

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

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TODD GELLETLY'S SUBMISSION FOR THE INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN NEW SOUTH WALES.



An area Ecologically Thinned in February 2010, currently this area has spent much of the time, since the NRC's Final Report in December 2009, over meter deep in flood water.

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The focus of my submission will centre on the Red Gum Forested areas within the Riverina.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

I have been involved in the Red Gum Industry as an employee of our family business for fifteen years. All up I have been working in one form or another in Red Gum since I was ten years old helping out on school holidays whenever I could bringing my involvement in Red Gum to twenty five years.

I completed a submission into the Riverina Bioregion Regional Forest Assessment conducted by the Natural Resources Commission of New South Wales. I have attached that submission in addition to my current submission. Also attached are some articles relating to Red Gum management. When reading these consider they were written at the time of the NRC Assessment in 2009.

I hold two tertiary qualifications. Due to my extensive experience in Red Gum management I believe I among other experienced Red Gum Managers possess the necessary knowledge, skills and passion to ensure the long term sustainability of all Red Gum Forested areas provided they are managed appropriately. This will create positive environmental and economic outcomes for our Forests and our small communities.

THE NRC REPORT

The NRC assessment of the Red Gum Forests within the Riverina resulted in Land Tenure changes that will have an everlasting impact on the Riverina Bioregion.

In the Final Assessment Report under heading “1.1 Overview”

It states “The purposes of this final assessment report are to:

1. Draw together the best available Science and knowledge on the river red gum woodland forests of the Riverina Bioregion.
2. Draw out the key issues to underpin recommendations to the Government on their future management”.

The timing of the NRC report was crucial to its outcome as it was done at the height of one of the worst ever droughts on record compounded by grossly overstocked Red Gum Forests struggling to compete for moisture due to lack of flooding for nearly fifteen years

While there is no doubting the scientific credentials of the NRC panel it was evident that their own personal opinions weighed heavily in their decision making.

NRC Commissioner Dr John Williams stated at an industry meeting at the Gulpa Sawmill that “I think” “I believe” “Maybe I’m dreaming”. Commissioner Williams said these words when trying to convince the gathering that the economic value of the forests would be higher to local communities as National Parks driven by the tourist dollar rather than already \$70 million plus timber industry.

Commissioner Williams was advised to investigate the tourist numbers to the Yanga National Park to back his claims. Professor Peter Kanowski even went as far as laying a bet with an experienced industry member that an area within the Koondrook Perricoota Group of State Forests would never see flood water again. In less than one year that particular area was 2 meters deep in flood water in what turned out to be a large scale flood. In two years since then that particular area has spent more time under flood water than not.

The NRC failed on many levels to listen to local experts who had spent the majority of their lives living and working in the region. They did listen though when it came to the critical point of active management.

One point reverberated throughout the Final report is the need for active management. Recommendation 3, in the Recommendations Report (December 2009, page 6)

States: “The River Red Gum Forests of the Riverina require active management. All Forest managers on Public Land, including those managing Forests as Reserves, should

implement the forest management principals developed in the NRC's final assessment report. In particular those principals cover appropriate implementation of:

Ecological Thinning

Grazing by domesticated animals

Fire management

Silviculture

Firewood collection."

Recommendation 4, in the Recommendations Report (December 2009, page 6) States the need to trial Ecological Thinning on a large scale.

Recommendation 12, in the Recommendations Report (December 2009, page 9) Discusses the need to appropriately fund multiple use Forests such as Koondrook-Perricoota and Campbell's Island.

Recommendation 13 in the Recommendations Report (December 2009, page 9) Discusses the need to appropriately assist mills and mill workers to exit the industry and to also assist industry to transform to make best use of declining yields of high quality saw log and increased volumes of low quality saw log and residue.

The first part of the NRC's recommendation 13 couldn't be done fast enough by the government the second part was completely ignored. The Riverina Community Development Fund contributed no money at all to any Red Gum Timber Industry related projects.

The NRC report states on numerous occasions that we face a water scarce future, well since the report much of the entire Eastern portion of Australia has received extremely high rainfall resulting any many large scale floods, most if not all major wetlands benefitting from the flooding. In stark contrast to the NRC's dire "prediction".

TOURISM

The NRC's Final Assessment Report (2009) states in table A9.5 on page 319 that the total direct and indirect effect in terms of output of the River Red Gum Timber Industry was \$86,136,000. Having this information provided to the NRC, Commissioner William's "Dream" was that forests would be of higher economic value to the region as National Parks driven by the tourist dollar.

While there is still some industry currently operating at the time leading up to their final report the indication was the timber industry was worth \$70,000,000 annually. At a public meeting held in Deniliquin I question Commissioner Williams as to the number of tourists and their spending needed to replace what was thought at the time a \$70,000,000 annual industry. At the meeting I gave Commissioner Williams the following information. To replace a \$70,000,000 industry with tourism to our region it meant that for 52 weeks of the year there had to be an additional 384 tourists per week each spending \$3,500 per week of their visit over and above the existing tourism numbers. I then asked him the question if he thought that a husband and wife with two kids would spend \$14,000 dollars on a one week holiday to the region. He simply shook his head and said no.

He knew his "dream" would never become a reality and provide any form of economic relief from the loss of the timber industry.

What I have observed in the short time since the new Red Gum National Parks were introduced is an increased number of campers visiting the State Forests all with a similar comment, "we won't camp in the National Parks because we can't take our dog and we are not sure if we can get wood for a fire or anything, there are too many rules"

Even during the inquiry Committee member the Hon. Cate Faehrmann told her own story of how her visit to a Red Gum National park was cut short due to flooding. Red Gum Forests within the Floodplain are inaccessible during times of flood, in summer temperatures are such that it is simply too hot and uncomfortable for families to camp due to the heat. Tourism has a very small window of opportunity to fully access and enjoy a Red Gum Forest. Even during this small window the forest can be inaccessible due to a rain event making it too wet to drive on Forest roads.

Tourism will never be a viable alternative for our lost timber industry, we are simply too far from the population masses and don't have the appeal needed to attract the necessary number of tourists to our region.

CURRENT OPERATIONS

Current operations have been severely impacted by large scale flooding that have seen industry halted from September 2010 to March 2011, then again in July, August and September 2011, again in March 2012 and now again industry is halted due to what is facing up as another large flood. With all major dams within the catchment at near capacity the next 5 – 6 years will more than likely result in flooding that will further impact industry access to resource compounded by the fact that a lot of the high ground will gradually be harvested to a point where even small floods will result in loss of access for extended periods of time. The flood enhancement project in the Koondrook Perricoota State Forest will also impact operations and access to resource into the future as well.

The land tenure changes have had a severe impact on industry, as in previous flood events with other State Forests open industry has been able to move around the many areas available for industry to access to maintain operations at a sustainable level.

All up industry has approximately 80 full time employees and somewhere in the vicinity of \$30 - \$35million of investment at a local level.

The NRC's recommendations to conduct Ecological Thinning operations across all Red Gum Forests either State Forest or National Park must be put into action.

There are two successful operators currently conducting Ecological Thinning operations in the Koondrook Perricoota group of State Forests. Both operations are professionally run with the combined single focus of ensuring long term survival and sustainability of the Red Gum Forests.

Industry must be provided with the access to resource to ensure its long term viability and survival. To ensure this is made possible forward planning is crucial. Current operations are time and time again halted or slowed down waiting for the next compartment to have its harvesting plan approved. Currently two of the three harvesting crews in operation are stopped as flooding has impacted open compartments once again. Planning must be made simpler and easier to ensure industry a constant supply of resource. Planning on a broader more flexible scale will ensure the Forests and the industry is more sustainable into the future.

Across all Red Gum Forested areas Ecological Thinning can be utilised to back the NRC's recommendations and to support the current industry. This will create positive environmental and economic outcomes for all stake holders.

The Werai group of State Forests provides a fantastic opportunity for the traditional owners to generate income and provide critical employment and education for its

members and work alongside the Red Gum Industry. This can create greater connectivity between the traditional owners and the Forest they hold so dear to their heart.

FORESTS NEW SOUTH WALES

Current FNSW staff possess a wealth of knowledge and passion when it comes to Red Gum and their input will provide valuable information into developing a suitable plan to commence Ecological Thinning across all areas of Red Gum regardless of their tenure. Additions to their budget and staffing levels will assist the industry with a constant supply of resource, better conditions for industry to work within, ensuring they continue to produce the appropriate outcomes for the Red Gum Forests whilst being as efficient as possible.

NATIONAL PARKS AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

As the below photos depict they obviously don't care about the Red Gum National Parks.



This photo was taken on July 24th 2012, over two years after the Land Tenure change from State Forest to National Park. If the NPWS can't even be bothered to change the sign what hope have they got in managing them. Across the road in The Noorong National Park, not even a sign at all. I doubt if the NPWS has even been to either of these Parks.

NPWS haven't even locked it up and left it, they have just left it, literally.





Do the photos of the Yanga National Park represent what the NPWS want their latest Red Gum National Parks to look like? Would they prefer the next photo of an Ecologically Thinned stand of Red Gums that are healthy, vibrant, resilient and most importantly will survive due to active management.

(note the available residue for domestic firewood collection)



This inquiry must conclude that Ecological Thinning can be introduced to any Red Gum Forest regardless of land tenure and the current industry must be utilised to produce the positive environmental outcomes Ecological Thinning has already produced within the Koondrook Perricoota Group of State Forests.

In times of flooding and the use of the Koondrook Perricoota Flood Enhancement Project to provide environmental water, industry can simply Ecologically Thin in other Red Gum Forested areas until such time as sufficient access is available in the Koondrook Perricoota Group to return to normal operations there. I am not proposing a major increase in volume in any way, simply accessing current volume levels in different areas of Red Gum regardless of land tenure.

This will continue to ensure positive environmental and economic outcomes are achieved for our Forests and our communities.

A STARTING POINT

It is my experienced opinion that as a starting point current Industry be utilised to conduct Ecological thinning operations in the Noorong, Niemur and Wetuppa National Parks. Not just little trial plots here and there, the entire net harvest area within apart from normal exclusions such as creeks etc that would apply to normal harvesting operations within an actively managed State Forest. This then can be used as a reference tool for anyone to study, observe and undoubtedly admire once it has been thinned. As a percentage these areas add up to less than 5% of the entire Red Gum National Park Estate. From there Industry will prove the value that Ecological Thinning will bring to the National Park Estate. The NRC report claims that up to 40% of the Edward and Wakool Forests will transition into Copperburr or grassland in the next fifty years. (NRC Recommendations Report, December 2009, page 50)

As for the Millewa Forests the NRC report states that 10% of the Forest will be lost in next fifty years. (NRC Recommendations Report, December 2009, page 36)

Why doesn't Industry target these areas to prove that active management is the way of the future for the Red Gums regardless of land tenure.

We have to break the outdated approach that by locking up huge areas of land into National Park it supposedly improves it. We have an opportunity to educate people from all different points of view on Forest management and through active management we can deliver positive environmental outcomes and expand our operations into areas that need active management to survive.

LOCAL ACCESS TO FIREWOOD

As the committee heard on several occasions during their visit to Deniliquin, National Parks have reduced the local population's access to firewood to virtually nil. Without main's supply of Natural Gas in Deniliquin or Mathoura there is no other viable, affordable form of heating than firewood. To the point where recently local courts convicted a member of the public for illegally collecting firewood. I completely agree it was unlawful but it highlights the impact the National Park has had on local firewood collection to the point where someone is prepared to risk huge fines and even jail to collect and sell firewood.

Ecological thinning will result in residue being left behind that is suitable for local people to collect for their own firewood use as was pointed out by the committee during their visit to the Little Forest on the 1st of August 2012. During the hearing the panel was informed that the local area was 95% reliant on wood heating. Ecological Thinning can in

this instance serve a dual purpose, firstly to improve the Forest and secondly provide local access to a resource that has been historically available since the area was settled.

INDUSTRY FUNDING

The Riverina Red Gum's Regional Employment and Community Development Fund was part of the overall \$97million Red Gum Package. \$12million was made available in two rounds. \$9.5million, in round one and \$2.5million, in round two.

In past Regional Forest Assessments (RFA) there has been direct industry funding made available to businesses that passed up the opportunity to exit their industry and remain operating.

In the Brigalow RFA a total package of \$116million was on offer. Of which \$9.7million went back to the remaining industry to value add, a total of 8.36% of the total package went to industry.

In the Red Gum RFA as far as I'm aware only \$580,000 was awarded to remaining industry in the form of funding. A paltry total of 00.59% of the entire package. This was for a project that was outside the Industry itself.

The remaining \$11.42million went to (according to the summaries available online at <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/grants/2012riverina.htm>) projects ranging from building upgrades to replacing worn out equipment. Good luck to all recipients but the funding was ill directed.

Recommendation 13 in the NRC Recommendations Report (December 2009, page 9) States:assist industry to transform to make best use of declining yields of high quality saw log and increased volumes of low quality saw log and residue.

Being the largest Red Gum business equating for over 50% of the total volume of all products removed from the forest we applied in both rounds of the funding only to be unsuccessful, 00.59% of the total package returned to the remaining industry for a non industry related project is completely inadequate.

Residue licensees are now dealing with their product being smaller and greener than ever before vastly increasing storage and handling costs that is impacting on profitability.

The Inquiry must ensure additional funding is made available to the remaining Industry to assist in value adding and develop their businesses to become more efficient and profitable.

INQUIRY OUTCOMES

The overall outcome of this Inquiry should reflect the fact that in relation to Red Gum:

- 1 The NRC's recommendations in relation to Ecological Thinning must be employed regardless of Land Tenure.**
- 2 The current Industry be utilised to conduct the necessary operations.**
- 3 Red Gum Industry Funding be made available in proportion to the Brigalow funding to holders of Wood Supply Agreements to assist in efficiency and profitability as per the NRC's Recommendation Report, (December 2009, page 9) Recommendation 13.**
- 4 Industry members and members of FNSW with knowledge and experience in Ecological Thinning must be involved in forming an appropriate flexible plan to ensure the NRC's recommendations in relation to Ecological Thinning are followed through on and produce positive environmental outcomes.**
- 5 A question that was asked several times by a committee member was "If the NSW Premier were here right now what are the three things you want him to do?"**

One thing I would like him to do is introduce Legislation to the Parliament that protects Regional Communities by giving Regional Communities the power to decide and fight for their own future based on local knowledge and vast experience and recognise that despite their lack of political power their voice be a crucial one when deciding on the future structure of their region.

I invite all members of the Committee to re visit the area and take some more time to discuss the issues contained within this submission. My contact details have been forwarded with this submission.

Regards Todd Gelletly.