

4 February 2011

Natural Resources Commission
GPO Box 4206
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Director-General
Att: Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology
Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water
PO Box A290
SYDNEY SOUTH NSW 1232

Ref: A503396

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Comments on the proposed amendments to the EOAM Chapter 8
Streamline assessment process for clearing native vegetation**

The Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority (CMA) welcomes any attempt to streamline and simplify the Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology (EOAM). The Murrumbidgee CMA looks forward to being continually involved in new opportunities to improve the current EOAM and welcomes changes that will lead to a greater accuracy of outcomes and efficiency in delivery.

Regarding the new proposed Chapter 8 of the EOAM, the Murrumbidgee CMA has a number of areas of concern, primarily relating to:

1. Vegetation Categories;
2. Improve and maintain test and consistency of environmental outcomes; and
3. Time savings.

1. Vegetation Categories

The Murrumbidgee CMA supports the revised vegetation categories and the three step process to determine if PVPs can be assessed using Chapter 8.

The Murrumbidgee CMA recognises that Category 1 will be the most applicable vegetation category for the catchment, as paddock tree clearing proposal represent a significant proportion of the PVPs delivered within the CMA.

The Murrumbidgee CMA recognises that Categories 2 and 3 are similar in parts, and therefore the following comments relate to both. Currently, the Murrumbidgee CMA assesses vegetation in these categories in two ways; either by negotiating with landholders to retain the vegetation as part of a

larger scenario; or by writing a Minor Variation Report and following the relevant Ministers Protocol. The methodology in Chapter 8 presents a third option with a streamlined approach. The Murrumbidgee CMA suggests that if delegations for Minor Variations were delegated to the General Manager, significant time savings would be achieved and the current assessment approach with accurate outcomes would be maintained.

Category 4 is unlikely to affect Murrumbidgee CMA, as very few Mitchell Landscapes in our region are less than 10% cleared.

Category 5 is potentially very useful to the Murrumbidgee CMA. Firstly, it could be used to assess clearing for the construction of telecommunication towers on private land. Currently, proposals involving telecommunication towers on private land are onerous and often involve Minor Variation reports as they are located in overcleared landscapes, and are not currently considered a RAMA. The Murrumbidgee CMA notes that a possible RAMA for telecommunication towers on private land is being considered, and this would provide a considerable time saving and is the preferred option for the Murrumbidgee CMA.

Category 5 could also be utilised within Murrumbidgee for small clearing applications less than 2 ha. The Murrumbidgee CMA welcomes that the 2 ha is not to be part of a contiguous proposal or done in association with any clearing that has, or will be assessed on the property. The Murrumbidgee CMA is concerned however that the 2 ha rule may be used to clear patches of High Conservation Value vegetation, or a Threatened Ecological Community (TEC).

2. Improve and maintain test and consistency of environmental outcomes

The Murrumbidgee CMA is concerned about the rapid development of the draft Chapter 8, and considers that more rigorous testing is required before implementation. During testing on the 27-28 of January 2011 in Orange, only a small number of PVPs were tested by CMA case officers, and consistency in environmental outcomes was unable to be accurately determined.

Currently, the EOAM is thorough in its assessment and produces consistent and accurate environmental outcomes. The Murrumbidgee CMA has concerns about using only the Threatened Species Tool to inform the improve or maintain test and to determine size and composition of vegetation within the offset using Chapter 8. Elements of the Biometric and LSC tools are still required, and removing these tools from the assessment is not a major time saver, and could potentially compromise the environmental outcomes that are currently required.

Currently, the Biometric tool ensures that offsets must be in vegetation that is of 'equal or greater' value than vegetation to be cleared, this basic tenet is removed when assessing the proposal using Chapter 8. The Murrumbidgee CMA is concerned that this level of simplification may allow vegetation that is 40% cleared to be used as offset for clearing vegetation that is 95% cleared, and therefore not complying with the intent of the improve or maintain test. The Murrumbidgee CMA acknowledges habitat features and attributes for threatened species do still need to be present in the offset.

3. Time savings

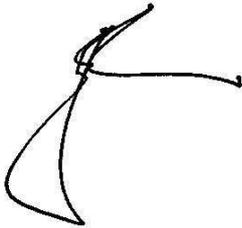
Although it is surmised above that many of the vegetation categories are relevant to the Murrumbidgee CMA, most clearing proposals would include a combination of sites of which some could be assessed using Chapter 8, however other sites would require assessment under the current EOAM. In these scenarios, PVP officers are unlikely to do two separate assessments, as this would potentially increase processing times, and may just assess the entire proposal using the current EOAM.

Of the current and past enquiries, approximately 20% of Murrumbidgee CMA's clearing PVPs would be able to be assessed using Chapter 8 methodology. Initial estimates indicate that this would lead to minor time savings and efficiencies.

The Murrumbidgee supports DECCW for the proposed investment into streamlining the assessment process. The Murrumbidgee CMA also strongly supports the maintenance of effort in the continual upgrade of the NRAT package and request that it should not be at the expense of the streamlined assessment proposal.

In conclusion, the Murrumbidgee CMA welcomes the commitment from DECCW in developing and improving the EOAM. The Murrumbidgee CMA appreciates the opportunity to be involved in the process, and looks forward to future involvement.

Yours sincerely



John Francis
Acting General Manager
Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority