

From: Kate Boyd
Sent: Friday, 23 October 2009 11:12 PM
To: Avtar Singh
Subject: Submission on NRC Preliminary Assessment of River Red Gum ecosystems

Dear Commissioners and staff,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your Preliminary Assessment Report for the Riverina Bioregion and River Red Gum ecosystems.

I do not live in the region but I have visited the several of the different forest, woodland and other wetland communities each of the main river and creek systems at various locations on a number of occasions, and I have some experience of inland riverine wetland management. As a member of one of the Community Conservation Advisory Committees set up following the Brigalow-Nandewar forests decision I also have some knowledge of issues arising in management of current or former State Forests in inland NSW. I appreciate the social and environmental complexity of the issues your Report assesses. You sought comment on 9 key issues. I do not have the detailed local knowledge that would be required to comment fully on each. I feel it is more appropriate that I submit my views on what will be the best broad direction for future management in the hope that this will assist you in making recommendations to Government. My comments therefore cross several of the 9 issues.

It is clear that the industries harvesting wood products are neither ecologically sustainable nor economically sustainable. Most of the wood products are of low value compared to the moderate and high value of the ecosystems from which they are taken, and the benefits obtained from use of those products can generally be obtained in other ways (e.g. sleepers can be made from concrete; homes can be heated in other ways; the pleasure of watching a log burn may not be directly replaceable but can be done without or swapped for different pleasures at home).

By comparison, the benefits of keeping the remaining loggable trees cannot be obtained by substitution. I believe that the values of River Red Gum forests and woodlands are seriously diminished by timber harvesting operations (whereas some other forest types in other regions can sustain some careful logging with much less loss of or risk to values in the medium or long-term). I do not believe the values and benefits lost can be obtained now or in our lifetimes through growth of younger trees when lack of inundation seriously limits growth and harvesting is in excess of growth rates.

Your report has described some of values that are threatened (e.g. threatened species) but has not given sufficient weight to the importance and difficulty of keeping relatively common species common and keeping ecosystems functioning effectively in the face of both river regulation and climate change. For example, I suspect that areas opened up by harvesting operations will be more prone to change greatly through establishment of different species (exotic or Aussie) at the expense of many of the species that were normally present or even common in the past. Different species are likely to grow either when a flood eventually occurs washing propagules in or when a wet season enables seeds already present to establish, then continue to grow instead of dying because lack of ongoing inundation will mean the species that previously dominated the floodplain will no longer be favoured over species that could not tolerate repeated or prolonged inundation. The food webs associated with the declining flood loving/tolerant species will tend to disintegrate putting populations of many more species at risk including once-common species.. Opening up the forests at the present time of changed water regimes will reduce their resilience. Many more values will be threatened in addition to the values of the trees that are felled. The integrity of the system has already been seriously compromised because so many areas have already been altered by clearing, logging or changed surface and groundwater regimes.

Management efforts should therefore be focussed on maintaining as much as possible of the remaining natural values of the ecosystems, without making this more difficult by extracting more wood for relatively little benefit.

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Since the harvesting is not at a sustainable rate, the benefits to people involved in harvesting and sale of products are not sustainable and change will be necessary at some time. This will mean some change in the communities where these people live or spend their income is inevitable. The process of changing to new jobs or income sources is a worrying inconvenience, particularly for people who are not confident of their ability to learn or use different skills and get new jobs or who feel they will have to move, but such a process of change has potential to lead to different benefits. It would be far better to assist these people and communities to make changes to a new future now than to lose more of the benefits associated with ecological. I am sorry that I do not have the knowledge or experience to suggest how these communities and individuals can best be helped. Several other towns where timber harvesting operations have closed continue to be good functional towns, demonstrating that the change can be survived (e.g. Coolah and Bingara). The Brigalow-Nandewar forest decision resulted in ongoing employment for each of the Bingara timber workers who wanted this and financially supported alternative transitions for those who did not want government jobs. I understand that all those who wanted Government jobs are happy with their new jobs. Similar transitional arrangement could be made in the Riverina in association with changing most of the state forests to national parks and building up the tourism and park management industries as well as such other industries are suited to the region. The NSW Government should give high priority to funding the transition – it is more important than many other things the Government wastes funds on like main roads.

I believe that the best outcome for NSW and the region can be obtained by converting most of the State Forest areas to national parks and nature reserves along with other areas of Crown Land of moderate or high conservation value. Please recommend this. All areas of high conservation value should become national parks or nature reserves – they should not be left as State Forests or in other tenures so that they can be logged. Leases of high natural value should be bought as is happening in the Brigalow-Nandewar. National parks should be extensive and so far as possible the reserves should be interconnected. Where local Aboriginal people, particularly traditional owners, wish to have a major role in management of the land as national parks these should become Aboriginal owned national parks. Water and community resources should then be focussed on managing reserves as well as possible – much greater environmental flow allocations are needed.

While the Government decision that changed many State Forests in the Brigalow Belt South and Nandewar Bioregions into reserves managed by NPWS was commendable in many ways, I do not think it is a model that should be followed. Areas that Aboriginal people had a particular interest in should not have been excluded legislatively from further consideration for Aboriginal ownership. There currently appears to be no particular benefit from calling the whole bioregional area the Community Conservation Area. Labelling all the reserves as part of the Community Conservation Area seems to have achieved nothing other than slight initial confusion and wastage on larger signs. The 3 Community Conservation Advisory Committees covering the BBS-N Area have made contributions to development of a management agreement for public lands in this Area that should make it a better agreement than one developed by the land management agencies alone might have been, but there is so far no indication that the agencies will implement actions that were proposed by community reps not in the draft suggested by agencies. While establishment of the three Community Conservation Advisory Committees may have increased the ability of different interest groups to work cooperatively through management issues, or helped more people learn about the range of management issues that reserve managers must address, and may have provided a mechanism for informed community input on forestry issues that was previously lacking, supporting these Committees is an expense that may no longer be worthwhile.

It may be better for the Riverina to use the normal Regional Advisory Committee system to obtain advice on management of NPWS-managed areas, establish a new Advisory Committees for whatever areas remain as State Forests or Crown Timber Lands, and use joint meetings of this Advisory Committee and representatives of the NPWS Advisory Committees to discuss co-ordinated management of all of the public lands in the region with a view to minimising boundary issues, maximising effectiveness and efficiency of appropriate management that gives due recognition to the natural connectedness of the ecosystems.

Thank you for considering this submission.

Yours faithfully,
Kate Boyd

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