

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

**Organisation:** Wakool Shire Council

**Name:** Mr Bruce Graham

**Date received:** 7/08/2012

---

3 August 2012

Ms Madeleine Foley  
Director  
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5  
Legislative Council  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
**SYDNEY NSW 2000**

Dear Ms Foley

**WAKOOL SHIRE COUNCIL: SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT**

Wakool Shire Council resolved to make this submission at its meeting held on 18 July 2012. We understand that the deadline for submissions has now been extended to 31 August 2012.

Council appreciates this opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry into public land management in New South Wales. Council also appreciated the opportunity to present and answer questions at the public hearing held at Deniliquin on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2012.

**Wakool Shire**

The Wakool Shire covers an area of 7,521 km<sup>2</sup>. It has a population of 4,362 (2006 census), which has declined gradually since 2001 by an average of just over 1% each year. Its main industry and largest employer is the agriculture and forestry sector. The total gross value of agricultural production in 2005-2006 in Wakool Shire was \$165.8 million, the highest within Central Murray. There is little employment in sectors other than agriculture, meaning that overall diversity is still relatively low. <sup>1</sup>

Wakool Shire contains significant environmental areas and features including Yanga National Park and part of the Koondrook – Pericoota Forest, which in turn is a component of the Gunbower – Koondrook – Pericoota Icon Site.

Wakool Shire has been adversely impacted on by a number of government decisions in recent years. These include the decision to close the river red gum industry. 65,922 hectares of new national parks were created from 1 July 2010. In Wakool Shire the following State Forests became National Parks at that time: Niemur, Noorong, Wetuppa and Whymoul. This does not include the purchase of Yanga Station in the north of the Shire, which resulted in a significant loss in rate revenue. The Werai Forests were vested in the Minister for the

Environment on 1 July 2010 and are to be transferred to traditional owners for conservation purposes. The Koondrook Forests are managed by Forest NSW under its Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management Plan.

## **Yanga**

Yanga Station is located 9.6 km south east of the town of Balranald but lies almost completely within the Wakool Shire. It was the largest freehold property in the southern hemisphere at approximately 210,000 acres. Yanga was primarily a sheep, cattle & cereal cropping station but also included rice and a large timber harvesting operation.

In 2005, the NSW Government purchased Yanga Station from the Black family to create the Yanga National Park, which was expected to generate significant environmental and tourism outcomes. In a joint submission to the then NSW Minister for Environment, The Hon. Bob Debus MP, the Shires of Wakool, Balranald and Hay acknowledged these potential environmental and tourism outcomes but also drew attention to the negative economic and social impacts of this decision.

The Shires of Balranald, Hay and Wakool also indicated their extreme disappointment at the total lack of consultation prior to the purchase announcement in September 2005.

The vast majority of Yanga National Park is located within the Wakool Shire comprising approximately 10% of this Shire's land area. The Wakool Shire runs from the Murray River at Barham to the Murrumbidgee River at Yanga; spanning both river valleys. There is a variety of agricultural production, including grazing, rice and cereal crops. Part of the area has access to irrigation water.

Prior to its sale, Council provided a range of services to the Yanga area community and this has continued since the conversion to National Park. Yanga Station was the Wakool Shire's largest ratepayer and before gazettal contributed approximately \$52,000 each year in rate revenue. In addition to the purchase of Yanga, NSW National Parks & Wildlife purchased another property on 5 March 2010, which removes a further \$6,000 each year in rate income to the Shire. Extrapolated to net present value this annual loss of rates now exceeds \$110,000 per annum.

Waugorah Road is the main access to the northern section of Yanga and is maintained by the Wakool Shire Council. There are seven bridges located on this road, which is sealed for 23kms and unsealed for a further 28kms.

In the joint submission to the NSW Government made in 2005, the Shires of Balranald, Hay and Wakool proposed a number of measures to offset the impact of the sale and conversion of Yanga to National Park. This included completion of the construction and sealing of Waugorah Road (28 kilometres) and that Wakool Shire Council plant be engaged to undertake works (roads, fire breaks etc.) in the Park, wherever possible. Apart from initially utilising Wakool Shire Council plant for some minor fire-break work (but not in recent years); not one dollar of adjustment assistance has been provided to Wakool Shire Council from the NSW Government.

Yanga National Park was the 680th National Park created in NSW, and was described by the then Premier, Bob Carr as a single most important acquisition by the State Government in recent history. The National Park includes a 17,000-hectare river red gum forest and the Lower Bidgee Floodplain, which apart from being a Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) 'icon site' is home to significant bird breeding rookeries.

At the time of creating the Yanga National Park the NSW Government projected tourist numbers at 50,000 people per annum - equating to 60 vehicles or 3.5 tourist coaches per

day. In a recent presentation to Council the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service advised that Yanga National Park has been open to tourists since 2009. They estimate that approximately 25,000 people visited Yanga in 2011. Most of these visited the Yanga Homestead. In addition 2,600 people participated in guided tours of the Yanga National Park.

Herein lies the issue for Wakool Shire. Yanga National Park is geographically adjacent to the township of Balranald in Balranald Shire. The NSW Government has overlooked the obvious inequity arising from creating a National Park in Wakool Shire which is only of direct benefit to the Balranald Shire community. Effectively the ratepayers of Wakool Shire have to bear the costs of a Balranald tourism asset. The much vaunted economic prosperity arising from Yanga National Park is simply a mirage to Wakool Shire.

The NSW National Parks Service further advise that the following land management activities are undertaken at Yanga:

- Pest animal control – including pigs (over 700 destroyed in 2011), deer, foxes & rabbits
- Weed control
- Fire Management
- European Heritage Management
- Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Management
- Threatened Species Management
- Vegetation Management
- Water Management and Ecological Restoration

In April 2012, Wakool Shire Council wrote to Robyn Parker MP, NSW Minister for the Environment advising of the perilous state of the Yanga National Park in relation to bush fire control. With the wetter seasons of recent times, Yanga is now a tinderbox of grass & timber ready to explode. The fire control activities undertaken in areas not visible to the general public (beside the Sturt Highway) are completely inadequate. To this end Wakool Shire Council recently made an application, via the Rural Fire Service (RFS) estimates process, for funding of a CAT 6 fire truck largely in response to this risk. Any RFS asset purchase requires a significant contribution from Council, adding to the net cost to our ratepayers of having Yanga National Park in Wakool Shire. Disappointingly, Council only received a reply to our letter on 27<sup>th</sup> July 2012, even though the matter was also progressed through the Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Councils (RAMROC) forum, who sought a meeting with the Minister in June 2012. Unfortunately, the Minister was not able to make that meeting and it was eventually held with her Chief of Staff.

### **The Nimmie-Caira Landholders proposal**

This proposal is for the sale and full control of 84,000 hectares (ha) within the Lower Murrumbidgee Icon Site (Nimmie-Caira) including full control of channel and floodplain infrastructure.

This site is immediately adjacent to the Yanga National Park.

We are aware that the NSW Office of Water has commissioned the Risorsa Group of Griffith to prepare a feasibility/business case on the Nimmie-Caira proposal and that work was due to be completed in June 2012.

Council's position is that the Nimmie-Caira landholders have every legal right to sell their land, infrastructure and water assets. However, the impact on Wakool Shire Council of

implementing this proposal would be to further erode the rate base of this Shire in a similar way to when Yanga Station was converted into the Yanga National Park.

Council remains concerned that the private property in the Nimmie-Caira area will be converted to National Park, if the current proposal proceeds. This would lead to a further erosion of Council's rate revenue – in the order of \$35,000 each year. In addition, Council retains an obligation to maintain services, principally to road infrastructure.

It is for these reasons that Council proposed, in its letter of 19 March 2012 to Minister Hodgkinson, that this impact be offset by transferring all road infrastructure (roads, bridges etc.) north of the Sturt Highway within Wakool Shire, plus Impimi Road, to the State, if the Nimmie-Caira proposal proceeds.

An alternative infrastructure package was discussed during our meeting in May 2012 with Kaye Dalton of the Risorsa Group. This package, which we have called the Nimmie-Caira Asset Strategy, includes the replacement of the three existing timber bridges on the Waugorah Road, resealing of 23km of Waugorah Road, gravel re-sheet of Waugorah/Coates Roads (28km) and Lourica Road (8km) and annual maintenance of the road infrastructure.

Council is open to further discussions about all options for an equitable solution to this matter.

### **River Red Gum forests**

River Red Gum forests are an important asset in the Riverina Bioregion and specifically to Wakool Shire in the economic, social and natural environment context.

The River Red Gum is one of the fastest regenerating species and Australian forests were considered to be amongst the world's best and healthiest.

Yanga Station, now Yanga National Park, encompasses an area of 80,000 hectares with 150 kilometres of Murrumbidgee River frontage – and 17,000 hectares of river red gum forest.

Until 2005, the red gums were harvested on a sustainable, limited basis under the supervision of a responsible forester with over 40 years' experience. It is interesting to note that former Premier Bob Carr commented at the time that the property was purchased on how well Yanga Station and the red gum forest had been cared for. The local saw-mill has stopped operating and the people who worked there have lost their jobs. This particularly impacted the town of Balranald.

It is evident that the forest is not being managed well and is becoming increasingly choked with too many trees.

Previously, Barham-Koondrook supported three major saw-mills, three low quality sawlog mills, and one residue operation. Total direct employment in Crown mills was estimated at over 110. In addition, both Koondrook and Barham supported a further 35 people. Bonum Saw Mills developed a veneer factory that produced the only River Red Gum timber veneer in the world. There were also two River Red Gum furniture businesses in the twin towns. Overall there were estimated to be 143 persons working in timber processing in the towns of Barham and Koondrook.

In large part this industry drew its timber supply from the Koondrook – Pericoota Forest. The only major saw-mill still operating in the Barham-Koondrook area is Arbuthnot Sawmills Pty Ltd of Koondrook with several residue operations, mainly recovering fire-wood, active.

Council is of the view that River Red Gum forests in the Riverina Bioregion should be intensively and actively managed.

**Conclusion**

Council is also of the view that our National Parks, State Parks and forests should be managed for multiple benefits and uses, such as timber production, conservation, tourism, and recreation.

Yours sincerely

**Bruce Graham**  
**General Manager**

<sup>1</sup> *Wakool Shire: Strengthening Irrigation Communities Synthesis Report – Stage 1: Where are we at now?* Hyder Consulting Pty Ltd, Dec 2010.