

Shire of Wakool

RIVERS, REDGUMS & PLAINS

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In replying to correspondence, please quote Councils Ref. No.



21 October 2009

Forests Assessment
Natural Resources Commission
GPO Box 4206
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Sir/Madam

NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION - RIVERINA BIOREGION - REGIONAL FOREST ASSESSMENT - RIVER RED GUMS AND WOODLAND FORESTS - PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

This matter was considered by Council at its meeting of 21 October 2009, where it was resolved:

- i. *That the report be received & noted.*
- ii. *That Council makes a submission on the preliminary assessment report prepared by the NSW Natural Resources Commission on the Regional Forest Assessment (in the Riverina bioregion) for the River Red Gum and other woodland forests.*

Accordingly, this letter forms the basis for Wakool Shire's submission on the preliminary assessment on the Regional Forest Assessment (in the Riverina bioregion) for the River Red Gum and other woodland forests.

It is acknowledged that the primary purpose of the preliminary assessment report is to set down the economic, social and available scientific knowledge about these forests and their current management. Accordingly, the preliminary assessment is largely a data gathering exercise.

In reviewing the preliminary assessment, it appears that there has been a large amount of environmental assessment documented with a lesser focus on a detailed understanding of the social and economic value of these forests to local and regional communities. It is imperative that the NRC assessment is a balanced assessment with equal understanding of the environmental, social and economic value of the forests.

The future sustainability of these forests is of prime importance to Wakool Shire. The red gum forests are an extremely important asset to the ongoing sustainability of our shire. This is in an economic, social and natural environment context. In this regard, the timber industry will be a key part of the solution for the ongoing management of these forest assets.

It is also noted that the NRC preliminary assessment (appendix 5) has not acknowledged Wakool Shire's submission dated 15 September 2009. I have attached a further copy of this submission.

I trust that this submission will be carefully considered by the NRC and Wakool Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to continue to liaise with the NRC on this critically important issue for our community.

Yours faithfully



CHRIS CHAPMAN
GENERAL MANAGER

Chris Chapman

From: Chris Chapman
Sent: Tuesday, 15 September 2009 4:14 PM
To: felicity.calvert@nrc.nsw.gov.au
Cc: .Wakool Shire Trim; Mark Williams
Subject: River Redgum Forests in Riverina - NRC Assessment - TRIM I09/2861
Attachments: ForestsNSWEISSocioEco.pdf

Felicity

I refer to your letter dated 20 August 2009 and the NRC-RAMROC meeting held in Deniliquin on 21 August 2009 regarding the abovementioned matter.

As you may recall, I raised at the NRC-RAMROC meeting in Deniliquin the amount of information Wakool Shire provided to Forests NSW in preparation of their EIS into the Harvesting and associated road work operations in south western NSW.

I have reviewed the Forests NSW EIS information and it is still current in terms of the social and economic value of the timber industry to the town of Barham in Wakool Shire. I have attached some extracts from the Forests NSW EIS that are relevant.

In summary, the assessment by the NRC is of critical importance to Wakool Shire. The red gum forests are an extremely important asset to the ongoing sustainability of our shire. This is in an economic, social and natural environment context.

I look forward to engaging with the NRC through the course of this assessment.

Chris Chapman
General Manager
Wakool Shire Council

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Fax: 03 5887 5103

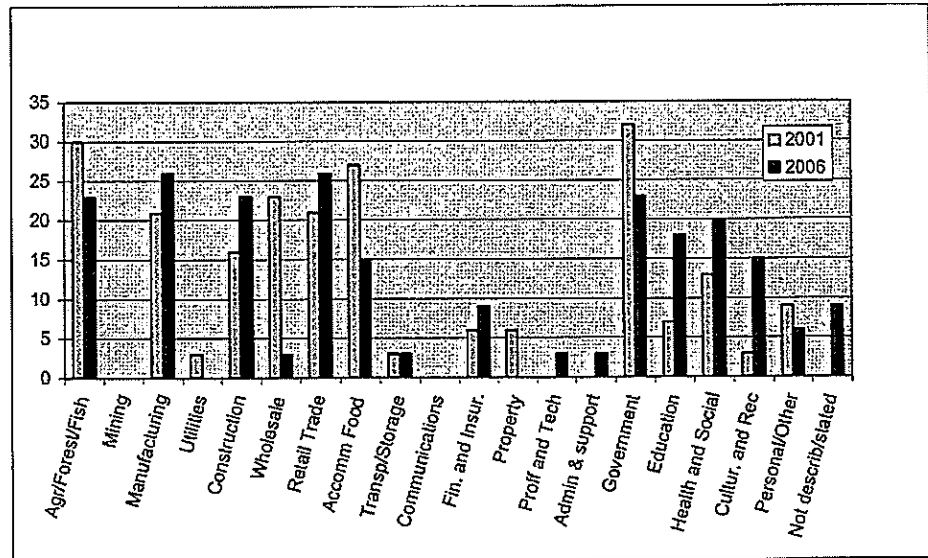


Figure 11-6 Mathoura employment by industry

Services and facilities

Most services are supplied at the multipurpose Visitor and Business Information Centre built in 2003 on land donated by Forests NSW as part of its commitment to the town. This hosts the library, a sub-branch of Bendigo Bank, Centrelink and Medicare access points, tourism information and various business services. Mathoura has a primary school, church, post office and police station, two hotels, one club and one op shop.

Importantly, the Bendigo Bank was established in Mathoura five years ago as a Council initiative after a period of 15 years where the town was without a bank. Since its establishment the Bendigo Bank has experienced gradual but sustained growth.

Mathoura has a suite of strong community service and interest organisations, including a Chamber of Commerce, a local newspaper, and hosts several regional festivals including the Mathoura Fishing Classic and the Cadell Country Fair. The town is strongly connected to the recreational and timber industry value of its River Red Gum forests, and optimism remains relatively high. Similar to other towns, in 2006 the rate of volunteering was close to a quarter of the population (24.7 %).

Barham-Koondrook

Barham is the largest town in the Wakool Shire, located on the Murray River, and together with its smaller twin town of Koondrook on the Victorian side of the river, in 2006 supported a population of over 1,900. Although administratively separate, the two towns function socially and economically as one, and there is a high level of cooperation between the two towns. Barham – Koondrook provides services and facilities for the surrounding agricultural industries and itself supports a significant River Red Gum timber industry which is integrally linked to the history of the town as a destination on the river transport route.

Population

Although the population of the twin towns is increasing, this growth has predominantly been in the smaller town of Koondrook. In both towns the growth is primarily in the older age groups, with an average age of 50 in 2006 (Table 11-6). This aging is also reflected in the high elderly dependency ratio and low labour force participation, as a large segment of the population moves into retirement.

Table 11-6 Key socio-economic indicators for Barham-Koondrook

Socio-economic indicators	1996	2001	2006
Population (number)	1,832	1,852	1,934
Population Growth (%)	-0.3	1.1	4.4
Indigenous population	22	20	28
Indigenous population growth (%)		-9.1	40
Indigenous population (%)	1.2	1.1	1.4
Median age			50
Elderly dependency ratio	38.1	37.3	55.2
Overall dependency ratio	67.6	65.7	84.3
Sex ratio (number of males per 100 females)	104.7	98.7	99.8
Unemployment rate (%)		4.2	3.2
Labour force participation rate (%)		50.0	50.3
Occupied dwellings (%)		87.0	83.8

The intensifying drought is reported to have reversed this population growth trend since 2006, causing out migration of working families to seek employment in other areas. Anecdotal evidence from discussions with parents of school aged children and local real estate agents in Barham-Koondrook indicate declining school enrolments, with families leaving mostly for the coastal towns of Melbourne and Geelong, or mining towns.

Economy and employment

Agriculture and timber are key industries in Barham-Koondrook and surrounds, after retail and accommodation and food (Figure 11-7). Agriculture is diverse, with sheep, wool and cattle, feedlots, crops, citrus, dairy and vineyards. While permanent plantings continue to prosper, with the ongoing drought, rice and dairy have suffered major declines. It is reported that in the last 2 years, the number of dairies in the Shire has reduced from 27 to two, with significant consequences for employment, investment and spending in the towns of Barham-Koondrook (pers. comm. Barham Real Estate Agent, 2008).

Barham - Koondrook supports three major sawmills, three low quality sawlog mills, and one residue operation, however the percentage of the timber sourced from Forests NSW is unknown. Total direct employment in the Crown mills is estimated at over 110 staff. In addition, both Koondrook and Barham support significant value added businesses employing a further 33 people. Bonum Sawmills has developed a veneer factory that produces the only River Red Gum timber veneer in the world. The factory has been operating since 2003 and employs 21 staff.

There are also two River Red Gum furniture businesses in the twin towns, employing a total of 12 staff. Overall there are estimated to be 143 persons working in the timber processing plants in the towns.

Timber operators interviewed indicate that the large majority of staff are local, however some staff travel from as far as Moama. Even if only 100 of these employees are resident in Barham-Koondrook, this represents almost 15 % of employment in the towns in 2006. Given more recent out migration, the timber industry most likely represents an even larger proportion of employment. Some timber industry operators have also indicated that they are no longer able to source timber from private lands, so the Forests NSW quotas are their sole supply.

Unemployment rates in Barham - Koondrook in 2006 were low and falling, however, as discussed above, this is more likely due to the out migration of working age people seeking employment.

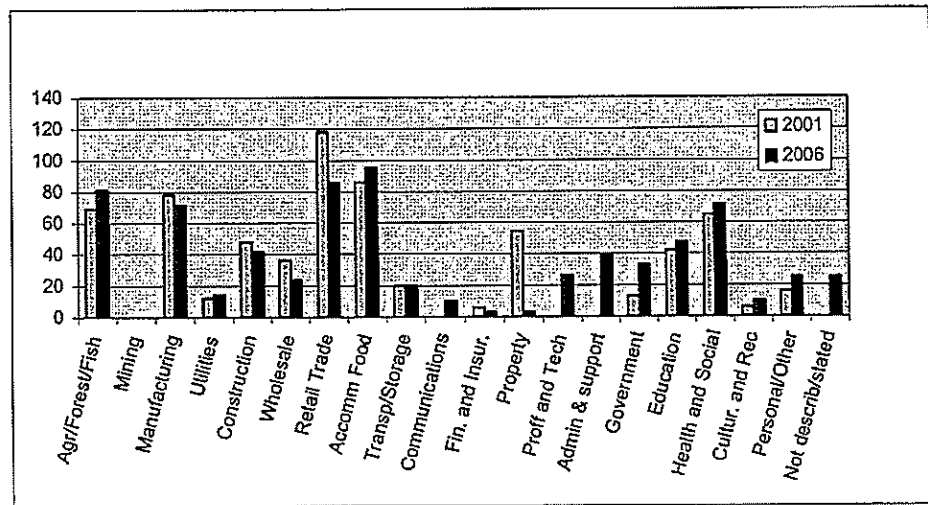


Figure 11-7 Barham – Koondrook employment by industry

Figure 11-7 indicates that the retail and property industries have suffered the most significant falls during the last census period, with losses also in construction, manufacturing and wholesale, whilst gains have been made in government, health, social and education services.

Services and facilities

Together, the towns of Barham-Koondrook have most of the facilities they need, including a hospital, medical centres, schools, bank, post office and police station, library and swimming pool. Despite the drought there have been no recent closures of businesses or services, although services provided from these facilities have declined. One doctor has recently left the town and the bush nurse will be leaving in 2009, while numbers of police have declined.

With the out migration of working age families, community organisations and sporting organisations are struggling for membership and volunteers, although in 2006 the level of volunteering in the towns was over a quarter (26.2 percent of people aged over 15 years). The Shows Society (who fundraise and promote the town), the Country Women's Association, Rural Bushfire Brigades, State Emergency Service Unit, and the Chamber of Commerce are currently struggling to maintain their activities. The town is increasing its tourism industry and retains its historical identity, which is linked with the Murray River and the timber industry. Local infrastructure and parks are steeped in this River Red Gum identity.

Balranald

Balranald is the main business centre of Balranald Shire which is located on the Murrumbidgee River. The shire includes traditional agriculture and irrigated horticulture, the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area and Mungo National Park, and the soon to be opened, recently established Yanga National Park. The traditional owners of the land include the Mutthi Mutthi, Paakantyi and Ngyiampaa Tribes.

Population

Balranald's population has declined significantly since 1996 (refer to Table 11-7). Over 8 % of the population is Aboriginal, although the Aboriginal population is also experiencing negative growth. Balranald's population is much younger than the other key timber towns identified in the study area, with a median age of 40 and an elderly dependency ratio in the low 30s.

Table 11-7 Key socio-economic indicators for Balranald

Socio-economic indicators	1996	2001	2006
Population (number)	1,419	1,284	1,216
Population Growth (%)	6.93	-9.51	-5.3
Indigenous population	115	114	98
Indigenous population growth (%)		-0.9	-14.0
Indigenous population (%)	8.1	8.9	8.1
Median age			40
Elderly dependency ratio	21.2	25.2	31.5
Overall dependency ratio	59.2	62.4	65.3
Sex ratio (number of males per 100 females)	104.1	109.64	98.4

11.3.4 Mathoura

As a major employer and significant element to the identity and tourism promotion aspect of the town, the timber industry is key to Mathoura. With continued timber allocation, the small town has the potential to continue modest stable growth, especially in concert with continued influx of retirees. Relative to the region, Mathoura is less dependent on agriculture and has been impacted to a lesser degree by the drought. Mathoura has motivated community organisations involved in promoting and stimulating development in the town.

11.3.5 Barham - Koondrook

In contrast with recent census figures, Barham-Koondrook appears to be experiencing decline brought about by the intensifying and lengthy drought. The timber industry in Barham – Koondrook provides significant employment for the town (around 15 % of jobs) and uniquely provides significant high-end value adding which is solely dependent on the supply of high quality River Red Gum sawlogs. The additional reliance of this industry and the families it supports on associated industries and services is currently providing for the maintenance of existing commercial and public services and industries. Ongoing operation of the industry would provide this stable element of the economy and community with security that would underpin further investment in the industry.

Additionally, with greater security and surety of future Forests NSW timber supplies, Barham – Koondrook, has the potential to further expand its value added timber industry and increase its contribution to the local economy.

11.3.6 Balranald

Although Balranald has experienced population decline and escalating unemployment, it has managed to retain many of its service roles, has benefited from the expanding forest industry (currently estimated at 7.6 % of the 2006 workforce) and sees potential in developing tourism. However, the creation of Yanga National Park has reduced the available private lands for timber harvest in the area and increased competition for this resource with the Merbein Crown timber mill. In the context of this declining resource, continued Crown timber supply under current allocations processes would facilitate the continued operation and potential growth of the timber industry in Balranald (as Campbell's Sawmill has capacity to further value add to its production), and specifically the large Campbell's Sawmill operation. The continued operation of the timber industry would also be able support the continued operation of related industries and services which are increasingly reliant on the industry to survive the drought.

11.3.7 Merbein

With a growing population, declining unemployment, a diversified economy and proximity to Mildura, Merbein is a relatively robust town. Although it is somewhat less advantaged than nearby Mildura, and is also impacted by the ongoing drought, it remains resilient. The timber industry involves a single sawmill supplied by Forests NSW that employs an estimated 26 staff and would utilise local support industries. Continued allocations to this mill would provide security for this sector of the economy.

Mail Message

From: [Felicity Calvert](mailto:felicity.calvert@nrc.nsw.gov.au) [felicity.calvert@nrc.nsw.gov.au]
To: [Chris Chapman](mailto:Chris.Chapman@wakool.nsw.gov.au) [/O=WSC/OU=FIRST ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=Chapman]
Cc: [Wakool Shire Trim](mailto:Wakool.Shire.Trim@wakool.nsw.gov.au) [/O=WSC/OU=FIRST ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=Trim],
[O=WSC/OU=FIRST ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=Williamsm]
Sent: 18/09/2009 at 11:56:15 AM (18/09/2009 at 12:56:15 AM GMT)
Received: 18/09/2009 at 11:56:52 AM (18/09/2009 at 12:56:52 AM GMT)
Subject: RE: River Redgum Forests in Riverina - NRC Assessment - TRIM 109/2861

Many thanks Chris and apologies for my belated reply.

I have forwarded this information to the relevant people involved in our assessment.

Regards

Felicity

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From: Chris Chapman [mailto:chris.chapman@wakool.nsw.gov.au]
Sent: Tuesday, 15 September 2009 4:14 PM
To: Felicity Calvert
Cc: Wakool Shire Trim; Mark Williams
Subject: River Redgum Forests in Riverina - NRC Assessment - TRIM 109/2861