

**Submission
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INQUIRY INTO CROWN LAND IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Valley Watch Inc

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Upper House Enquiry Into Crown Land

Valley Watch Inc. is a community organisation based in the Lower Clarence Valley. Our mission statement is “to advocate for a healthy and biologically diverse environment and preserve the quality of life of the Clarence Valley”.

Crown Lands retained by the state of NSW include many of our remaining natural landscapes. These lands, although extensive, remain relatively unmapped and under assessed for their ecological importance. We recognise that there are diverse uses, both active and passive, of Crown Lands and that appropriate management ensures the access and public use of these lands.

The environmental value of much Crown Land is in the conservation of native vegetation, wildlife habitat and corridors as well as the biodiversity of our coastal environments, wetlands and river systems, all of which are under enormous pressure from increasing levels of development. The retention and management of our Crown Land provides long term benefit to the resilience and health of our natural environment. Many areas of Crown Land would be of high conservation value requiring active management of weeds and pest animals as well as commercial activities such as grazing.

Proposed changes to the way Crown land is managed in the Western Division include conversion of some leasehold land to freehold land, and removing of requirements that management is consistent with the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

Changes to Crown land management will be exacerbated by proposed changes to native vegetation laws in NSW which will see land clearing rules significantly weakened by the proposed Biodiversity Conservation Bill and Local Land Services Amendment Bill, including enabling broad-scale land clearing via the equity code.

Although there was opportunity to comment on the draft NSW Travelling Stock Reserves State Planning Framework 2016-19, five year grazing permits were being advertised even before this draft document was placed on public exhibition.

Controlled grazing of TSRs has helped to conserve significant parcels of remnant vegetation including endangered ecological communities and threatened species in the Central Division. TSRs need appropriate grazing regimes and management to maintain their importance as wildlife corridors. Our organisation is keenly aware of the significance of TSRs as we have significant portions falling within our LGA.

While the North Coast in general and the Clarence Valley LGA in particular are well endowed with National Parks and Nature Reserves, they are on land that was not suitable for clearing for agricultural uses, such as rocky outcrops and ridge lines. These areas generally have poorer soils and do not support the vegetation types and habitats that occur on the fertile valley floors with creek lines, rivers and rich alluvial soils. The TSR network, however, mostly occurs on these fertile valley floors because it was developed along a series of reliable water sources, often following traditional Aboriginal pathways through the landscape. Therefore, the vegetation and habitats contained in TSRs are, in many cases, the best remnants of woodland ecosystems that are adapted to fertile soil conditions.

The network of travelling stock routes throughout NSW provides the opportunity to apply the principles of connectivity conservation or “biolinks”. TSRs act as corridors and stepping stones, connecting fragmented vegetation across the landscape. In particular, they connect the remnants of a north-south corridor of woodland in eastern Australia.

Temperate Australian woodlands, such as the Box and Ironbark woodlands, once covered extensive areas of the Western Slopes and Tablelands from Queensland to the Riverina. They were home to a huge variety of plants and animals. The advance of wheat and sheep farming changed this situation, and vast areas were cleared. Because TSRs have been retained as public land, they were not cleared for grazing and cropping, and woodland remnants were preserved.

Many birds and mammals need tree hollows for breeding. These habitat trees generally take a minimum of 70 years to develop. Gibbons and Lindenmayer (Tree Hollows and Wildlife Conservation in Australia, 2002) have shown that more than 300 species of Australian native animals – mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians – depend on hollow-bearing trees for their survival. The occurrence of a natural range of hollow sizes, depths, volumes and positions helps to ensure that a diversity

of hollows is available to cater for the special ecological requirements of all of these animals. Without the TSR network these habitat trees would not have survived.

The TSR network has the ability to provide emergency feed and agistment during times of drought, fire and flood is obviously of considerable economic benefit to primary industry. TSRs also provide a valuable resource for apiarists.

“The Long Paddock” is part of Australian culture, renowned in poem and song – “Clancy of the Overflow” and “Saltbush Bill” by Banjo Paterson, “Andy’s Gone with Cattle” by Henry Lawson and “Heading South Through the Long Paddock” by John Kinsella are just a few examples.

In many cases it would appear that travelling stock routes developed from Aboriginal travel lines, as these routes often followed the most accessible routes through the landscape, avoiding natural obstacles and linking water sources. Many TSRs may have developed by transfer of knowledge from Aboriginal guides and trackers, and workers in the pastoral industry, or by early Europeans observing the physical signs of traditional pathways and adopting them.

Traditional camping places have also been gazetted as travelling stock reserves. The presence of scarred trees, middens and artefacts on many TSRs is evidence of the traditional spiritual and cultural connections of Aboriginal people with these areas.

The TSR network provides for many recreational uses – bushwalking, picnicking, swimming, horse riding, fishing, cycling and birdwatching. It is important in our increasingly urbanised society that people have the opportunity to experience the recreational opportunities the TSR network provides.

We have considerable concern in relation to the sale and leasing of Crown Lands, a process which lacks transparency, with little information or public accountability regarding the sale, leasing and granting of other interests. Nor is it mandatory to prepare a plan of management for a Crown reserve setting out what activities and development are permissible or what licences are authorised.

Our organisation believes that the proposal for Crown land to be administered as a Public Trading Enterprise without proper environmental or cultural assessment, suggests that there will be widespread sale and commercialisation of Crown land. We believe that Crown land must be administered in an open, transparent and accountable manner that increases public participation, including increased Aboriginal involvement, and must be based on the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

Agencies responsible for the administration of Crown land, including TSRs, must work co-operatively with other land managers such as State Forests, NPWS and local councils to promote conservation of biodiversity and the protection of ecosystem services.

We believe that good Crown land management is an important way to protect ecosystems and the services they provide such as clean water and air, carbon sequestration and biodiversity which will benefit the health of our land and the wellbeing of future generations of Australians.