

FOREST ASSESSMENT
NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION
GPO BOX 4206
SYDNEY NSW 2001
EMAIL: forests at nrc.nsw.gov.au

M & V. ATKINSON

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Dear Commissioners,

PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT REPORT
Riverina Bioregion Regional Forest Assessment
River red gum and other woodland forests

We, Mike and Valerie Atkinson, provide some comments below on the preliminary report on the Riverina woodlands, which we have accessed via the Commission's web-site. We present these comments in the hope that a final report will be a more accurate and useful document.

BACKGROUND

We are not writing this as representatives of any particular organisation or company. We write as people familiar with the Riverina, and as members of a family that has extensive and continuous associations with the Riverina, in particular the Murrumbidgee and Lachlan Rivers since the 1870s.

During that time the main activity of family members has been sheep grazing, but members of the family have used river water and timber for building, fencing, drinking, irrigation, feeding stock, and have benefited from the work of beekeepers when one of the eucalypts is in flower. We are the proud owners of several carved red gum bowls, made from cast-off 'rubbish' left behind by sleeper cutters some years ago. Each of us has helped in (private) replanting projects in the Riverina, and have worked with biodiversity surveys in the area.

A family property has in recent years been bought by NPWS after nearly 70 years in the family, and is now part of the NSW reserve system. We hoped to learn about the status and future options for all the timbered areas on these rivers, (the Murrumbidgee and Lachlan), and were curious to read descriptions of timbered land on some of the smaller drainage lines, mainly around the Hay area.

We are very disappointed with the contents of this report, albeit an interim document.

Our comments are presented below.

Yours faithfully M. & V. Atkinson

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference include three points (abbreviated):-

a regional forest assessment of the scientific **bioregion**:

Recommendations for various uses of **public land**;

Recommend **water management and flooding** requirements to sustain the forests.

Based on these terms, we expected to see information on the distribution of forests in the region. It is appreciated that Cypress pine forests are being dealt with separately, but a forest assessment should include at the very least a description of red gum, box (eg *Eucalyptus largiflorens*) and Acacia woodlands, and an analysis of the forest areas held under freehold, leasehold and various public titles. While the report tries to resolve the extensive work of John Benson (NSW National Herbarium) and Doug Binns (Forests NSW) the report deliberately ignores all other forest types to concentrate on River Red Gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*), and only those within the bounds of a few large areas held by Forests NSW.

Forests NSW are responsible for a chain of small forest areas along both the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers. Only last week we drove past a sign inviting us to visit 'HAY STATE FOREST', while a short distance downstream is the "WOOLOONDOOL STATE FOREST". If this document is an assessment of Riverina forests, at least a list of these areas and preferable an assessment of them could be expected – even if the areas in between, which we can assure you, is heavily timbered and locally highly regarded, are not acknowledged.

In addition to the areas of Forests NSW on the main rivers, there are many forest areas, within the region reviewed, away from the main river channels, held as State Forest areas.

In summary we expected to see at least a listing if not a brief assessment of forest areas in the Riverina, either area by area, by tree species, or by tenure. We may have missed these tabulations, but the primary term of reference, to assess all the forests in all the region seems to have been ignored.

KEY ISSUES

Comments have been sought on nine key issues; are comments are made on specific topics and may relate to one or more of these nine points.

Ramsar Sites – the Ramsar Convention listing of Riverina forests was a major step in recognising the importance of these wetland sites. There is no discussion in the report of any current or future management options from the Australian Ramsar group. Much of this section appears to have been copied from State Forests NSW.

Current Forest Status - Table 8 indicates that only 1.3% of Black Box woodland in NSW has been reserved; 69.7% of the original Acacia woodland has been cleared and a mere 1.7% is reserved in some form or other.

Page 96 (section 3.5.3) this claims that timber from River Red Gums is "*highly valued for use as railway sleepers*"! This may have once been the case but concrete sleepers have been shown to be more resilient and have a smaller environment footprint. This comment is a terrible distortion of the current position and should be deleted from any subsequent report.

The current narrow buffer zone alongside river channels must reflect the much wider lateral influence of river floods in this region. These buffer zones should be increased at least to the width in use elsewhere in NSW. Far more appropriate flora and fauna surveys should be carried out before any logging takes place, irrespective of the current land tenure.

Page 99 (section 9.6) the authors of the report should be told that the settlement on the Murrumbidgee River with a small timber mill is known as DARLINGTON POINT – not DARLING POINT.

One fact we have managed to extract from this document is that there are now five timber mills left employing somewhere between 150-200 people. There could have been a review of the logging industry, historical total production and employment figures could be instructive. From the various industry tables reproduced it appears that the main use for River Red Gums is either for garden mulch, firewood, or even sawdust. Table 19 (p.244) quotes a figure of over 100,000 tonnes of 'residue' being produced. Whatever basis there may once have been for settling on a "sustainable" annual quota (before the current drought), this is no way to run a government controlled logging industry.

Grazing and Bee-keeping in or near State Forests and excluding all other forest areas) merit three and two paragraphs only. There seems to have been no input from groups representing either of these industries.

Implications – following the extensive and thorough Victorian (VEAC) red gum review, NSW growth rates and 'sustainable' yields must be urgently reviewed.

All Ramsar sites should immediately be managed by the NSW NPWS.

The unique value of the riparian timber in the Riverina as a corridor and refuge must be acknowledged by careful and appropriate legislation.

Indigenous involvement is a prerequisite for future conservation of the Riverine Woodlands.

