

## INQUIRY INTO ACCESS RESTRICTIONS TO PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERWAYS

**Organisation:** Gloucester Environment Group Inc.

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## Gloucester Environment Group Inc

*We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Land on which we meet and pay our respects to the Elders - Past, Present and Emerging*

### **INQUIRY INTO ACCESS RESTRICTIONS TO PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERWAYS**

Gloucester Environment Group is an incorporated volunteer organisation in the MidCoast Council area with around 120 members who reside in or near Gloucester. GEG members provide, assist and plan for environmental enhancement projects in our region. GEG is a member group of the Nature Conservation Council NSW.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry.

Our concerns relate specifically to the governance of our State Forest Estate including the lack of public consultation processes that fail to establish the community engagement necessary to transparently justify Forestry management decisions.

GEG submitted to the Independent Forestry Panel (Sept 2024) our concerns that FCNSW are openly supportive of commercial, industrial hard rock quarry development in our State Forest Estate in spite of the community opposition and seemingly in breach of its own corporate objectives.

Wallaroo State Forest is within the Williams River Catchment and Grahamstown drinking water catchment – home to a range of threatened species and an area which provides habitat connectivity through to the MidCoast. The regenerating native forest is located at Balickera, just north of Raymond Terrace.

FCNSW signed a Deed of Agreement with a hard rock quarry company in 2018 (ARDG Stone Ridge Quarry) to establish a commercial quarry operation pending planning approval. What was originally proposed in 2018, had tripled in size by 2025 proposing to extract 1.5 million tonnes per annum. FCNSW will receive royalties from the operation for at least 30 years. **It is the first proposed SSD hard rock quarry on public land in NSW.**

A consequence of the proposal is that the community will be locked out of the forest. What will remain is a large water storage pit. The forest habitat and biodiversity, as well as the social services the forest provides to the community will be irretrievably lost. The Wallaroo State Forest enjoys/enjoyed high recreational usage. It is valued for the scenic and environmental values it offers to the Port Stephens hinterland community.

Undoubtedly, the financial gain from the project will be substantial – shared between the proponent and FCNSW which currently runs in financial deficit.

FCNSW held no community consultation prior to signing the Deed of Agreement, and none since. There has been no Amended Plan of Management for the Forest produced whereby the community has been allowed the chance to comment about the Project. There has been no independent assessment to justify this quarry above any other quarry – existing, recently approved or proposed in the region – and there are eight other quarries within a 25km radius. Importantly those other quarries are on private holdings – so the operational landscape risks are borne by owner, not the people of NSW.

The matter is now before the Land and Environment Court – class action was initiated by Save Balickera Inc.

There is one other much smaller, comparable quarry operational in NSW Forest Estate. The Bago Quarry in the Hastings Council area (200,000 tonnes per annum) is located in a FCNSW hardwood plantation and commenced operations in 2022.

It is worth noting the proponent's response to Hastings Council regarding objections to the local economic impacts on residents –

*Firstly, Council will note the evidence submitted by the Forestry Corporation (in separate correspondence) that the financial yield from the recent harvesting of timber from the quarry precinct amounted to a figure of less than \$40,000. Council will also note from that evidence that the period of rotation for future harvests will be the order of 40 years Secondly, **the value of the royalties flowing to the Forestry Corporation (from quarry operations) will be higher than the yield from timber harvesting by a factor of several hundred times***

(Correspondence from DeGroot & Benson Pty Ltd their ref 14164, To: Port Macquarie Hastings Council, Attn: Chris Gardiner Re:DA 2015/953 – Development Application for Extractive Industry, Lot 161 and Part Lot 52 DP 754445, Broken Bago State Forest Bago Road, Herons Creek 6 December 2016 ANNEXURE A-1-)

The proponent further stated: *Quarry royalties from quarry operations will be significantly greater than the economic return from plantation timber.*

However, FCNSW are bound by Ecologically Sustainable Management (ESFM) principles which includes the objective to "maintain or increase the full suite of forest values for present and future generations." Once a commercial hard rock quarry has completed its' life, the integrity of the landscape is changed forever and the hard rock resource permanently depleted.

It is clear FCNSW supports both these quarries because of the opportunity to capitalise on royalties. It is fair to state that as far as the rural residential communities of Balickera and Wauchope are concerned, both quarry projects are strongly opposed.

It is felt FCNSW fails to recognise that the State Forest Estate is valued and seen as an economic and environmental asset in each locality, underpinning and guiding Council regional planning. Changing the nature and fundamental purpose of a community's local Forest undermines social cohesion.

GEG has written to Government Ministers voicing our concerns. There has been no meaningful response from FCNSW or the responsible Ministers.

## **CONCLUSION**

Gloucester Environment Group submits that the conduct of Forestry Corporation NSW in relation to Wallaroo State Forest represents a systemic failure in public land governance. By facilitating large-scale commercial quarrying without transparent community consultation or proper strategic planning, FCNSW has overridden the environmental, social, and recreational values that communities attach to their local forest estates.

Wallaroo State Forest, by way of example, holds far greater long-term value to the community as an intact ecological, recreational, and cultural asset than as a depleted quarry void.

GEG calls on the Inquiry to recommend stronger oversight of FCNSW, mandatory public consultation for major land-use changes, and enactment of the legislative safeguards to prevent the quiet conversion of State Forests into private industrial zones without proper justification or public consent.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry.

Yours faithfully,  
Megan Benson,  
Committee Member, Gloucester Environment Group  
27<sup>th</sup> July 2025