

**Submission  
No 126**

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

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There are 6,641,256ha of National Parks and Reserves in New South Wales (source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_park)), 740,000ha of Travelling Stock Reserves (source: [http://www.lpma.nsw.gov.au/crown\\_land/crown\\_reserves/stock\\_reserves](http://www.lpma.nsw.gov.au/crown_land/crown_reserves/stock_reserves)) and about 3,700,000ha of roadsides (source: [http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/environment/downloads/rec\\_fact\\_sheet\\_3.pdf](http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/environment/downloads/rec_fact_sheet_3.pdf)). This is over 13% of the total area of the state that is managed by public authorities. The NSW Roads and Traffic Authority, the Livestock Health and Pest Authority, the NSW Department of Primary Industries, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and the NSW Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts all manage these lands under the charter of providing public recreation and conservation areas, for the benefit of the people and the environment. Yet what we have in reality is vast areas of the state that provide ideal conditions for the increase in feral pest numbers, the dispersal of noxious weeds and the build-up of alarming fire hazards. The residents and landowners throughout the state are becoming increasingly angry, disappointed, concerned and threatened by the issues that are not being addressed adequately by the managers of these public lands. Society, and mostly rural communities, are having to bear the economic, social and environmental costs from this lack of management. The intent behind the ideal of public lands is admirable, but unrealistic. There is no way that society can afford to own and properly manage the vast public lands within NSW, without these areas returning fiscal rewards. The perceived benefits are far greater than the tangible benefits. Most of the public lands within NSW are never accessed or used by the public. The small National Parks that can be well maintained and reasonably accessed, and that provide general amenities for the public, are very well supported. The large areas of National Parks are already a huge liability on society. The Travelling Stock Reserves are rarely used for travelling stock and have outlived their time. Roadsides are essential but they have to be properly maintained as roadsides, not as nature reserves. Their fundamental purpose is to allow the safe passage of motor vehicles, not as pest and weed harbors.

There is simply no way that the NSW State government or any public authorities can afford the immense cost involved in properly managing our public lands. Some, and a great deal, must be returned to private ownership. This is the only viable way that enough resources and manpower can be provided to properly maintain them. Private landholders also have the greatest pool of knowledge and experience about controlling weeds, pests and fire. They have a very real and personal benefit in making sure that this is done correctly, and they don't charge for the service. Prior to the 1970's, most of the land within NSW was held privately, and managed so well, that the government considered it to be of high conservation and environmental value, and claimed these areas as National Parks. If the private landholder was doing such a great job, give it back to him. Not only will they preserve these areas for future generations, they will do so in an economically responsible way.

**SUBMISSION TO  
GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING  
COMMITTEE NO.5  
MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN NSW  
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**Miss Sonia O'Keefe**



I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Inquiry into the Management of Public Land in NSW being conducted by General Purpose Standing Committee No 5.

I have lived in a small rural community all my life and I am becoming increasingly concerned about the devastating mismanagement of public lands and the adverse effects on neighbours and communities. I am particularly referring to National Parks, Wilderness Areas, Livestock Health and Pest Authority (LHPA) managed lands, and roadsides. The acquisition and management of these lands is being driven by emotion and good intentions, not by realistic and sound land management practices.

## **Roadsides**

While I know that it is a nice idea to think of roadsides as part of our nature reserves for flora and fauna, in reality it is only creating traffic hazards. Road verges that have been allowed to regenerate uncontrolled now have vegetation growth right to the edge of the road. It impedes the ability of drivers to spot wildlife approaching the road and consequently more wildlife are being hit and killed by traffic. It also disregards the fact that vegetation so close to the roadside will invariably end up across the road. A terrible example is the Oxley Highway from Long Flat to Yarrowitch. This stretch of road is very windy and steep and whenever there is windy weather or storms, the giant trees end up across the road. This will one day result in a fatality.

## **Livestock Health and Pest Authority (LHPA)**

Travelling Stock Reserves (TSR's) are controlled and managed by the Livestock Health and Pest Authority's (LHPA) in New South Wales. These reserves are many of the worst pockets of feral animal harbor and noxious weed infestations within the state. Two TSR's on the eastern side of Walcha are so heavily infested with St Johns Wart, that they are almost useable for stock. These reserves, which are adjoined by infested roadsides, are the seed bank for the continued spread of this and other weeds. Across the state these reserves are rarely used for the purposes of travelling stock, and during dry periods, they provide supplementary feed for a very small number of stock. The resources need to quell the weeds and pests would be completely unjustified if a cost / benefit analysis was undertaken.

## National Parks and Wilderness Areas

These are the public lands of greatest concern. Due simply to the huge amount of land that is now controlled by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) they have not only become an incredible cost burden on the general community but they pose an ever increasing fire risk to neighbours, firefighters and the general public. If these areas are allowed to continue to build up fire hazards people, homes and animals are going to be incinerated. I don't believe that the general public has any understanding of bushfires, or realise the immense danger that is accruing. Bushfires that we have previously seen in this country are only a warning of what is to come.

I am at a complete loss as to understanding the logic behind amassing the vast areas of National Parks that are in NSW. In our area, the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park is 123,000 hectares. (*source: Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts*) How could any public authority possibly imagine that they are going to be able to effectively manage a park that size? It defies belief that anyone would consider this, yet this is only one of the many National Parks within NSW.

According to the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts website, the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park threat status for density of pest species is rated high (6), pest impact is high (6) and weed density is high (3). This is not management by anyone's standard. The most significant introduced species are Giant Parramatta grass (*Sporobolus fertilis*), lantana (*Lantana camara*), prickly pear (*Opuntia*), blue heliotrope, blackberry, sweet briar (*Rosa rubiginosa*) and burrs of the *Xanthium* spp. Lantana is so widely distributed it has affected World Heritage values. (*source: Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts*) Feral animals within the park include foxes, rabbits, cats, deer, donkeys, horses, pigs and dogs. Add to this a massive amount of fire build-up and what we have is the full catastrophe!!

The hypocrisy in all of this is that these areas were taken over from private landholders because they were 'pristine' areas of high conservation value. In effect they have been locked up and allowed to degenerate into overgrown scrub, of which the vast majority of them are never entered by people, no native fauna lives and feral animals and pests thrive.

Last April I visited the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, but I didn't remain in the very well maintained 2ha of picnic area. I attempted to walk through the park over areas that I have previously covered by foot when the land was privately owned. Instead of a relaxing walk, experiencing magnificent views and an amazing array of wildlife, as

promoted by the National Parks, and previously experienced by myself, I found that I had to trudge my way through chest height growth of grass and weeds, including stinging nettles and blackberries. The only animals that I saw all day were two wild horses. I did not even hear a bird or see a goanna. The animals cannot survive in that sort of overgrowth either.

This National Park has already experienced two severe bushfire episodes. These were both declared Section 44 Fires and millions of dollars were spent trying to extinguish them. Both fires were controlled only when it began to rain. However, government authorities learnt nothing and the fuel has been allowed to build up again. It is worth noting here, that during the time of private land ownership, no taxpayer funds were ever spent on fire-fighting and no lives or homes were ever lost.

Learning to manage fire threat is a skill that is acquired over many years, mostly by experiencing small hot fires and developing an understanding of how they run and self-perpetuate. Counterparts in America have now realised their mistakes. "By stamping out small fires and allowing fuel to stockpile, our policies ensured that when conditions were right, fire would return – bigger, hotter and more destructive than ever. There comes a point where no amount of money, no amount of heroism, is enough. Far from wholly within the control of man, fire becomes unstoppable." (*source: Wildfires, National Geographic, July 2008*) This is just commonsense and understood by every bushman across NSW, but incomprehensible to our government authorities. Ironically, the biodiversity and animals that they mean to protect will one day be completely destroyed. The monetary cost to our government will be unbelievable.

## **Conclusion**

I am astounded by how the management of public lands in NSW has become such a complicated issue. Landowners across the world have been successfully managing private lands for hundreds of years and yet public entities, with far greater resources, can't seem to get it right. Perhaps the answer is too simple. Firstly, the area of National Parks is way too large. All of these lands have been managed by private landholders before their acquisition into National Parks. They remained in a condition that was ideal enough for them to maintain biodiversity and conservation value, and become National Parks, so

somebody was doing something right. Revert most of the land back into private hands and begin to reverse the decline.

Secondly, the main consideration for managing the land that is retained by the Crown, has to be a cost benefit. There has to be enough visits and use of the land to justify the cost involved in maintaining them properly. The absolute vast majority of National Parks areas are never used or accessed, year on year, by anyone. There is no justification for the continued lock-up of land that is only becoming a liability. Weeds, pests, fire hazards and fences all need continuous and effective resources applied to them.

Thirdly, look at how private land is managed and be prepared to take advice from landowners. Quite often they will be the greatest asset to proper management. This also applies to TSR's and roadsides. Adjoining owners have a personal benefit to be gained from ensuring that these public lands are properly looked after, so work with them, instead of hampering their efforts.