



National Park Estate (Reservations) Bill.

Second Reading

Mr KNOWLES (Macquarie Fields—Minister for Infrastructure and Planning, and Minister for Natural Resources) [3.30 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I am proud to introduce this bill, which builds on the already considerable achievements of this Government in the important area of forest conservation and reform. This bill is part of a package of initiatives the Government is implementing to protect in reserves 65,000 hectares of the last remaining icon areas of north-eastern New South Wales including high conservation value old-growth forest and rainforest. These initiatives complete a journey that for many people began 20 years ago with Premier Wran's decision to save Terania Creek and other rainforests of this region of New South Wales. These areas are, of course, now registered on the World Heritage List. Since coming to office in 1995 we have built substantially on that landmark achievement. With this decision nearly a million hectares of national parks, nature reserves and State conservation areas have been created through this Government's forest policy. But this Government has been dedicated to creating not just more national parks, but a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system.

This system is based on scientific assessment of forest attributes. It links up national parks and other protected areas to provide extensive reserves in the eastern region of New South Wales. The new reserves that this bill provides for are the culmination of this process. The reserves protect 65,000 hectares of the north-east's forest icons—including outstanding areas such as Wollumbin and Whian Whian—for future generations of Australians. The new conservation reserves have been shown to contain over 500 species of birds and animals and 4,000 plant species. The areas also contain pockets of rainforest and old-growth forest, wilderness and habitat for threatened fauna such as the koala, powerful owl, Hastings River mouse, tiger quoll and yellow-bellied glider. But the decision to include these important areas in reserves has been made only after careful assessment of the implications for timber supplies on the North Coast.

I stress that the decision to include these important areas in reserves is matched by steps that reaffirm the Government's intention and capacity to maintain timber supplies on the North Coast. These timber supplies were an important component of the regional forest agreement that was struck through negotiation between conservation groups, industry and Government in 1998. They have remained central to our deliberations. Our approach is set out in a complete package of measures that, taken together, allow for the conservation of the icon areas while maintaining timber supplies. This, of course, is a balanced and comprehensive solution. In relation to the timber supply initiatives, we have been conscious that timber yield has been constrained by some limits on logging near streams and other environmental exclusion zones. Studies have estimated that up to 18 per cent of timber theoretically available is, in practice, unavailable as a result of these restrictions.

The advent of better harvesting technology over the past few years along with new information on protecting water quality has allowed timber to be harvested without posing a significant environmental risk to the conservation values of these protected areas. I advise the House that the Ministers responsible for the portfolios of Natural Resources, Forests, Fisheries and Environment have already approved the amendment of the environmental prescriptions to remove the buffer-on-buffer effect while still ensuring environmental protection. Those signatures were provided as recently as 24 hours ago. Some additional changes to the threatened species licence to allow for more flexible management approaches are also being finalised and will be made a high priority. Measures to address supply issues are being taken to ensure that the industry continues to be supplied and receives a more reliable flow of timber.

Furthermore, we are confirming for timber production the interim forest management zones—that is FMZ 8—that were not initially included in the supply estimates. This is possible following the completion of investigations into these areas. This package is designed around the principle that there will be long-term sustainable logging of all available areas of State forests. The House would also be interested to hear that purchases of private land by State Forests of New South Wales funded through the 1998 decision on forests, have already added about 5,000 cubic metres to the annual supply, and additional purchases will continue to augment supply. To underscore our commitment to the timber industry we propose to enter into direct discussions with timber companies that hold wood supply agreements in the region to provide even greater certainty to industry. At present these agreements subject the mills to a timber supply review in 2006.

The Government is seeking to remove the uncertainty that this may pose by offering to enter into fresh supply

agreements. The Government has entered into a memorandum of understanding with Boral, one of the region's largest millers, to provide for new investment and new jobs for the North Coast. Boral has indicated that by securing long-term timber supply it will be able to undertake major investment in its timber mills, value-adding operations and new hardwood plantations. To remove the potential uncertainty for other millers the Government has invited, via its representative body, the Forestry Products Association, other holders of wood supply agreements in the region to negotiate similar arrangements to meet their individual needs and timber availability. The Minister Assisting the Minister for Natural Resources (Forests) has written to the Forest Products Association seeking its views on the option of entering into memoranda of understanding with its members.

The Forest Products Association has responded with in-principle agreement, and negotiations will now proceed. Renegotiating contracts will mean that industry will gain greater certainty now, not later. I am proud to say that this package of reforms ensures that we keep faith with the industry while making an historically important conservation decision. The package also demonstrates the New South Wales Government's commitment to the Regional Forest Agreement, which provides for ongoing modification and improvements as circumstances change, and to the maintenance and improvement of the native timber industry in this State.

I turn now to the provisions of the bill. This bill revokes the dedication of certain State forests and reserves them as national park, nature reserve, flora reserves and State conservation areas, and declares areas of special management zones on State forests. It is important to firstly draw attention to the new category of State conservation area under the National Parks and Wildlife Act. The bill creates several new State conservation areas in areas of known or likely mineral potential. In one case, Jiliby State Conservation Area, the reservation is restricted to a depth of 50 metres to facilitate underground coalmining. This new category of reserve was established with a dual purpose: to protect conservation values while permitting mineral and petroleum exploration and production.

While exploration and mining will require the concurrence of the Minister for the Environment and consideration of environmental impact, it is important to emphasise that the government intends that exploration and mining will occur within State conservation areas with appropriate environmental safeguards. Consistent with the National Parks and Wildlife Act, all State conservation areas will be reviewed every five years to determine if the State conservation areas category remains appropriate or if a different reserve type should be used. I deal now with the specific details of the bill. The object of the bill is to transfer certain State Forest land to the national park estate. The bill is divided into three parts, which I shall outline to the House. The first part is the preliminary section, which, among other things, provides for the commencement of the proposed Act on 1 July 2003. Part 2 deals with land transfers, including the necessary revocations and reservations. The descriptions of the land to which part 2 applies are in schedules 1, 2, 3 and 4. I draw attention to clause 9, which enables the Director-General of National Parks and Wildlife to adjust the descriptions of land in schedules 1, 2, 3 or 4. These adjustments must be in order to alter the boundaries of the land for the purposes of the more effective management of national park estate land and State Forest land and to adjust boundaries to public roads. Any such adjustment must not result in any significant reduction in the size or value of any such land and can be made only up to dates specified in the bill. Adjustments are also authorised in connection with easements. The director-general must have the agreement of relevant Ministers to make any changes. Part 3 covers a number of miscellaneous matters giving effect to the provisions of the bill. Clause 13 amends the Native Title (New South Wales) Act 1994 to preserve native title rights and interests in respect of a reservation, or vesting of, or declaration over, land or waters by the operation of the proposed Act.

I now turn to the schedules in this bill. Schedule 1 deals with State forest to be reserved as national park, nature reserve or State conservation area. Schedule 2 deals with certain areas included in schedule 1 whose reservation is delayed until July 2006 to allow plantations within the new reserves to be harvested once, prior to reservation. Schedule 3 sets out the land whose dedication as State forest is revoked and is vested in the Minister administering the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 for the purposes of part 11 of that Act. This is to accommodate small quarries and other continuing uses. The schedule also applies to land held under Crown leases in State forests whose dedication is to be revoked. These crown leases will continue, unless sold on a voluntary basis to the National Parks and Wildlife Service. If purchased, the land will be reserved under an appropriate category.

Schedule 5 makes ancillary and special provisions relating to transitional arrangements. They include the exclusion of freehold and certain leasehold interests from the provisions of the bill, except in the case of land that immediately before the commencement of the Act was vested in the Minister or Her Majesty for the purpose of part 11 of the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974.

Schedule 5 deals also with existing interests and gives the Minister administering the National Parks and Wildlife Act administration of those interests where land is transferred to the management of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Schedule 5 also contains special provisions with regard to access roads within national parks, nature reserves and other reserves to ensure that right of access through the new national parks can continue and be formalised where it is necessary to do so, such as where the access road leads to a private land-holding or to timber resources available for logging.

The aim of this Government's forest policy has been to create a reserve system that is comprehensive, adequate and representative, protecting and conserving the biodiversity of the State's forests through scientific and systematic reservation rather than piecemeal reservation, while at the same time maintaining viable and ecologically sustainable forest industries. Our success in delivering on this policy is a great achievement for the people of New South Wales and for people, both Australians and visitors from overseas, who visit our State. I have no doubt that the legacy of this Government's decisions on our forests will be welcomed and praised by future generations.

This Government's forest policy has resulted not only in unprecedented levels of scientific and other data, but also in the conservation of nearly one million hectares of New South Wales forests. It has also resulted in a legislative process for ensuring ecologically sustainable forest management through forest agreements and integrated forestry operations approvals. I am pleased to be able to say that this Government has dealt with the last remaining forestry conservation icons on the North Coast. A cornerstone of this achievement has been the Forestry and National Park Estate Act 1998, which was a major legislative reform on which subsequent forestry legislation, including this bill, has been based. I am proud to introduce this bill, which forms a critical part of our continuing forest reform achievements. I commend the bill to the House.

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