Forests Assessment
Natural Resources Commission
By email

21/08/09

Re: River Redgum Assessment

To whom it may concern,

I am concerned about the future of the River Redgum forests in southern inland NSW because they are threatened by drought, poor water management, commercial logging, livestock grazing, weeds, and inappropriate fire regimes. In general, I support the conversion of State Forests and Crown land to conservation estate as a measure to assist in the conservation of these forests and their associated natural and cultural assets. Even if some areas of unprotected public land are significantly degraded such that they would not normally warrant being added to the conservation estate, it would be useful to prevent those areas from being inappropriately managed, potentially by gazetting them as lower-level conservation areas that would at least facilitate the retention and development of the tree canopy (e.g. where the understorey has been lost to exotic pasture species).

I am familiar with various River Redgum communities in southern NSW and Victoria, and am aware that many have been mismanaged such that they have regenerated with excessively high stem densities. Such dense tree regrowth would need to be managed for biodiversity conservation purposes, especially if these areas were to be converted to conservation estate. I am aware that NSW does not permit even ecologically-based logging in conservation estate, and this concerns me in the context of some Redgum forests that are now unnaturally dense. I recommend that the NRC consider the approach used in Victoria as part of that State's conversion of many former State Forests to National Parks in its Box-Ironbark region. Its assessment process recognized that many of those areas had problematically dense tree cover that inhibits understorey and canopy growth, and decreases the likelihood of and increases the time required for tree hollow formation – a factor critical for many of the area's threatened fauna. As part of the conversion of former Box-Ironbark State Forests to conservation reserves, the Victorian Government specifically permitted the logging of forests specifically to promote better ecological outcomes. Research to support that action was undertaken by the University of Ballarat.

Whilst it should not be a driver in determining the areas that might warrant reservation, the potential need to engage local logging contractors to conduct strictly supervised and ecologically determined thinning in new reserves could be seen as something of an economic transition arrangement for settlements that were formally involved in commercial logging. Ecological thinning may generate a supply of timber (albeit of relatively small diameter logs) for some years after commercial logging ceases. In the event that ecological thinning operations are not self-funding through the sale of timber, they should be factored into the costs of managing new conservation reserves. Eventually, the need for thinning would cease as stem densities are optimised and maintained through the reinstatement of ecologically sound fire regimes (which will suppress excessive sapling growth). During the conversion process, forestry operations can be shifted towards a plantation basis.

In addition, I ask that the NRC consider that were it to recommend the creation of new conservation areas of River Redgum communities, there is a need to press government to adequately fund the management of those areas. I am aware that because of the large increase in area of conservation estate resulting from the RFA in eastern NSW, the NPWS's ratio of management funds and staff per hectare of reserve dropped

significantly. Many NPWS staff have told me that they rarely receive the funds necessary to manage new reserves properly. I have seen evidence of this throughout NSW. Insufficient staffing and management funds results in problems such as feral species and inadequate bushfire risk management undermining conservation values and creating animosity in surrounding human communities.

The potential inadequacy of funding for management should not be seen as a reason to continue commercial exploitation of some Redgum Forests to subsidize the conservation of others, nor as a reason for not creating new reserves. Conservation reserves should be gazetted on their merits. It is preferable to have an inadequately managed reserve than to have the area unprotected and inappropriately exploited. However, it is clearly optimal to have new reserves where this is required, and to have their management appropriately funded in the long-term. Such funding and staffing has economic benefits for local economies that may otherwise be disadvantaged by the reduction or cessation of commercial logging and grazing in the new reserves.

On the question of management-based grazing in Redgum Forests, I recommend that the NRC give particular attention to the alternative options such as burning and, in particularly degraded areas adjoining built assets, the use of slashing. Some graziers claim that grazing of Redgum Forest understorey is necessary to reduce dangerous levels of fire fuels. Some claim that it has other conservation benefits by suppressing exotic pasture grasses such as Phalaris. My understanding is that livestock grazing may have some management benefits in areas dominated by an exotic understorey on the proviso that stocking rates and timing are determined by ecological priorities such as the reduction in seeding of exotic grasses. Such usage should be in the context of management that is intended to progressively reduce and ultimately remove exotic understorey. I do not believe that livestock grazing should be used as a general tool for bushfire fuel reduction as it can have too many adverse side effects such as soil compaction, riparian and wetland degradation, and suppression of native flora. Commercial grazing of publicly owned Redgum Forests should cease as it is degrades conservation values or at least impinges on their natural regeneration.

A key factor in the decline of the lowland River Redgum Forests is the failure of river managers to direct appropriate flows into these communities to maintain their ecological function. Whilst some forests and/or associated wetlands have been temporarily given appropriate water allocations, most have not, and this has profoundly exacerbated the damaged caused by drought. I ask that the NRC consider the importance of river management in the conservation of Redgum Forests and their associated wetland communities. Irrespective of their many other values, Redgum Forests represent a substantial carbon sink. Failure to provide adequate water through river management, sees these communities decline to the point of becoming carbon sources. Government should be encouraged to provide the necessary water allocation to at least maintain these communities and their role in sequestering carbon. Water allocated to these forests would likely result in considerable carbon capture through forest growth and soil carbon enrichment, whereas water allocated to commercial cropping and grazing most likely results in substantial carbon emissions.

Sincerely,

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