

Submission
No 239

INQUIRY INTO PROPOSAL TO RAISE THE WARRAGAMBA DAM WALL

Organisation: BirdLife Australia
Date Received: 10 September 2019

10 September 2019

Justin Field MLC
Chair
Select Committee on the Proposal to Raise the
Warragamba Dam Wall
Legislative Council
NSW Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney, NSW 2000

Via submission portal.

Dear Select Committee Chair,

Re: Inquiry into the Proposal to Raise the Warragamba Dam Wall

BirdLife Australia is an independent science-based bird conservation organisation with over 145,000 supporters throughout Australia and is recognised as a leading authority on the ecology and conservation of Australia's native birds.

Since its inception in 1994, BirdLife Australia has been a member of the National Regent Honeyeater Recovery Team and leads the coordination of conservation actions for the National Recovery Plan for the Regent Honeyeater.

BirdLife Australia holds serious concerns regarding the impact of the proposal to raise the Warragamba Dam wall (the Proposal) on the global population of Critically Endangered (IUCN, EPBC Act 1999 and BC Act 2016) Regent Honeyeater.

Further, BirdLife Australia believes the Proposal's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) to date has not appropriately accounted for breeding populations of the Regent Honeyeater within and adjacent to the Proposal project area including within the Proposal's inundation zone.

The following attachment acts as our submission and addresses these concerns through these terms of reference:

- D(iii) - the adequacy of the Environmental Impact Assessment process to date, including the assessment of impacts on ecological values of the Greater Blue Mountains National Park; and
- I - any other related matters. We address our general concerns on impacts to the global population of Regent Honeyeater here.

If you have any questions relating to this submission, please contact BirdLife Australia's Woodland Bird Program Leader and Regent Honeyeater Recovery Coordinator Dean Ingwersen

Yours sincerely,

Paul Sullivan,
Chief Executive,
BirdLife Australia

BirdLife Australia
Suite 2-05
60 Leicester Street
Carlton VIC 3053
T 03 9347 0757
F 03 9347 9323
info@birdlife.org.au
birdlife.org.au



Attachment A – BirdLife Australia submission on relevant terms of reference.

D. The adequacy of the Environmental Impact Assessment process to date, including the assessment of impacts on (iii) ecological values of the Greater Blue Mountains National Park.

BirdLife Australia has serious concerns that the Proposal has not appropriately accounted for the occurrence of breeding Regent Honeyeaters within and adjacent to the Proposal area, including within the inundation zone, or the impacts the Proposal will have on these birds through the initial referral and currently during the EIA process.

The Proposal's referral (EPBC 2017/7940¹) to the Federal Department of Environment for assessment under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) failed to account for the Regent Honeyeater within the project area (Table 3-3: Listed threatened species within and around Lake Burragorang) and further stated:

Terrestrial fauna species, including avifauna, are not expected to be impacted by the Project as areas of potential inundation are not known to represent critical habitat for any of these species. Similarly, changes in downstream areas caused by modification of flow regime are not expected to impact on any important habitat areas or populations.

However, public sightings and previous survey records demonstrate Regent Honeyeaters utilising the Burragorang Valley²³ over previous decades, and in November 2017 large-scale targeted surveys for Regent Honeyeaters recorded a minimum of 21 adult birds (between 5-10% of the estimated global population) and 7 nesting events in the Burragorang Valley⁴. This clearly demonstrates the significance of the area for the species, especially as breeding habitat.

Further, the raising of the Warragamba Dam wall, and any resulting inundation of woodland habitats, would have a significant impact on the global Regent Honeyeater population and significantly increase the species' extinction risk. Inundation of the riparian woodland habitats as would occur under the Proposal will lead to the loss of hundreds of hectares of known breeding habitat.

The limited available survey data within the Proposal area represents a 'best case scenario', meaning the true impact of the Proposal on the Regent Honeyeater population is likely to be substantially greater.

Finally, because the Regent Honeyeater population requires a network of breeding sites (see below) the loss of breeding habitat in the Burragorang Valley will impact the entire population and offsetting is not a viable option.

¹ Department of Environment (2017). *EPBC Act – Public Notices*. 2017/7940 - Water NSW/Natural Resources Management/Approx 65 km west of Sydney CBD/New South Wales/Warragamba Dam Raising Project. Available at: <http://epbcnotices.environment.gov.au/referralslist/>

² Kvistad, L. et al. (2015). Very low population structure in a highly mobile and wide-ranging endangered bird species. *PLoS one*, 10(12), p.e0143746

³ Atlas of Living Australia (2019). Regent Honeyeater records. Available at: https://bie.ala.org.au/species/urn:lsid:biodiversity.org.au:afd.taxon:af9380ee-2f65-4213-bb6f-ea6baf92ad3e#tab_recordsView. Accessed 18/8/19.

⁴ Crates, R. et al. (2019). Contemporary breeding biology of critically endangered regent honeyeaters: implications for conservation. *Ibis* 161: 521-532.



I. Any other related matter - Impacts on the global population of Critically Endangered Regent Honeyeater

Regent Honeyeaters are one of Australia's most threatened birds with a current wild global population estimate between 250-500 individuals⁵⁶, a reduction of 80% over the past 30 years⁷. The removal of foraging and nesting habitat has been extensive and has reduced their available habitat to small and isolated remnants. Under current strategies, and without major conservation initiatives, it is predicted that there is a greater than 50% probability that the Regent Honeyeater will be extinct within two decades⁸.

The National Recovery Plan for the Regent Honeyeater states:

Ongoing declines in population size and habitat availability present significant challenges for the recovery of the Regent Honeyeater and exert strong pressures on the survival of the species in the wild. Given these challenges, all areas where Regent Honeyeaters are known or likely to occur require protective measures.

Remaining, and newly discovered, habitat where Regent Honeyeaters are known to regularly occur or breed is critical for the survival of the species. The greater Blue Mountains provide the remaining stronghold for the Regent Honeyeater with the majority (around 80%) of the wild population estimated to occur and breed here⁹. Based on an extensive monitoring program and public sightings, areas with recorded breeding events include the Capertee and Wolgan Valleys, the Mudgee-Wollar district, the lower Hunter Valley and the Burragorang Valley.

Surveys, including colour marking and resighting of individuals, demonstrate that birds frequently move between these key areas and breed in different locations in different seasons. The wild Regent Honeyeater population is therefore dependent upon this small network of key nesting sites to persist¹⁰.

Further, Regent Honeyeaters have specific habitat requirements when breeding and due to the fluctuations of flowering conditions this may mean that only one of these locations is suitable for breeding in any given year¹¹. Pressures at these remaining breeding sites put further strain on the species as they compete with aggressive native species for food resources and nesting locations and are at risk of rapid mortality from random events such as wildfire.

The Proposal will result in the inundation of the Blue Mountains National Park, the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and Greater Blue Mountains Key Biodiversity Area and areas that have been recorded as Regent Honeyeater breeding habitat (see above). Inundation could result in the loss of hundreds of hectares of breeding habitat important for the survival of the species for up to five weeks during a flood event.

Crucially, the specific habitat requirements of the Regent Honeyeater mean that birds cannot simply 'nest elsewhere' if key breeding habitat is lost. The loss of any breeding habitat would be detrimental to the viability of the species and the deliberate inundation or destruction of any remaining breeding habitat is incongruous with the National Recovery Plan and would contribute to the trajectory of extinction for the species.

⁵ Kvistad, L. et al. (2015). Very low population structure in a highly mobile and wide-ranging endangered bird species. *PLoS one*, 10(12), p.e0143746

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia (2016). National Recovery Plan for the Regent Honeyeater. Available at: <https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/286c0b52-815e-4a6c-9d55-8498c174a057/files/national-recovery-plan-regent-honeyeater.pdf>.

⁷ Threatened Species Scientific Committee. (2015). Regent Honeyeater conservation advice: Available at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/pubs/82338-conservation-advice.pdf>.

⁸ Geyle, H. et al. (2018). Quantifying extinction risk and forecasting the number of impending Australian bird and mammal extinctions. *Pacific Conservation Biology*, 24: 157-167

⁹ Crates, R. et al. (2019). Contemporary breeding biology of critically endangered regent honeyeaters: implications for conservation. *Ibis* 161: 521-532.

¹⁰ Ingwersen, D. (unpublished data). Regent Honeyeater colour mark and resighting database. Managed by BirdLife Australia.

¹¹ Runge, C. et al. (2017). Solving problems of conservation inadequacy for nomadic birds. *Australian Zoologist* 39: 280-295.