

The Commissioner  
Natural Resources Commission

Ms Debbie Andrew

21<sup>st</sup> October 2009

Dear Commissioner,

**Re: Conservation of the River Red Gum forests of south-western NSW.**

I wish to congratulate the government on undertaking an independent assessment of the conservation needs of the River Red Gum forests of south-western NSW with the aim of establishing significant and sizeable new national parks to protect these threatened ecosystems.

I wish to make the following points in respect to their conservation values, threats to these ecosystems and proposed conservation outcomes.

Conservation Values.

1. The Riverina is one of the most heavily cultivated and poorly reserved bioregions in Australia with only 1.9% included in reserves.
2. The NSW River Red Gum forests include two of the largest stands Barmah-Millewa and Koondrook-Perricoota-Gunbower which extend either side of the Murray River and provide opportunities to create large reserves in conjunction with Victorian National Parks.
3. River Red Gum Forest provide habitat for at least 46 threatened fauna species, including the Barking Owl, Squirrel Glider, Southern Bell Frog, Superb Parrot and Regent Parrot and 23 threatened plants.
4. River Red Gum Forests regularly support more than 20,000 waterbirds, including 19 migratory birds listed for protection under international agreements.
5. River Red Gum forests play a major role in native fish migration, spawning and recruitment during flood events and provide habitat for four globally threatened fish species.
6. The River Red Gum forests of south-western NSW provide the best remaining native vegetation corridor between the Australian Alps and South Australia providing opportunities for animal movement and migration, especially in the face of climate change.

Threats

1. The River Red Gum wetlands are an ecosystem in crisis facing irreversible collapse without environmental flows of water or natural floods. Restrictions on irrigation flows must be maintained until natural flooding can occur.
2. Logging and intensive grazing is having a massive impact on these ecosystems which are already in crisis. Logging is demonstrably unsustainable with most areas operating on assessments that are 25 years old and do not account for the massive declines in growth resulting from a drying climate and reduced water

flows. The extremely long time required for these trees to develop hollows and reach old growth stages, most valuable to fauna for nesting hollows, takes hundreds of years and so logging is effectively mining the forests of their old growth trees.

3. Logging is undertaken in a destructive patch-clear felling, not as selective logging of some individual trees.
4. Much of the timber logged is used for low value products such as firewood and fence posts with only 17% as sawn timber and extraordinary 83% goes to residue (ie waste) markets.

#### Conservation Outcomes

1. The establishment of new reserves must include extensive large old growth stands that are not dying and have a likelihood of surviving into the future.
2. New reserves must contain significant wetlands and breeding habitats of threatened fauna.
3. The National Reserve criteria should be applied to the assessments.
4. A goal of 60% remaining healthy Red Gum Forests should be sought for inclusion in conservation reserves.
5. Refugia, landscape corridors and linkages need to be identified and considered in the establishment of new reserves.
6. Environmental water flows must be guaranteed to these forests to insure they will survive for future generations.
7. The practices of logging and grazing in these threatened ecosystems should be examined regarding their ecological and economic sustainability.
8. The creation of significant new National Parks will increase tourism to the region.

I urge the Commissioner to support a thorough and professional and scientific conservation assessment of the River Red Gum forests in order to determine the best and most comprehensive conservation outcomes for these iconic forests that will demonstrate this government's commitment to the protection of our natural and cultural heritage to future generations.

Yours sincerely,

Debbie Andrew