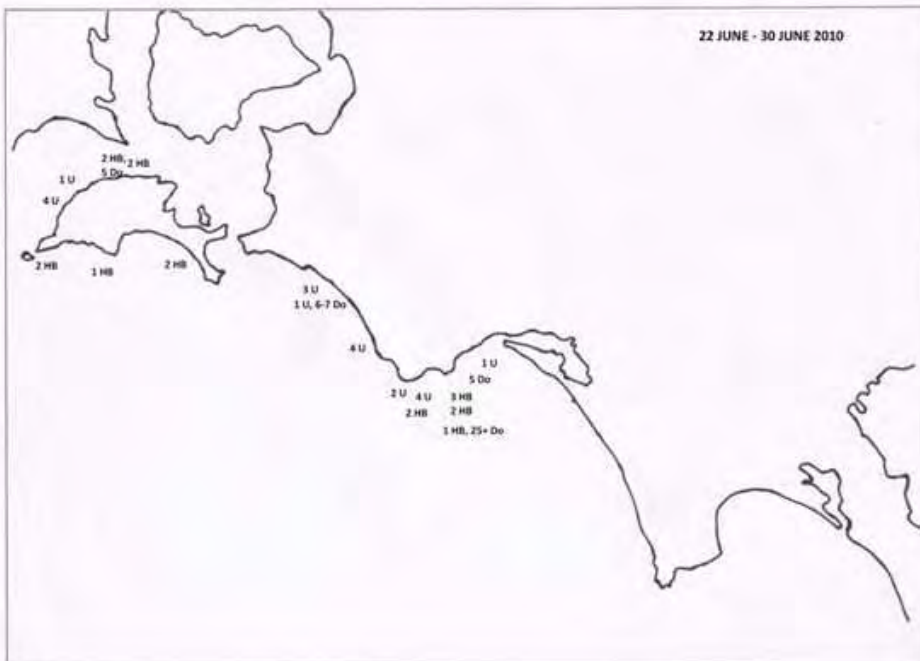
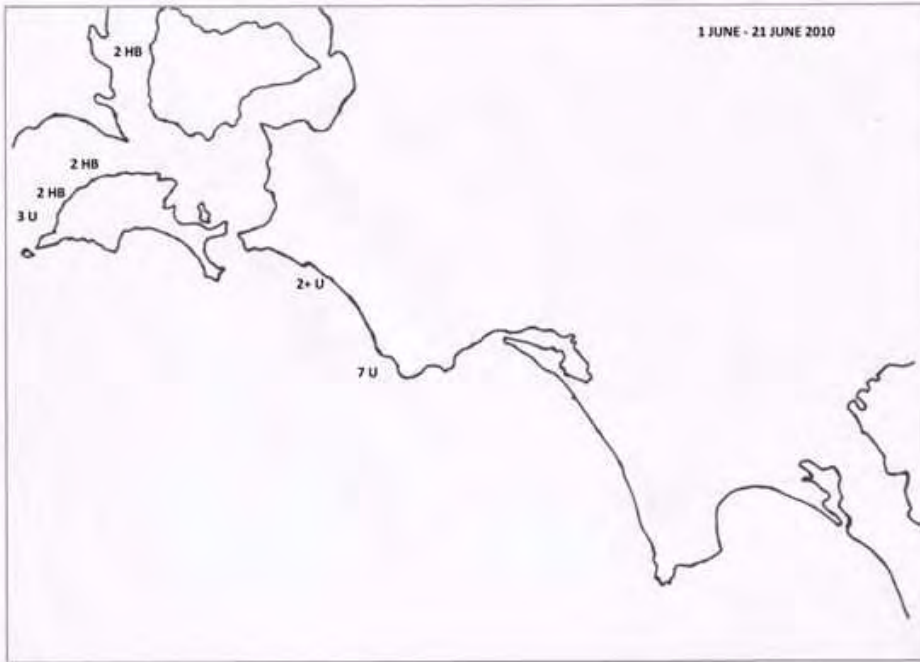
Thank you for your interest in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

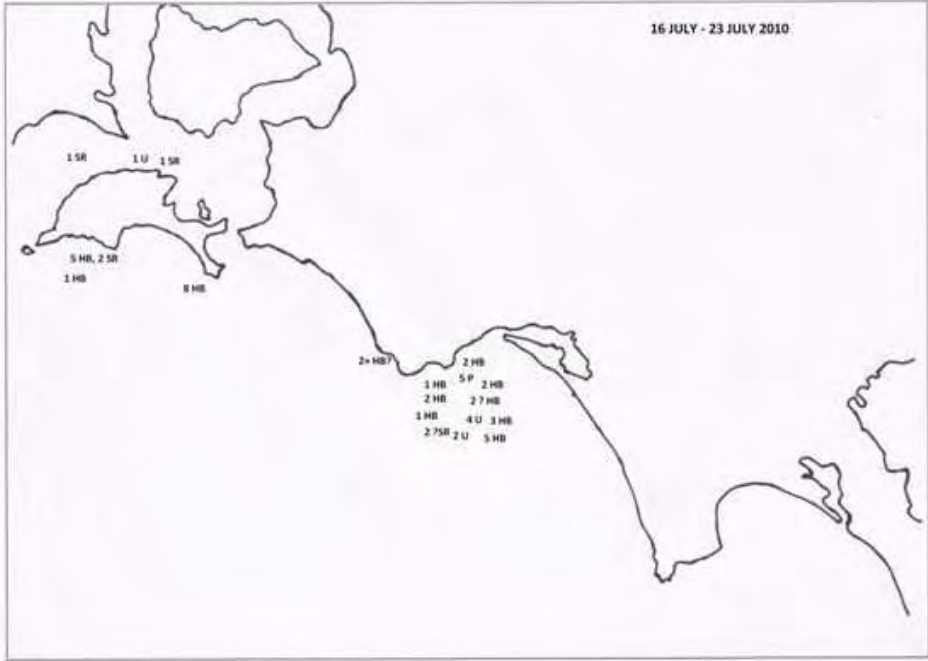
Mark Robertson
Vice-president, Watershed Victoria
Co-ordinator, Winter Whale Watch

Cc Ken Smith, MLA for Bass
Ryan Smith (Victorian Minister for the Environment)
Tony Burke (Federal Environment Minister)
Ted Bailleau (Victorian Premier)
Bob Brown, Richard Di Natale (Federal Greens)
Sea Shepherd









1 AUGUST - 1 SEPTEMBER 2010

