



Nature Conservation Council

The voice for nature in NSW

10 August 2014

Dr John Keniry
Commissioner
Natural Resources Commission
Level 10, 15 Castlereagh Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000 Australia

Dear Commissioner

Submission on NRC draft report on management of Brigalow and Nandewar SCAs

This is a submission to the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) on behalf of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC) on the *Draft report: active and adaptive cypress management in the Brigalow and Nandewar state conservation areas* (the report).

NCC is the peak environment organisation for NSW, representing 130 member societies across the state. Together we are committed to protecting and conserving the wildlife, landscapes and natural resources of NSW.

NCC is strongly opposed to the recommendations outlined in the report. We believe there is no scientific justification for the recommendations, which appear to be politically driven.

If you have any questions about the following submission, please contact Karl Beckert, Forest and Wildlife Campaigner, on kbeckert@nature.org.au or 0497836589.

Yours sincerely

Kate Smolski
Chief Executive Officer
Nature Conservation Council of NSW

1. Introduction

NCC has serious concerns with the underlying motivations and questionable reasoning behind this report. We believe:

- The recommendations are political and not independent;
- Commercial logging and grazing on conservation lands sets a dangerous precedent and is contrary to the management principles for these areas; and
- There is no scientific evidence provided to justify logging, grazing, firewood harvesting, or burning of biomass for electricity generation.

We recommend at a minimum the report must:

- Acknowledge commercial logging and grazing in conservation areas is a decision to be made by government and the community;
- Properly recognise the scientific evidence that 'ecological thinning' of White Cypress provides no demonstrable environmental, social or economic benefits; and
- Accept that ecological thinning and grazing will be a significant unnatural disturbances that will impede the development of the Brigalow and Nandewar SCAs as mature ecosystems.

2. There is no scientific evidence provided to justify logging and grazing

Ecology in the Brigalow and Nandewar

The Brigalow and Nandewar contain some of the most threatened semi-arid biodiversity systems in NSW. It is listed as one of Australia's 15 national biodiversity hotspots.

Threatened species in the State Conservation Areas include a high proportion of the largest population of Barking owl in NSW, the Pilliga mouse, the Black-striped wallaby, Koala, and a range of woodland birds and microchiropteran bats. Any logging or grazing operations in these areas would degrade the habitats of these species.

Some of these species, such as the Black-striped wallaby and Koala use dense stands of white cypress to shelter from heat. Fragmentation of larger dense stands of white cypress through logging and grazing as recommended in the report, will mean an increase in penetration of heat through the canopy, leading to higher overall temperatures, removing the advantage of a cooler microclimate created by large dense stands.

Further, the NRC sets no benchmark for what an 'ideal mosaic' of dense White Cypress would look like, making the whole exercise directionless. Since no ideal mosaic range is identified, the NRC's justification for logging and grazing of White Cypress areas has no scientific basis and simply does not stack up.

No demonstrated scientific evidence that logging and grazing will provide ecological benefits

The NRC has provided no scientific evidence that logging, grazing, or firewood harvesting of White Cypress will provide ecological benefits or maintain conservation values.

Areas of dense White Cypress provide conditions vital for the survival of several native plant and animal species, and thinning this habitat is not associated with any ecological benefit (Eldridge et. al., 2011, Thompson and Eldridge, 2005a).

Carrying out these activities would in fact be likely to degrade existing habitats and reduce biodiversity and conservation values. There is little discussion in the report on the detrimental impacts of the heavy machinery used during logging activities.

It is well known that such machinery breaks down soil structure and the logging itself exposes the ground to the effects of wind and rain, increasing the likelihood of erosion. Also, semi-arid ecosystems such as those in the Brigalow and Nandewar SCAs take a relatively long of time to recover from such activities.

The soil health under undisturbed dense stands of cypress is maintained by an increased incidence of bryophytes, mosses and other non-vascular plants, which protect soil structure and aid water infiltration and retention, when compared to forests where disturbance from grazing and logging has occurred.¹

Larger individual White Cypress trees provide important habitat for threatened wildlife and reduce the density of seedlings in the immediate area.² Removing these larger mature trees will increase cypress density, not reduce it, thereby perpetuating the cycle of regrowth.³

3. Draft report lacks independence

The charter of the NRC is to be an independent body that provides evidence-based solutions on natural resource issues through *“rigorous, high quality independent advice”*.

It is vital to acknowledge that while the NRC can make recommendations in line with its consideration of both the practical science and economics, it is not the NRC to pre-empt decisions that are the responsibility of government.

¹ See W.A. Thompson and D.J. Eldridge, 2005 *White Cypress Pine (C. glaucophylla): a review of its roles in landscape and ecological processes in eastern Australia*

² Pulsford IF, Banks JCG & Hodges L (1993) Land use history of the white cypress pine forests in the Snowy Valley, Kosciusko National Park. Pp. 85-104 in *Australia's Ever-Changing Forests II: Proceedings of the Second National Conference on Australian Forest History* (ed. by J. Dargavel and S. Feary). Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra.

³ See W.A. Thompson, D.J. Eldridge, *Plant cover and composition in relation to density of Callitris glaucophylla (white cypress pine) along a rainfall gradient in eastern Australia.*

The report was commissioned at the request of then Premier Barry O'Farrell in 2013 with an eye to opening these State Conservation Areas to logging and grazing. The terms of reference specifically state that the report should assess "*the potential environmental and socio-economic impact and benefits*" as well as "*commercial opportunities derived from adaptively managing these forests*".

The report as a whole appears to have been constructed to justify commercial logging operations. In order to preserve its independence, the NRC should acknowledge the political and highly contested nature of the proposal to allow commercial logging and grazing on conservation land.

The way the recommendations have been framed assume commercial logging and grazing on conservation land are acceptable activities. For instance, recommendations 5(c) to 5(e) argue for legislative change to provide for commercial thinning on conservation land, with any logs from that land able to be used for electricity production and counted towards the renewable energy target.

By making these recommendations the NRC is taking a strong political position on the kinds of activities that are appropriate for conservation areas and the use of resources from those lands. The final version of the NRC's report should make clear that this is an issue for discussion by government and the community.

4. The proposals set a dangerous precedent for commercial exploitation of conservation areas

State Conservation Areas were set aside to protect biodiversity and conservation values

State Conservation Areas were set aside to protect and conserve significant or representative ecosystems, landforms, natural phenomena, or places of cultural significance.

In 1999 the NSW Government initiated a scientific study of the area (called the Western Regional Assessment)⁴ to identify forests of significant environmental value. The assessment involved extensive consultation with timber operators, conservation groups, Aboriginal stakeholders, minerals and gas industries, local communities and local government.

At the end of this assessment, in 2005 the government legislated to permanently protect some lands as State Conservation Areas (as part of the Brigalow and Nandewar Community Conservation Area). Other areas were classified as national parks, Aboriginal areas, or state forests.

These new State Conservation Areas were created specifically to ensure protection of their natural values by excluding logging and grazing activities. Were it not for potential mineral wealth, these conservation areas would have been classified as National Parks.

They provide essential habitat for native wildlife in a highly modified and cleared landscape. Opening these important areas to commercial logging and grazing would cause significant environmental damage and substantially degrade their conservation and recreation value.

⁴ EPA, *Western Regional Assessment*, <http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/forestagreements/BrigalowNandewar.htm>, Accessed: 1 August 2014

Commercial logging, grazing, firewood collection and use of timber/biomass for electricity generation will result in significant degradation of the conservation values of these State Conservation Areas.

Allowing commercial logging and grazing would set a dangerous precedent

Opening these areas up for commercial purposes would set a dangerous precedent that may lead to other conservation areas being made available for resource exploitative.

It is an unlikely coincidence that the four priority areas targeted for the commercial logging trial are the largest conservation areas in the Pilliga and contain the best stands of mature White Cypress. These areas are high in biodiversity and support large populations of threatened woodland fauna and flora.⁵

The report recommends changing conservation legislation to avoid falling foul of provisions of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* that prohibit logging for commercial purposes. Such an ad hoc approach to policy and legislation is poor practice, and in this case strongly suggests that the purpose is not primarily about achieving the best conservation outcomes for these State Conservation Areas.

At the same time, there is an existing review of conservation legislation under way by the government-appointed Biodiversity Review Panel. The panel's brief is to look into how to reform the *Native Vegetation Act*, the *Threatened Species Act*, and parts of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act*. Making recommendations at this time with the broader review under way could undermine the Biodiversity Review Panel's process.

5. The economics don't stack up

An unnecessary cost to taxpayer

The draft report optimistically states that by allowing commercial return from thinning logging operations the cost to the taxpayer would be between \$40 and \$300 per hectare, which at 6,721 hectares would result in a total cost between \$0.5m and \$1.3m.

This is a large, and according to the science, unnecessary cost. Even if one concedes there is a need to thin White Cypress (which the NCC strongly disagrees with), why the option of well-planned and ecologically based fire management isn't extensively canvassed as an alternative, rather than a secondary measure, has not been made clear in the draft report.

⁵ EPA, *Western Regional Assessment*, <http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/forestagreements/BrigalowNandewar.htm>, Accessed: 1 August 2014

The taxpayer has already paid for these areas to be protected

In 2005, when the Brigalow and Nandewar conservation areas were declared, the timber and logging industry received a multi-million dollar pay-out as compensation. NSW taxpayers paid \$51 million in 2005 for these areas to be protected from logging and grazing.

When the State Conservation Areas were declared, to assist the timber industry transition to the new management regime, the Brigalow Assistance Fund was allocated a \$41 million to provide financial assistance to help some operators exit the industry, support those remaining, and assist workers who would lose their jobs. A further \$10 million over five years was provided to the Brigalow Transition Fund.

To open these areas to logging now is not only bad for nature, it is double dipping on an asset already paid for by taxpayers.⁶

6. Conclusion

The final report by the NRC must not make any value judgement on whether or not commercial logging and grazing activities should be permitted in conservation areas. These areas were reserved under legislation to be protected for their conservation values. Changing that purpose would set a dangerous precedent. There is no scientific evidence provided in the draft report that shows improved biodiversity outcomes will result from logging, grazing, firewood harvesting, and burning of biomass for electricity generation.

One could conclude this report was written to justify commercial logging of state conservation areas. This is unacceptable and threatens the independence of the otherwise well-regarded Natural Resources Commission.

Finally, while this report was being written it should be noted that the government has announced a Biodiversity Review Panel to evaluate the application of conservation legislation in NSW in general. Issues covered in the NRC report should be considered as part of the whole process and not in isolation.

We recommend at a minimum the report must:

- Acknowledge commercial logging and grazing in conservation areas is a decision to be made by government and the community;
- Properly recognise there is no scientific evidence provided to justify logging, grazing, firewood harvesting and burning of biomass for electricity generation; and
- Accept that ecological thinning would be a major disturbance that will further set back the long-term value of the Brigalow and Nandewar State Conservation Areas as mature ecosystems.

⁶[http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/la/latabdoc.nsf/0/bf97950d87b24f71ca2573a8007c7374/\\$FILE/Brigalow%20and%20Nandewar.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/la/latabdoc.nsf/0/bf97950d87b24f71ca2573a8007c7374/$FILE/Brigalow%20and%20Nandewar.pdf)