

23.10.09

Dear John and Team,

It is imperative that the Redgum Forest Assessment being conducted by the NRC, recognises that the future management of redgum forests must pay strong attention to economic, social and environmental factors.

We all want resilient Redgum forests, resilient Redgum timber industries and resilient local Redgum communities.

The redgum timber industries are part of the solution, in the already highly modified landscape of the Redgum forests of the Riverina.

As your report notes, the current Redgum forests are a result of 75 years of water regulation and 120 years of silviculture.

In times of scarce water, silvicultural thinning is one of the most effective means of keeping these forests viable.

We remind you of your observation of the interwoven nature of community and Redgum timber industry, building human capital and community resilience together. (page 9 NRC Prel. Assessment Report)

We have been making this point strongly, constantly and clearly in all our meetings with the NRC.

Of course, we support that areas of special conservation values should be actively managed, but believe that this is already happening and should continue under special management zones by Forest NSW.

We do not believe that locking areas into National Park offers the best protection for the biodiversity or the viability of the Redgum forests.

There is already a significant amount of Redgum forests in the Riverina bio region, already reserved for conservation values.

We refer you to our initial O'Brien Sawmills NRC submission which outlined our business, our connection and commitment to Redgum forests, Redgum communities and Redgum country. That submission tells the story of who we are, what we do, our values and our hopes for our forests, industry and community.

A Redgum Forest fighting for survival-too many trees in extreme drought



A Redgum Forest- thriving after thinning, in extreme drought



Our response to the NRC Preliminary Assessment River Redgum Report key issues is noted as follows:

Issue 1: Have the values supported by the forests been adequately described

Direct Employment Figures

The Redgum industry employment figures have been understated in this report, mostly due to the rigid guidelines of interviewing only timber industry businesses with a direct relationship with Forest NSW.

There are more than one thousand people are directly and indirectly employed in the Redgum industry, in the Riverina.

Many Redgum timber businesses access timber resource from both State Forests and private property, while some have access to only one or the other.

Both resources are vital to maintaining a vibrant industry, providing a strong economic basis for the well being of our small communities.

Otherwise, the pressure on the infrastructure and economies of our communities increases until they become unviable.

To give a fair balance of the economic worth of the industry to the region, we believe that the full economic story needs to be told in this assessment.

Issue 2: What other information is available to inform the assessment, particularly on areas outside the Central Murray?

Look to the findings of the various Bushfires inquiries in both Victoria and NSW, and their devastating effects and enormous costs on environment, biodiversity and local communities. The findings have implications for this assessment.

The RRGEA Report, which was produced in response to the VEAC Redgum Assessment, has many positive proposals which the NRC should note.

Investigations into the Nyah Vinafera/ Hattah-Kulkyne Forests

Issue 3: How will river regulation, climate variability and climate change affect the forests and the values they can support in the future?

River regulation since the 1930s has had a enormous effect on the availability of water for the Redgum forests.

Water has been diverted from the Murray-Darling to grow fibre and food for many Australians, to provide water for regional communities and larger cities like Adelaide and Melbourne. The flooding regime will NEVER return to what it was Pre European times.

There are many differing opinions on climate change into the future. Even amongst the science community, there are many opposing interpretations of what may or may not happen. It is obvious that we need to actively manage these forests into the future, with less water. With the climate change predictions, indicating drier and hotter times, it is ludicrous to increase fuel loads in the forests. Locking the forests up, with the high probability of them burning, into National Parks is not the answer.

Ecological thinning is a great management tool, which can work with whatever climate change throws at us, as opposed to doing no active management.

In Redgum National Parks like Yanga, where millions of tonnes of dead and dying Redgums constitute most of the forest, it is not a matter of IF it burns, it's a matter of WHEN and how devastating will it be. The managers of Yanga will tell you of their achievements and their aims. But compared to the damage being caused by mismanagement, the wins are miniscule compared to the losses and the risks. With this knowledge, why would we go and replicate the same in other Redgum forests??

Issue 4:

What are the key forest values and core ecological processes we should seek to maintain in this dynamic context?

The key forest value should be to have the healthiest, most sustainable forest possible, ensuring long term survival, through all the challenges ahead, be it fire, flood or drought.

The predictions of drier and hotter weather is scary. The 13 year drought is taking its toll, impacting on the survival of the forests.

Redgums are currently dying at alarming rates because of overstocking and not enough ground moisture.

We need to keep harvesting the dead and dying Redgums, to ensure the survival of dominant, healthy trees.

If the predictions are right and the redgums die, what happens to the water quality of the rivers if the root systems die?

They are the filters, the lungs of our waterways.

Do they become saline ponds again?

Creating large tracts of Redgum National Parks will definitely not solve the problem of the enormous numbers of tree deaths, that are happening right now.

This is of huge concern to ourselves and our communities.

The health and future of the redgums is vital.

Ecological thinning is a great management tool that fits in with potential climate changes. It is a very adaptive management strategy. NRC should fully support ecological thinnings and the Redgum timber industry businesses capable of performing it.

Issue 5: What approaches should we take to maintaining the forest values and processes through the transitions that seem inevitable

The main approach is to keep actively managing the forest. The forest has been managed for the last 6000 yrs by various custodians.

There is no need to respond with knee jerk reactions, just because a few radical green groups have done a backroom deal, to promise the government some preferences

We should look at the science, consult and learn from the local communities, as we step through each process of change.

Partnership with local communities will bring the best results for the environment.

We have dedicated people from NSWFS, industry and local community working together to create positive outcomes. Lets not be held to ransom by the ill informed ideologues , who do not have anything to lose.

Everyday, our thoughts and actions are never far away from how to improve the forest

NRC need to consult on what options are available to businesses and communities that are going to be affected by changes into the future.

In the Preliminary Assessment report, it states on page 109
Many businesses do not place a value on their quota
This is totally untrue.

Do they think the Quota licence come out of a Weetie packet?

Timber people base their whole business plans around their Quota allocations and our business would become unviable without them.

Our own business has spent millions of dollars buying allocation/licences, when they rarely becomes available.

We value it more than anything else in our business, as do other Quota /licence holders.

On todays market those allocations would be worth in excess of \$50 million dollars, making the total asset base worth upwards of \$100 million dollars.

This needs to be on the table and talked about before the final recommendation to the government is presented

Issue 6: What are the key features of a sustainable future for the forests, forest industries and the local communities?

O Briens Redgum have 35yrs of experience in harvesting Redgums
Over the last 7 or 8 yrs, we have spent a lot of time and millions of dollars on harvesting dead and dying Redgum trees that were classed as uncommercially viable trees.

These sub-dominant trees choke up the forest, rob valuable moisture and nutrient and are major players in the demise of the health of ALL the trees in the forest. Once the sub-dominant trees are taken out, the healthy ones respond immediately, even to minimal rainfall

Our company has thinned thousands of hectares, on both private property and state forests

This is not a trial of a 50m³x50m³ plot

This is not a field day of how we may do things into the future if this or that happens

We are not waiting for approval of funding from government

The government actually get paid a royalty and make money from us droughtproofing their sick forest.

IT is actually happening now.

We have drought proofed and saved, hundreds of thousands of trees, from certain death, with outstanding success

Under the direction of SFNSW, O Briens Redgum, Darlington Point Sawmills and the Gelletly Family currently conduct full time, effective silvicultural operations.

We are the leaders in true conservation of our forests

We have had the vision and the investment commitment to become the most effective silviculturists of Redgum forests, in the world

If someone does not agree with that statement, please get them to show us who is doing it better

We have conducted trials that prove we can double growth in Redgums, even in the face of drought.

Not only surviving, but thriving.

in turn sustaining our forests, forest industries and local communities into the future with less water

We are more than happy to go over these trials with NRC

We are major employers and leaders in our communities, with a lot of on the ground experience

If we lose that now, it will be lost forever

What are NRC going to do about this?

Hopefully not give in to political pressure

Issue 7: How can local communities transform to cope with less water?

Our communities are already on their knees from constant years of drought. Mental health issues, suicide deaths are serious concerns in our communities.

If the government want people to grow food and healthy forests in our communities, into the future, they need to help, instead of creating policy that hinders us.

There are a whole range of avenues to research
But first we need to get rid of this political culture of using primary industries as a soft target for green preferences
At the risk of sounding pessimistic ,when we are naturally optimistic, our political experience shows that rural people are constantly being horsetraded in political circles , for green preferences.
It is appalling, to think that the average age of the nations foodgrowers, are in their late fifties and forestry people feel like second class citizens.

Issue 8: How can forestry industries respond to declining wood yields?

Just because we may have less water into the future, does not automatically correspond directly to lower wood yields
Hopefully the Perricoota cutting, which can deliver up to 6000 megs per day gets the green light.
We fully support this concept of watering the forest and then let it flow back into the rivers for further use downstream
We believe that watering and thinning go hand in
If this Perricoota project is done properly, it has the potential to make the forest better than it has ever been., with minimal water

Less water, better forest, what a great outcome!

There are plenty of good, practical watering concepts, that need to be approved and implemented ASAP.

With the thinning we have conducted, we have been able to double the growth of the Redgum trees, despite the worst drought on record.
Over 90% of the Redgum forests have not been thinned, the way SFNSW and our company do it now
Look at the health of the forest now, in its overcrowded chaos.
Then examine the thinned areas and imagine if that was replicated across the whole of the forest
Better still, imagine in a perfect world if it had been thinned over the last few decades or even the last century the way we do it now.
Most of the concerns that surround us now, even in this serious drought, would not even be there
Remember that trees are a main indicator of the health of the forest and all that depend on it
If you have poor tree health, more than likely everything else will be struggling also
If you have good tree health, more than likely everything else will be healthy and thriving

We cannot do anything about the weather, but we can do something about good forestry practices that will save countless millions of redgum trees into the future.

O Briens Redgum are committed to the health of the Redgum Forests
We have the expertise and the capacity to make a huge influence on the health of our forests
We are improving the forest everyday
Lets get on with it !

Issue 9: What are the appropriate policies and institutional arrangements to manage these forests through such a challenging and uncertain future?

The main focus is to have a vibrant, healthy, sustainable forest

Locking up large tracts of forests for the sake of preserving it, is an outdated , ridiculous concept.

This is where National Parks and lightning strikes, make such a devastating combination.

National Parks builds up the fuel load and lightning comes along and ignites it. This has been very effective in the past decade with the millions of hectares of death and destruction, all Australians have witnessed

Thinning reduces fuel loads dramatically and at the same time improves the health of the forest

This is not rocket science, it is common sense

We are seeking longterm agreements to get on with improving the health of the forest through thinning

If we do not do it,who is?

The government has neither the commitment nor the money to carry out longterm activities

The Greens are sitting and hoping for rain in the driest continent in the world.

We are improving the health of the forest everyday

Thinning is the solution, coupled with water whenever available

We want a sustainable future for our Redgum forests, our industry and our communities.

We do not want to be traded off to satisfy urban green rhetoric.

As Patrick Moore (Founding President of Greenpeace) says "we should be using more wood, not less!"

Whoever reads this, could you please make sure that these points are conveyed to the decision makers within NRC