

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

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INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN NSW

River Red Gum State Forests in Southern Riverina

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1. Process and Assessment of Impacts Prior to Conversion

The process for the conversion of the State Forests in the Southern Riverina to National Park was almost political fraud. The community was well aware that it was part of the Labour Government agenda and that it intended to use the National Resource Commissions (NRC) Report on River Red Gums and Woodlands to justify their decision. However the Report was significantly flawed, and at the eleventh hour the Government legislated the National Parks without the Report in the vain hope of gaining support from the Greens.

In support of the following comments which highlight the failures in the assessment process, I wish to advise that I have recently retired after 28 years as Director of Engineering with Murray Shire Council. My family and I have lived at Mathoura for 30 years on our small property adjacent to the Gulpa Creek and the now Regional National Park, and have keen interest in, and respect for, the forests and wetlands in our region.

i. Operational

There was no real understanding or appreciation of the type of forests, the recent management practices, or the user benefits that river red gum provides.

The NRC Report fails to articulate that the current forests are just that. They are recent forests created by cattle grazing, timber harvesting, and river regulation. Therefore why is there so much emotion about the need to preserve and foster the ecological values of a created forest that has been managed principally for timber production over the past 100 years or so? The concern is with what type of forest will evolve under a nil harvest regime. The forests will develop into mainly mature trees as regeneration is suppressed by reduced sunlight, and hence we will see a fourth phase in the evolution of the forests since white man's arrival.

The management practiced by Forests NSW was effective in providing a win-win situation that maintained a balance between the environmental requirements and timber production. There had been a significant improvement in forest management in the past 10 years or so since milling was removed from the forests, the environmental assessment processes improved, and the industry rationalised to a small number of operators.

The NRC Report paid scant recognition to the uses that Red Gum is renowned for. It is an excellent hardwood timber that is durable and structurally sound. It is required for timber bridges and wharf maintenance, many of which are heritage items that require quality and lengths of red gum that are only available in selected areas of the previous State Forests. In addition red gum is the preferred timber for railway sleepers, however there will not be sufficient timber in the remaining State Forests or on private land to service their requirements. Timber sleepers will be required for many years because it is not financially or practically viable for rail authorities to convert all lines to concrete sleepers overnight.

ii. Economic

Despite the claim in the NRC Report that the red gum timber harvesting had been uneconomic, it was one of the Government's better financial operations and subsidised the other forest management requirements. A Regional Manager of NSW Forests told me some years ago that the red gum harvesting in this region was more profitable to them than the radiata pine forest operations. Forest harvest management had become a more efficient and less onerous task in recent years, with fewer operators and out of forest milling. In addition timber royalty now applies to all the timber whereas in the past, residue was left in the forest unused. What probably frustrates local people the most is that throughout the whole process the NRC Report failed to acknowledge that River Red Gum is probably the best renewable and sustainable resource we have. On the floodplains of the region red gums just need sunlight and water. Depending on the availability of water, 50 to 100 year old timber can be harvested sustainably at 25 year intervals, which in turn provides additional sunlight to assist germination and maintain a healthy growing stock. Why would any government think that denying access to this valuable resource is good for the community, or the forest?

iii. Environmental

I acknowledge that the forests do provide significant environmental qualities, but there was no need to convert almost all of the forests to National Park status and management to supposedly improve their environmental qualities. Much is made in the Report about the need for water to assist with the survival of the trees, and I agree. However the protection offered by the Ramsar declaration and the water to be provided under the Murray Darling Basin Plan to not only the Icon Sites, but also the forests in general, will provide the support required for those areas of significance as well a major portion of the forests in general.

It was often implied in the NRC Report that the recent extended drought was the commencement of global warming. However this period was a typical cyclic drought and

temperatures have not risen yet to commence the effects of global warming. Weather patterns may change in the long term, but in the mean time we will continue to see the vagaries in the local weather and the rainfall in the high country. The Murray River floods on average about every 20 years in a cyclic pattern matched by droughts, with major variations about every 100 years. More importantly though is that the Murray Darling Basin Plan will provide additional water for the forests irrespective of who the Manager of the forests is. In recent years NSW Forests have been very effective with their water management of the wetlands in the Mathoura area, utilising environmental water to induce and sustain bird breeding in the Ramsar declared areas. In addition the Barmah-Millewa Water Management Plan has been operating co operatively between the two State authorities for over 15 years to maximise the use of available water.

The NRC Report also implies that harvesting the red gum reduces the debris on the forest floor, whereas under no harvest management there would be more debris, hence a better biodiversity environment. Red gum is renowned for limbs falling because of the "Punk" disease, and hence there already exists a quality forest floor environment. To endeavour to create a dense forest floor environment will only increase the risk of fire and the resulting damage.

iv. Social

There was no assessment or consideration of the customers who use red gum. To effectively shut off supply of railway sleepers, bridge timber, piles and landscaping timber is bordering on criminal. Only limited supply is available from private property (after they have had their environmental assessment approved) and the Perricoota/Koondrook Forest.

Firewood is effectively an essential resource for many people and was a pastime/leisure pursuit often associated with a BBQ or fishing opportunity for those able to cut and collect it. The severe restrictions imposed by NP&WLS on the time, location and availability of firewood takes away the pleasure one enjoyed in finding a timber residue stockpile, enjoying the day, and knowing that you were assisting the forest by reducing the amount of cut down residue timber.

2. Assessment of Impacts After Conversion

It is difficult to comment on all the impacts since conversion because it has only been a relatively short time since National Park management commenced, however the following has been noted.

i. Operational

Two things that were immediately obvious were that NP & WLS were very ignorant of the forests and current issues and processes, and that in addition to the funds provided for timber workers to exit the industry, significant funds were available for National Parks staff, equipment, and infrastructure, in what appeared to be a show of strength and commitment to keep the locals happy. (Trinkets for the Indians!)

The operation to identify the boundaries of the Parks and Reserves took far too long, and promises were made about access and facilities that were later withdrawn. If experience from the development of other National Parks is to be believed, as there are so many now, then funds will dry up within a few short years and only a base staff level will be left to manage a very restricted National Park. The concern is that these forests need active management which will require considerable funding. If good management by harvesting and/or thinning is not provided then fire is more than likely going to destroy the good ecological environment that already exists.

Another thing that has concerned locals is the Sydney centric, one size fits all approach. There was no local consultation on the boundaries, the naming of the whole group as the Riverina National Park, or the development of the Tourist Action Plan. Each forest has a name and has individual characteristics which were apparently not considered relevant in Sydney. This flies in the face of much good work over many years by the local tourism organisations.

ii. Economic

The restricted access to firewood has caused the retail price of firewood to more than double, and it will continue to increase in price if availability is not improved. With no natural gas in the region the increasing price of firewood is crippling people who rely on wood for heating and have to purchase it. Hence an increased community cost to those that can least afford it. Similarly the cost of sleeper has almost doubled as local supply cannot meet demand and sleepers are now imported from northern NSW. Again a further cost increase to be born in the long run by the community because of political interference.

3. Mandated Management Practices

It is too early to know how determined or how effective the National Parks and Wildlife Service will be in carrying out mandated work to combat fires, weed control and pests.

4. Examination of Models for Management:

The declaration of almost the whole area of Riverina State Forest land, that is community land, to National Park is a travesty of justice, and a lost opportunity for the wider community to benefit from one of nature's best renewable resources.

There is no benefit in the declaration and conversion of so much State Forest to National Park. Perhaps initially 30% may have been an appropriate area, and then, with the benefit of hindsight, proper planning and monitoring of the effect of additional water allocations and its management, further areas could be included in 10 to 15 years time. At the same time timber harvest quotas would need to be reduced to match available timber and growth rates. Unfortunately in recent years NSW Forests appeared to increase harvest rates by reducing the return harvest times as well as the trunk diameter to maximise their return on timber royalties. Although there is still a strong demand for red gum timber, it is acknowledged that demand is reducing as alternative options become less expensive and provide a longer life. But there will always be a demand for firewood, landscaping timber and authentic structural timber for piles, retaining walls, wharves and bridges. These special orders may possibly be only available from areas within National Parks as is the case with timber for piles, hence a flexible approach is required to enable these projects to be serviced.