

centralwest
environment
council

Ringwood Rd
Wollar NSW 2850

4th November 2013

SUBMISSION

Brigalow and Nandewar Cypress Forest Management

Natural Resources Commission
GPO Box 4206
Sydney NSW 2001

nrc@nrc.nsw.gov.au

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Introduction

Central West Environment Council (CWEC) is an umbrella organization representing conservation groups and individuals in central west NSW working to protect the local environment for future generations.

CWEC wishes to thank the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) for the inclusive consultation process undertaken during the assessment of cypress management in the Brigalow and Nandewar State Conservation Areas (SCAs) or Zone 3 Community Conservation Areas (CCA).

CWEC appreciated the opportunity to discuss this review process in both a phone meeting with NRC staff and consultants, and in a face to face meeting at Coonabarabran with other local community representatives.

CWEC participated in the Western Regional Assessment of the Brigalow Belt South and Nandewar Bioregions from 2000 to 2005 working towards the protection of significant ecological features in the remnant vegetation of the wheat sheep belt.

The western woodland ecosystems in the region provide habitat for a large number of endangered ecological communities, threatened plant and animal species. The woodlands are particularly important for declining woodland birds and mammals.

CWEC supported the outcome of the process with the reservation of large areas of western woodlands for the protection and recovery of threatened species habitat. CWEC also supported a generous structural adjustment package for the timber industry that included investment in value adding. CWEC supported the concept of developing cypress plantations on private land through active management of cypress regrowth.

CWEC is of the opinion that the 20 year wood supply agreement for cypress harvesting in the remaining Zone 4 CCA was based on flawed modelling of timber volumes. This is an issue for Forest NSW to resolve.

There is major concern that the rationale behind this current review process is to open up Zone 3 CCA for commercial timber harvesting activities. This will not be supported by the broader community as a precedent in NSW.

The key issues to be covered in this submission include:

1. Consistency with relevant legislation, agreements and management plans
2. The cessation of the CCA Advisory Committees and active community participation in the development of Plans of Management (PoMs) for Zones 1, 2 and 3 CCA
3. Sustainable development in Zone 3 CCA

4. Managing for ecological outcomes
5. Fire as an active ecological management tool
6. Mechanical thinning and grazing inappropriate in Zone 3 CCA

CWEC has provided the following recommendations to guide the NRC in developing a report on active and adaptive management of cypress within western woodland ecosystems:

Recommendation 1: That commercial thinning operations in Zone 3 CCA not be considered because they are inconsistent with legislation, agreements and management plans

Recommendation 2: That the NSW Government provide the necessary resources for the continuation of the CCA Advisory Committees

Recommendation 3: That Restart NSW funding be provided for the ecologically sustainable development of infrastructure and visitor facilities in Zones 1, 2 and 3 CCA

Recommendation 4: That the NSW Government provides adequate resources for the development and finalisation of threatened species recovery plans and for integrated invasive species management in the Brigalow and Nandewar regions.

Recommendation 5: That the NSW Government adopt the use of fire as the best tool for active and adaptive ecological management of cypress regrowth.

Recommendation 6: That grazing and mechanical thinning of cypress not be conducted in Zones 1, 2 and 3 CCA

The rationale for these recommendations is provided in the submission below.



Cilla Kinross

President
Central West Environment Council

1. Consistency with relevant legislation, agreements and management plans

CWEC is of the opinion that the consideration of commercial thinning operations within the Brigalow and Nandewar regions in reserve areas is inconsistent with current legal provisions.

Zone 3 of Community Conservation Areas (CCAs) consists of land that is reserved as a State Conservation Area (SCA) under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NPW Act). The purpose of SCAs is, among other things to identify, protect and conserve areas which:

- (a) contain significant or representative ecosystems, landforms or natural phenomena or places of cultural significance: and...*
- (c) that are capable of providing opportunities for uses permitted under other provisions of the NPW Act in such areas...*

Under section NPW Act 30G(2), SCAs are to be managed in accordance with management principles including:

- (a) the conservation of biodiversity, the maintenance of ecosystem function, the protection of natural phenomena and the maintenance of natural landscapes;*
- (b) the conservation of places, objects and features of cultural values;*
- (c) provision for the undertaking of uses permitted under other provisions of the NPW Act in such areas (including uses permitted under section 47J) having regard to the conservation of the natural and cultural values of the state conservation area...*
- (f) provision for appropriate research and monitoring.*

Under the *Brigalow and Nandewar Community Conservation Area Act 2005* (CCA Act) provisions are set out for the development, content and implementation of the *Brigalow and Nandewar Community Conservation Area Agreement* (Agreement) between the NSW Minister for the Environment and Minister for Primary Industries. The CCA Act provides a co-ordinated framework for the management of land zoned 1 to 4 in the CCA. The Agreement contains additional principles to the NPW Act and CCA Act.

The Agreement made in June 2009 has objects consistent with those under section 3 of the CCA Act:

- (a) the permanent conservation of land, their natural ecosystems and biodiversity;*
- (b) the protection of areas of natural and cultural heritage significance to Aboriginal people;*
- (c) the continuation of forestry, exploration, mining, petroleum and other uses in an ecologically sustainable manner within nominated zones and;*

(d) strong involvement by local communities in the management of land Zoned within the Community Conservation Area

Section 11.13.1 of the Agreement provides that

Ecological thinning and silviculture:

In Zones 1, 2 and 3 non-commercial ecological thinning of dense cypress regrowth may be applied to enhance habitat values and ecosystem function, consistent with the current policy of the Land Management Agency regarding ecological restoration.

Under the CCA Act timber logging for commercial purposes is only permitted in Zone 4, which is subject to an Integrated Forestry Operations Approval (IFOA). The IFOA specifically exempts Zones 1, 2 and 3 from its operations.

Therefore the consideration of commercial thinning operations in Zone 3 CCA is not consistent with the provisions of the Agreement or the IFOA for the Brigalow and Nandewar CCA.

Any active or adaptive management activities would need to take into account:

- woodland species of flora and fauna which inhabit Zone 3 CCA;
- threatened species and endangered ecological communities;
- the high conservation value of the areas as contiguous remnant native vegetation in central NSW;
- healthy soils in an area of natural phenomenon; and
- the cumulative impact of such practices on a conservation area which can be subject to mining and petroleum activities

Any activities undertaken in nationally listed threatened species habitat would need to be considered as a controlled action under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

Recommendation 1: That commercial thinning operations in Zone 3 CCA not be considered because they are inconsistent with legislation, agreements and management plans.

2. The cessation of the CCA Advisory Committees and active community participation in the development of Plans of Management (PoMs) for Zones 1, 2 and 3 CCA

CWEC was actively involved in the establishment of the CCA Advisory Committees, having representatives from member groups on the Central West and Namoi committees, and maintaining close communication with environment representatives on the Gwydir-Border Rivers committee.

The NSW Government ceased funding the operation of the Advisory Committees in February 2012 with no consultation or communication with committee members.

CWEC believes the NSW Government has failed to comply with the objective of the CCA Act to include '*strong involvement by local communities in the management of land Zoned within the Community Conservation Area.*'

One of the tasks of the committees was to have input into the development of Plans of Management for Zone 1, 2 and 3 CCA before going to public exhibition for comment. This work has ceased.

All other areas of NSW covered by the NPW Act have advisory committees that actively participate in the development and review of PoMs.

The committees also had the opportunity to consider the implementation of the IFOA on Zone 4 CCA and the sustainable development of exploration and mining activities on Zone 3 and 4 CCA.

CWEC is of the opinion that any consideration of adaptive and active management processes within the Brigalow and Nandewar CCA should include participation of the Advisory Committees as established under the CCA Act.

The NSW Government needs to provide adequate resources and agency support to reconvene the committees so that involvement by local communities in the management of CCAs is reinstated.

Recommendation 2: That the NSW Government provide the necessary resources for the continuation of the CCA Advisory Committees

3. Ecologically sustainable development in Zone 3 CCA

The concept of ecologically sustainable development in Zone 3 CCA is applicable to the development of infrastructure for visitors and the management of exploration and mining activities.

The development of a commercial cypress thinning operation is not consistent with the relevant legislation. Any active or adaptive management activities aimed at improvement of ecological function cannot be defined as development.

The potential environmental and socio-economic impacts and benefits of undertaking active and adaptive management processes consistent with the principles of ecologically sustainable development relate more closely to NSW Government investment in improved infrastructure.

Communities impacted by the Cobbora Coal Project within the Brigalow bioregion have been given \$20 million of assistance through the Restart NSW infrastructure program.

CWEC believes that this funding source would be appropriate for the development of improved visitor facilities and infrastructure in Zone 3 CCA as it would increase tourism opportunities and provide local employment in the construction industry.

This would be consistent with Goal 3 in the NSW State Plan 2021 to '*Drive Economic Growth in Regional NSW*'. It would provide '*services where people need them*' and '*lifestyle opportunities*'

Recommendation 3: That Restart NSW funding be provided for the ecologically sustainable development of infrastructure and visitor facilities in Zones 1, 2 and 3 CCA

4. Managing for ecological outcomes

The process of adaptive management requires the identification of desired ecological outcomes and the development of a comprehensive monitoring, reporting and evaluation program before activity commences.

CWEC believes that the development and finalisation of threatened species recovery plans will provide the best indication of the types of activities needed to remove key threatening processes and identify key ecological outcomes.

The recovery plans would identify the common threats across a suite of threatened species and enable a prioritisation of active management processes.

CWEC considers that more resources for invasive species management are another key element of achieving important landscape scale ecological outcomes.

The example of the cross tenure/cross agency fox baiting program in Goonoo Zone 1 and 3 CCA, for the protection of the nationally endangered Mallee Fowl, is the style of program that needs to be resourced for priority invasive species across the region.

CWEC is not aware that the active management of cypress regrowth in Zone 3 CCA has been identified as the highest priority management activity in any recent scientific assessment conducted in the region regarding the maintenance and enhancement of environmental values in Brigalow and Nandewar SCAs.

Improved ecological outcomes will be achieved through an integrated set of management activities that are well resourced and well monitored.

Recommendation 4: That the NSW Government provides adequate resources for the development and finalisation of threatened species recovery plans and for integrated invasive species management in the Brigalow and Nandewar regions.

5. Ecological fire as an active management tool

CWEC considers that, subject to rigorous research, well beyond the adaptive management process proposed, possibly the least threatening and least cost process for the active management of cypress regrowth is low-intensity mosaic burning operations under appropriate seasonal conditions.

This will require detailed planning, monitoring and rigorous on ground management. However, while designed to achieve habitat improvement by removing some dense stands of small cypress regeneration and reduce competition for other species, these burns will also provide hazard reduction outcomes throughout the reserve at the time of action.

Fire is a useful tool in the landscape, if implemented carefully. The Australian landscape has developed with the natural phenomenon of wildfire.

Previous forestry management strategies of suppressing wildfire to protect timber resources and of ring-barking large eucalypts to remove competition for cypress growth have altered the ecological processes of the region.

While the consideration of protection of life and property is still paramount in the management of wildfire, the ecological benefits of using fire as a management tool needs to be more thoroughly researched in regard to cypress regrowth.

The experimental use of fire as an active and adaptive management tool in the Brigalow and Nandewar reserves could be a useful scientific program to research cost effective ways to maintain and enhance environmental values. However it should be stressed that this should not be implemented without a full assessment of the ecological outcomes as cypress, *Callitris* sp. is a fire-sensitive genus. Anyone doubting this should read Driscoll et al (2010) Fire management for biodiversity conservation: Key research questions and our capacity to answer them, *Biological Conservation*, Volume 143, Issue 9, pp 1928–1939

Recommendation 5: That the NSW Government adopt the use of fire as the best tool for active and adaptive management of cypress regrowth.

6. Mechanical thinning and grazing inappropriate in Zone 3 CCA

CWEC does not support grazing by introduced species or the mechanical thinning of cypress as ecologically sustainable active management processes in Zone 3 CCA.

Both of these activities have ecological impacts that are difficult to manage and are threatening processes in some habitats.

The impact of hard hoofed animals in sensitive habitats such as water courses and wetland areas, highly erodible soils and areas supporting rare and threatened plant species is well known. The grazing of natural areas by introduced species is inappropriate in areas reserved for species protection.

The use of large machinery in woodland habitats creates soil disturbance, air pollution from diesel and petrol motors, noise pollution and the possibility of oil and fuel spill contamination.

The use of brush cutters is equally as intrusive and very labour intensive, thus providing the least cost effective active management of cypress regrowth. Mechanical thinning of cypress leaves a residue of dead vegetation that could cause a fire hazard.

CWEC considers that neither of these active management processes is appropriate for Zone 3 CCA.

Recommendation 6: That grazing and mechanical thinning of cypress not be conducted in Zones 1, 2 and 3 CCA

General comment

It has been concluded in a recent study by Frank Götmark (2013) in 'Habitat management alternatives for conservation forests in the temperate zone: Review, synthesis, and implications', *Forest Ecology and Management, Volume 306, 15 October 2013, Pages 292-307*, that forest management for ecological outcomes is a complex matter that requires long-term experimentation to ensure that all possible management alternatives are considered in depth.

CWEC is not confident that the process currently being described will really address this issue, but will focus on the benefits of thinning to the local industry. Adaptive management, if correctly applied, can aid our understanding of forest conservation, but what is being suggested requires a much more rigorous process of scientific experimentation to assess the impact of any management changes to the flora, fauna, ecosystems and ecological processes.

