

**Submission
No 386**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Submission

Inquiry into the Management of Public Lands in New South Wales

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The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

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Introduction

The Inland Rivers Network (“IRN”) is a coalition of environment groups and individuals concerned about the degradation of the rivers, wetlands and groundwater of the Murray-Darling Basin. IRN has been advocating for the conservation of rivers, wetlands and groundwater in the Murray-Darling Basin since 1991.

IRN appreciates the opportunity to submit the following comments to the Inquiry.

Conservation significance of public lands identified in the Term of Reference

The Red Gum wetland forests of Southern Riverina¹, Yanga Station and Toorale Station provide significant conservation values to the riverine and wetland systems of the Murray-Darling Basin.

The Millewa Red Gum wetland forest was identified as an Icon Site in the Living Murray process that initiated an improved allocation of water in the Murray River system for environmental benefit.

Yanga Station is an important wetland area on the Murrumbidgee River system and was purchased as part of the NSW Government strategy to protect important areas of high conservation value in western NSW. This purchase also included the acquisition of water licenses to provide additional environmental flows in the lower end of the Murrumbidgee system.

Toorale Station is in a significant section of the Darling River system being at the confluence of the Warrego River. The purchase of the property and water licenses was strategic in providing water for the environment downstream of the large irrigation operations at Bourke. The restoration of grasslands on the property has been notable with the removal of stock.

These purchases were made through a market based transaction as a private decision of the owners.

The purchase of Old Dromona Station on the Gwydir River system occurred for similar reasons.

Adequacy of conservation management on public reserve system

IRN is satisfied that the process used by National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) to develop Plans of Management is very thorough with a high level of public consultation.

These plans provide detailed planning for fire, feral animal and weed control, access and facilities for visitors and neighbour relations.

IRN is of the opinion that the NPWS planning and land management process is better resourced and implemented than those conducted by Forest NSW.

¹ See attachment A

This has been demonstrated through the Community Conservation Area Advisory Committees set up to provide community input into broad landscape management decisions as a result of the western regional assessment process in the Brigalow Belt South and Nandewar bioregions.

Public support for management of environmental services

IRN is also of the opinion that conservation management provides a public good through maintaining and improving environmental services that contribute significant economic and social benefits to the Australian community. This management should be funded from the public purse in key areas of high conservation value.

The Red Gum wetland forests in the Southern Riverina, Yanga Station and Toorale Station provide important environmental services that need to be recognised and accounted for.

An example of environmental services includes the volume of insects consumed by water birds such as Ibis and Egrets and by the large number of bat species that occur in many wetland forests and woodland areas.

Healthy habitats for these species need to be protected. Water birds require appropriate flood regimes at breeding times and many bat species rely on tree hollows for nesting and roosting.

The conservation of Red Gum wetland forests in Millewa and Yanga and the wetland and woodland areas on Toorale as National Parks helps to achieve this outcome

Native forestry operations and the irrigation industry have been subsidised by the NSW taxpayer to a significant level. This must also be accounted for when comparing the economic impacts of managing land and water for the public good.

NSW 2021

The NSW Government has developed a 10 year plan to prioritise activities and outcomes for a range of strategies.

Goal 22 outlines targets and priority actions to '*Protect our natural environment*'.

These include:

Target - *Protect and restore priority land, vegetation and water habitats*

Manage weeds and pests

- Reduce the impact of invasive species at priority sites on NPWS parks and reserves leading to a positive response of native biodiversity at 50% of these sites by October 2015

Priority actions to manage weeds and pests include:

- Address core pest control in National Parks through the delivery of NPWS Regional Pest Management Strategies and improve educational programs and visitor access.

Protect and conserve land, biodiversity and native vegetation

- Identify and seek to acquire land of high conservation and strategic conservation value, for permanent conservation measures

Priority actions to protect and conserve land include:

- Establish more national parks including a new national park to protect the sensitive Dharawal State Conservation Area and continue the reserve establishment program.

Protect rivers, wetlands and coastal environments

- Improve the environmental health of wetlands and catchments through actively managing water for the environment by 2021

We will strategically recover and manage water for the environment to improve the health of the most stressed rivers and wetlands.

Conclusion:

The NSW Government has identified a set of goals that are being achieved through the ongoing management of areas converted from Crown Land, State Forests and agricultural land into the National Park estate.

The funding of adequate management of these areas provides employment and economic stimulus in local and regional areas of NSW in the same manner that public funding of education, health and essential services does.

The protection of key areas in the NSW landscape for conservation and provision of environmental services should be accounted for as a positive benefit to the NSW economy and society.

Conservation Values of the Red Gum Wetland Forests

The River Red Gum State Forests of south-western NSW are located largely on the mid-Murray, between Deniliquin and Swan Hill, but also extend west along the Murray to Lake Victoria, and include important areas along the Murrumbidgee near Narrandera, and scattered areas north along the Lachlan to Lake Cargelligo.

Millewa Group

The Millewa Group consists of 42,340 hectares situated on the broad floodplain of the Murray River that forms part of the Riverina plains. Some 33,636 hectares is listed on the Register of the National Estate, the RAMSAR list of wetlands of international importance, and the Directory of Important Wetlands of Australia. The area is contiguous with Victoria's Barmah Forest (23 500 ha) and together they represent the largest River Red Gum forest left in the world.

This Group supports three plant communities which are considered vulnerable and poorly reserved in NSW (Grey Box, Yellow Box and River Red Gum communities) and three communities which are considered poorly reserved (Black Box, Common Reed and Spiny Mudgrass).

Millewa is an area of outstanding cultural significance, and contains a very high number of Aboriginal sites including occupation sites, burial grounds, scar trees where canoes or shields have been cut, shell middens and mound sites on most sand ridges within the area (Australian Heritage Commission, 1998).

Four endangered and twenty-four vulnerable fauna species have been recorded in or adjacent to these forests – the endangered Plains Wanderer, Bush Stone-Curlew, Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot and the vulnerable Australasian Bittern, Barking Owl, Black-chinned Honeyeater, Blue-billed Duck, Brolga, Brush-tailed Phascogale, Chestnut Quail-Thrush, Diamond Firetail, Freckled Duck, Gilberts Whistler, Greater Long-eared Bat, Grey-crowned Babbler, Hooded Robin, Koala, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo, Painted Honeyeater, Painted Snipe, Speckled Warbler, Square-tailed Kite, Squirrel Glider, Superb Parrot, Turquoise Parrot. There are also historical records of the endangered Kultarr and now extinct Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat and Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby in the vicinity. Notable fish species include the declining Murray Cod and the threatened Macquarie Perch.

The outstanding importance of these wetlands to waterbirds is highlighted by the fact that a total of 13 migratory birds listed for protection on international agreements have also been recorded - Caspian Tern, Cattle Egret, Common Greenshank, Fork-tailed Swift, Glossy ibis, Great Egret, Latham's Snipe, Marsh Sandpiper, Painted Snipe, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Whimbrel, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, White-throated Needletail. When flooded, the forests provide breeding habitat for a large number of waterbirds of many species.

One endangered plant, three vulnerable and 8 regionally significant plants have also been recorded – the endangered *Sclerolaena napiformis* and the vulnerable *Amphibromus fluitans*, Slender Darling Pea and *Swainsona sericea*.

Other River Red Gum wetland forest groups in NSW with similar high conservation values include:

Werai Group

The group consists of 12,062 hectares on the floodplain of the Edward River, an anabranch of the Murray River, near Deniliquin. Some 11,234 hectares is listed as a RAMSAR wetland of international significance and a nationally important wetland on the Directory of Important Wetlands of Australia.

The higher areas of the floodplain are forested with River Red, while the low-lying marshes are typically dominated by Giant Rush with a dense emergent growth of Water Milfoil, Spike Rush and Mud Grass. When flooded, large number of waterbird species breed and the forests support large numbers of waterbirds.

Eight vulnerable fauna species have been recorded in the Werai group and surrounding areas including the Black-chinned Honeyeater, Brolga, Diamond Firetail, Grey-crowned Babbler, Hooded Robin, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo, Painted Honeyeater, and the Speckled Warbler. Five migratory birds listed for protection on international agreements have also been recorded in the area and its surrounds - Great Egret, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, White-bellied Sea-Eagle and White-throated Needletail, Cattle Egret. Two vulnerable plant species and one ROTAP species have also been recorded in the vicinity – the vulnerable plants *Maireana cheelii* and *Swainsona murrayana*, and the poorly known *Goodenia pusilliflora*.

The area is of outstanding social and cultural importance to the Wamba Wamba nation. Evidence of Aboriginal occupation of the area includes middens, burial sites and canoe trees (RAMSAR nomination).

Koondrook Group

The group consists of 35,465 hectares of State Forest on the floodplain of the central Murray River, near Barham. Some 31,150 hectares is listed as a RAMSAR wetland of international significance and a nationally important wetland on the Directory of Important Wetlands of Australia. This group of forests have been recognised as a Significant Ecological Asset by the Living Murray program.

The higher areas of the floodplain are forested with River Red Gum while the low-lying marshes are typically dominated by Giant Spike Rush, with a dense emergent growth of Water Milfoil, Spike Rush and Mud Grass. Black Box and Grey Box are concentrated in the Koondrook Forests. Reed beds also occur in the Koondrook forests and include species such as Cumbungi with a ground cover of grasses and water plants.

Three endangered species and 11 vulnerable species have been recorded in the forest or surrounding areas – the endangered Bush Stone-Curlew, Regent Honeyeater and Southern Bell Frog, and the vulnerable Australasian Bittern, Barking Owl, Black-chinned Honeyeater, Blue-billed Duck, Diamond Firetail, Freckled Duck, Gilberts Whistler, Grey-crowned Babbler, Hooded Robin, Magpie Goose, Speckled Warbler. Nine migratory birds listed for protection on international agreements have also been recorded in the area and its surrounds - Caspian Tern, Cattle Egret, Fork-tailed Swift, Glossy Ibis, Great Egret, Latham's Snipe, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, White-throated Needletail, Cattle Egret. When flooded, forests support large numbers of waterbirds.

One endangered plant and one vulnerable plant have also been recorded in nearby areas – the endangered *Wilsonia rotundifolia* and the vulnerable *Maireana cheelii*.

Evidence of Aboriginal occupation of the area includes middens, burial sites and canoe trees. The earliest dating of Aboriginal occupation of the area (13,000 years) within close proximity of the Koondrook and Perricoota Forests is at Kow Swamp.

Niemur Group

The Niemur Group covers 4,265 hectares of State Forest located on the Edwards and Wakool Rivers south of Moulamein.

Threatened fauna species likely to occur in the forest include three vulnerable bird species which have been recorded in close vicinity - Diamond Firetail, Grey-crowned Babbler and Australasian Bittern. The migratory Great Egret which is listed for protection on international agreements has also been recorded in the vicinity. One endangered and one vulnerable plant species are also known to occur in adjoining areas – *Austrostipa wakoolica* and *Austrostipa metatoris* respectively.

Leiwa Group

The Leiwa Group covers 1,484 hectares of State Forest located on the Wakool River north of Tooleybuc.

Three endangered and four vulnerable fauna species are known to occur within or in close proximity to these forests – the endangered Australian Bustard, Bush Stone-Curlew and Regent Honeyeater, and vulnerable Diamond Firetail, Grey-crowned Babbler, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo and Speckled Warbler. The migratory Great Egret, which is listed for protection on international agreements, has been recorded in the vicinity. The vulnerable plant *Austrostipa metatoris* has also been recorded in the forests.

Mallee Cliffs Group

The Mallee Cliffs Group covers 19,583 hectares of State Forests on alluvial floodplain located adjacent to the Murray River, south-east of Mildura. The Hattah-Kulkyne National Park adjoins the Mallee Cliffs group across the Murray in Victoria. There is a very small reserve of only 1,000 hectares adjoining Mallee Cliffs State Forest on the NSW side of the River, Kemendok NR, which is the only National Parks reserve on the entire Murray River in NSW.

Five endangered and eleven vulnerable fauna species have been recorded within or in close proximity to these forests – the endangered Bush Stone-curlew, Malleefowl, Southern Bell Frog, Regent Parrot and Swift Parrot, and the vulnerable Black-breasted Buzzard, Brown Treecreeper, Chestnut Quail Thrush, Gilberts Whistler, Hooded Robin, Inland Forest Bat, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo, Purple-gaped Honeyeater, Shy Heathwren, Southern Scrub-Robin and Speckled Warbler. There are historical records for the now extinct Mitchells Hopping Mouse and Pig-footed Bandicoot in the vicinity.

Four migratory birds listed for protection on international agreements have also been recorded in or adjacent to these forests – the Caspian Tern, Fork-tailed Swift, Great Egret and White-bellied Sea-Eagle.

Five endangered plants have also been recorded within or adjacent to the Mallee Cliffs group - *Austrostipa wakoolica*, Bitter Quandong, *Casuarina obesa*, *Eriocaulon australasicum* and *Pimelea serpyllifolia ssp serpyllifolia*. The poorly known ROTAP species *Goodenia pusilliflora* has also been recorded.

Lake Victoria Group

This group covers 8,930 hectares of alluvial floodplain adjacent to the Murray River, and includes Lake Victoria State Forest and other State Forests to the south-east, towards the town of Wentworth.

Two endangered and five vulnerable fauna species have been recorded within or adjacent to the Lake Victoria Group – the endangered Regent Parrot and Southern Bell Frog, and the vulnerable Gilberts Whistler, Greater Long-eared Bat, Hooded Robin, Inland Forest Bat and Redthroat. This area is a historical site for the now extinct Crescent Nailtail Wallaby. Four migratory birds listed for protection on international agreements have also been recorded – Great Egret, Caspian Tern, Common Sandpiper, White-bellied Sea-Eagle. One endangered plant, *Austrostipa wakoolica*, has been recorded in adjacent areas.

Lachlan Group

The Lachlan Group covers 6,163 hectares of State Forests scattered widely along the Lachlan River from Balranald north to Lake Cargelligo.

One endangered and eight vulnerable species have been recorded within or adjacent to these forests – the endangered Black-necked Stork and the vulnerable Barking Owl, Blue-billed Duck, Brolga, Diamond Firetail, Freckled Duck, Grey-crowned Babbler, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo and Turquoise Parrot. Seven migratory birds listed for protection on international agreements have also been recorded - Fork-tailed Swift, Glossy Ibis, Great Egret, Latham's Snipe, Marsh Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper.

Three vulnerable plant species have been recorded within or adjacent to forests in the Group - Slender Darling Pea, *Solanum karsense* and *Dodonaea sinuolata subsp acrodentata*.

Murrumbidgee Group

The Murrumbidgee Group covers 16,240 hectares of State Forests scattered along the Murray River from Hay east to Narrandera, but concentrated in a large swathe along the River just west of Narrandera.

Three endangered and eighteen vulnerable species have been recorded within or adjacent to these forests – the endangered Plains Wanderer, Bush Stone-Curlew Southern Bell Frog, and the vulnerable Australasian Bittern, Black-chinned Honeyeater, Blue-billed Duck, Brolga, Diamond Firetail, Freckled Duck, Gilberts Whistler, Grey Falcon, Grey-crowned Babbler, Hooded Robin, Koala, Magpie Goose, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo, Painted Honeyeater, Painted Snipe, Speckled Warbler, Superb Parrot and Turquoise Parrot. The importance of this Group and their surrounds to migratory waterbirds is highlighted by the fact that a total of 13 migratory species listed for protection on international agreements have been recorded - Cattle Egret, Common Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Glossy Ibis, Great Egret, Latham's Snipe, Marsh Sandpiper, Painted Snipe, Pectoral Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, White-throated Needletail, Wood Sandpiper.

Four vulnerable plant species and 2 ROTAP species have also been recorded within or adjacent to these forests – the vulnerable *Diuris tricolor*, *Maireana cheelii*, Mossgiel Daisy and Slender Darling Pea, the rare *Lomandra patens* and poorly known *Goodenia pusilliflora*.

Mulwala Group

The Mulwala Group covers 4,749 hectares of State Forests along the Murray River from Tocumwal east to Albury.

Three endangered and eighteen vulnerable fauna species have been recorded within or adjacent to these forests – the endangered Regent Honeyeater, Southern Bell Frog and Swift Parrot, and the vulnerable Australasian Bittern, Barking Owl, Black-chinned Honeyeater, Brolga, Brown Treecreeper, Diamond Firetail, Eastern Bent-wing Bat, Freckled Duck, Grey-crowned Babbler, Hooded Robin, Large-footed Myotis, Magpie Goose, Masked Owl, Osprey, Purple-gaped Honeyeater, Speckled Warbler, Squirrel Glider and Superb Parrot.

A total of 8 migratory birds listed for protection on international agreements have also been recorded - Cattle Egret, Fork-tailed Swift, Glossy Ibis, Great Egret, Latham's Snipe, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, White-throated Needletail, Wood Sandpiper.