SOUTH-WESTERN CYPRESS STATE FORESTS
REGIONAL FOREST ASSESSMENT

Submission by:

National Parks Association of NSW
Nature Conservation Council of NSW
Colong Foundation for Wilderness

Introduction

This submission has been prepared by the National Parks Association of NSW (NPA) on behalf of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC), the Colong Foundation for Wilderness and NPA.

NPA was formed in 1957 to promote the concept of a network of national parks in NSW legislated through a National Parks and Wildlife Act and managed by a professional National Parks and Wildlife Service. A major step forward in NPAs work was achieved with the passage of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act and the establishment of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in 1967.

Today NPA continues to build on this work through a network of 18 branches and over 5,000 members and supporters.

A major objective of NPA is to ensure that there is a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system across New South Wales. Through a project known as NPA-West, a focus of NPA's work has been the expansion of the reserve system in poorly conserved bioregions across western New South Wales. NPA is also working to achieve improved management of nature across the landscape including improving connectivity between reserves.

We welcome this assessment by the Natural Resources Commission. The protection and sound management of the Cypress Pine forests is an important component of biodiversity conservation in western New South Wales. Virtually all these forests have a role in protecting nature in a landscape where land clearing and grazing have severely reduced opportunities for conservation. These forests are of high habitat value for a range of flora and fauna species, including a suite of woodland birds which have declined in abundance over the last sixty years to extent they are faced with extinction.

Wood Supply Agreement for Cypress Mills

We do not agree that the protected area outcomes from this assessment should be compromised because of existing 20 year wood supply agreements to cypress mills in the region. In fact, we contend that those agreements are likely to be invalid due to them being signed prior to a proper ecological assessment of the region.

It is crucial that the NRC identifies all areas that are required for a CAR reserve system based on the JANIS criteria and their conservation values, without regard to timber issues, and that the assessment is not curtailed from the beginning due to pre-emptive wood supply agreements".

Context

Whilst the NRC information summary includes a map showing the NPWS estate (Figure 2) it is light on the ecological values of these protected areas and potential corridor links between the existing reserve system. In a number of cases the State Forests have an important function in linking existing reserves or in making the reserves more robust to external impacts through mechanisms such as buffering reserves from some of the impacts of intensive agriculture. Areas of Crown Land including Travelling Stock Reserves and Routes may also have important ecological values, which need to be taken into account as part of a landscape wide approach.

Understanding the ecological value of the existing reserve system and the needs for reserve expansion to ensure the establishment of a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system consistent with the nationally accepted JANIS criteria has been a central component of previous Regional Forest Assessments in New South Wales. An assessment for the Cypress Pine Forests ought have no less an understanding.

The Landscape Context section of the NRC information summary ought to have used ecological references in association with references with a forest production emphasis. For instance, Beadle (1981) indicates that forests and woodlands featuring White Cypress Pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*) generally fall within the Ironbark Forests and Woodland and Box Woodland associations. Beadle defines a number of alliances within these associations where White Cypress Pine is one of the dominant species.

Defining Cypress Forests

We strongly urge the adoption of a landscape approach, rather than a reductionist approach in defining the forests. This means that all forests within the cypress landscape should be assessed.

To adopt a reductionist approach would repeat earlier mistakes in forest assessment. It would also leave those forests excluded from the assessment in limbo. These forests are highly likely to support relatively rare vegetation communities and are also likely to support flora and fauna of state or regional conservation significance.

We are deeply concerned that section 2.2 of the NRC information summary appears to be taking the assessment down the reductionist path.

Application of JANIS Criteria

The NRC information summary questions the application of the JANIS criteria (JANIS 1997) to the cypress forests on the basis that only a small proportion of these forests occur on state forest land in comparison to the extent on private land.

We maintain that it is imperative that the JANIS criteria are applied. This is due to the extremely high degree to which the landscapes have been altered due to use for agriculture, the woefully inadequate extent of the existing reserve system in these landscapes, the high level of threat to dependent biota including woodland birds, the high level of threat predicted in relation to climate change and the fact that generally these State Forests have higher biodiversity value than remnants in agricultural land which have generally suffered higher grazing pressure.

Additional Survey Information

NPA has conducted Community Biodiversity Surveys in many parts of New South Wales over the past almost twenty years. The following surveys are relevant to the cypress landscapes:

- National Parks Association of NSW. 2008. Community Biodiversity Survey of Cumbine State Forest, Nymagee NSW from 31st August to 3rd September 2007: Final Report.
- Miehs, Anne. 2003. Lonesome Pine State Forest and Surrounds, Flora and Fauna Survey 29 September to 2 October 2000.
- National Parks Association of NSW. 2007. Mudgee Community Biodiversity Survey: Ulan Crown Lands and Hands on Rock Reserve, 30th September to 3rd October 2005. Compiled by Cathy Merchant.
- National Parks Association of NSW. 2007. South Mullion Range Crown Reserve Community Biodiversity Survey, 22-25 April 2005.
- National Parks Association of NSW. 2007. Community Biodiversity Survey Parkes Final Report: 26th-29th May 2006.

Data from these surveys has been forwarded to the NRC.

Ecological Values

The NRC information summary (section 3.1.1. State forests) states that the white cypress forests are relatively small in size. This gives a false impression as there are a number larger than 500Ha and many which form part of a larger wooded area taking into account adjoining public land or privately owned bushland.

In presenting information about the ecological values of cypress pine forests the NRC information summary (4.1.2 – Table 4) fails to include many of the vegetation survey reports which support the DECCW vegetation maps of the reserve system listed in Table 2 of the information summary. Many of these reports include information on rare, threatened and regionally significant plants occurring within the relevant reserves. It would appear that Table 4 also fails to include a number of internal reports relating to fauna surveys conducted by NPWS, particularly in the mid to late 1990's when funding was available to improve biodiversity information about the reserve system as part of fire management planning. These reports are generally held within regional and area offices of the Parks and Wildlife Group of DECCW.

Another important aspect is the value of water; creeks, drainage lines and drainage depressions. Where native vegetation remains in association with water features these areas form valuable refugia for flora and fauna with restricted distributions in the sheep-wheat belt. Wherever these environmental characteristics remain within the cypress forests they add to the conservation value of the forests. The best examples need to be protected within the reserve system, whilst with others it will be appropriate to have special management prescriptions to protect these ecological values.

<u>Ecological Values of Specific Cypress Forests</u>

The following listings represent knowledge of cypress forest values from NPA branches, members and field naturalists groups.

High Conservation Value Forests

We believe that, in the absence of proof to the contrary, all cypress forests should be identified as high conservation value. The cypress landscape has suffered from a high degree of impact from agricultural land use with extensive clearing and high levels of grazing intensity.

State Forests with recognised high conservation include:

Back Creek
Back Yamma
Bourbah
Boxall
Buckingbong
Carrabear
Carrawandool
Cumbine and associated timber reserves
Euglo South
Gillenbah
Gunebang
Mandagery
Manna
Merri Merri
Narraway
Nerang Cowal
Reefton
Sandgate
Strahorn
Tailby
Tallegar
Tottenham
Warrie
Weelah
Wilbertroy
Wyrra
Yambira

Core Conservation

Bimbi
Binya
Conapaira South
Lachlan Range
Lake Urana
Jimberoo
Mt Nobby
Weddin
Yathong and nearby timber reserves

Threatened Species and Communities

Blowclear East
Blue Mallee

Caroline
Coradgery
East Cookeys Plains
Gunningbland
Killanbutta
Monumea Gap
Mulyandry
Reefton
Tottenham
Warraderry

Connectivity

Kangarooby
Warraderry

Stepping Stones

Cargelligo
Gap Dam
Hillston
Mejum
Melbergen
Melougel
Naradhan
Stackpoole
Yelkin

Social/Recreational Value

Bendick Murrell
Bimbi
Binya
Weddin

"Invasive Native Scrub"

Conservation groups maintain their opposition to the listing of White and Black Cypress Pine as invasive native scrub (INS) species in eight catchment management areas in NSW under the *Native Vegetation Act 2003*. The NSW Government's listing of these species contravened ecological advice. It merely provides a mechanism for private land holders to circumvent the restrictions on clearing of native vegetation contained within the Native Vegetation Act.

The NRC information summary does not provide an objective assessment of the ecology of dense stands of regeneration, instead blandly repeating production forest propaganda.

Climate Change

The NRC information summary fails to make it clear that cypress pine forests occur within a part of Australia predicted to be subject to far greater rises in temperature than elsewhere. In addition across much of the southern part of the range winter rainfall is predicted to decrease. Evaporation

rates will be higher and water availability as a consequence is likely to decline to a significant degree.

The NRC information summary does not refer to Steffen *et al* 2009 which presents recent information about climate change and its potential impacts on biodiversity. It is important that this authoritative and up-to-date review forms a key part of consideration of the likely effects of climate change on the cypress pine forests.

Given that current levels of increases in world temperature exceed the worst case models previously used by the IPCC and there is no effective agreement to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, the NRC information summary is far too sanguine about the potential impacts of climate change on cypress pine forests.

There is already evidence that at the drier edge of its range White Cypress Pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*) is not regenerating, there must be some concern that regeneration failure will be a future feature of cypress pine forests further east.

Further the cypress forests themselves are an important carbon sink and may assist in amelioration of some local climatic effects due to their presence as islands of biodiversity. Mackey *et al* (2008) draw attention to the valuable role natural forests play in carbon storage. This is an important value which needs to the taken into account in the assessment. The negative impacts of high levels of timber extraction and high grazing intensity need also to be taken into account in carbon accounting for these forests.

Connectivity

Section 4.1.1 of the NRC information summary poses the question "*What is the ecological functionality of cypress forests, for example, vegetation connectivity to aid the movement of fauna through the landscape?*"

We concur that connectivity is an important issue and we place high significance on areas of State Forest and other public land which help connect larger reserves and forested areas. In the context of the cypress landscapes the concept of connectivity needs to be expanded beyond physical connectivity.

For some groups of species physically separated smaller forest areas may act as stepping stones between larger areas of forest and bushland. While not as ideal for habitat protection and connectivity as broad, robust corridors, a series of small forest areas stretching between larger reserves can still be important in providing opportunities for some groups of mobile species to move across the landscape.

Any consideration of the role of connectivity needs to consider physical connections as well as stepping stones.

Social and cultural values – passive recreation

NPA branches, NPA members and field naturalists groups across the cypress landscape use the State Forests for various passive recreation activities. These include bushwalking, bird watching, nature study and family camping. When they travel to State Forests they may spend money in local towns and villages on supplies, fuel, food and drink, thus contributing to local economies.

In recent years such passive recreation activities have been impeded by opening of the State Forests to licensed hunting. Our members are extremely concerned at the public safety implications of incompatible forest recreation.

Conservation groups are opposed to licensing of hunting and, in particular, hunting in the cypress pine forests. Hunting has a number of detrimental impacts:

- safety risk for passive recreation participants
- disruption of considered regional pest management strategies
- facilitation of illegal movement of feral animals

We consider that the recreational pursuit of hunting is not compatible with other land uses and should not be permitted within the cypress forests nor, indeed, any other public land in New South Wales.

Reservation of Cypress Forests

Areas of high ecological significance within the cypress landscape should be included within the protected area system managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

We are opposed to use of Community Conservation Areas as a reservation mechanism. The Government should use the National Parks and Wildlife Act as the method to achieve protection of high conservation value forests across the cypress landscape.

The NSW Government should also gazette National Parks and Nature Reserves for equivalent areas within the Brigalow Belt South and Nandewar Bioregions and for the Red Gum Forests. This would ensure consistent treatment of protected areas across New South Wales, save costs and reduce duplication and inefficiencies arising from having two different systems.

References

Beadle N.C.W. (1981) *The Vegetation of Australia* Cambridge University Press, London.

JANIS (1997) *Nationally Agreed Criteria for the Establishment of a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System for Forests in Australia.* A report by the Joint ANZECC / MCFFA National Forest Policy Statement Implementation Sub -Committee.

Mackey, B.G., Keith, H., Berry, S. & Lindenmayer, D. (2008) *Green carbon: the role of natural forests in carbon storage*. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

Steffen, W., Burbidge, A.A., Hughes, L., Kitching, R., Lindenmayer, D., Musgrave, W, Stafford Smith, M. & Werner, P.A. (2009) *Australia's Biodiversity and Climate Change* CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood.

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