



Cumberland Bird Observers Club

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**NSW Regional Forest Agreements
DPI Forestry
Department of Primary Industries
GPO Box 5477, SYDNEY 2001
e-mail: forests@industry.nsw.gov.au**

To whom it may concern:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Cumberland Bird Observers Club Inc (CBOC) Submission on proposed renewal of current NSW Regional Forest Agreements

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the mooted extension of three New South Wales (NSW) public native forest Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) - North-east (Upper and Lower), Southern, and Eden. The current RFAs finish in 2019, 2020, and 2021.

Cumberland Bird Observers Club Inc (CBOC) is a community organisation with about 500 members based in Sydney, with a keen interest in native birds and their conservation throughout NSW and beyond. State Forests in NSW contain large and important areas of habitat for a great variety of terrestrial wildlife (and some aquatic wildlife), and the way in which the forests are managed can have major effects on many species.

Background

We understand that each of the three existing New South Wales RFAs was preceded by Comprehensive Regional Assessments (CRAs) involving detailed ecological investigations. The CRA data provided the foundation for the RFAs, which have accredited logging under the Commonwealth *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (EPBC Act). This in effect means that Federal agencies have no say in the welfare of Federally-listed threatened species affected by logging.

The RFAs had a number of key aims, including the following:

1. To establish a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) network of reserves of forest ecosystems;
2. To Provide for ecologically sustainable management and use (ESFM) of forested areas;
3. To provide for the long-term stability of forests and forest industries.

Briefly, the RFAs were intended to facilitate multiple uses of public native forests, including: conservation (via the establishment of a CAR reserve network of forest ecosystems); timber extraction; and recreation. The concept of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM) was supposed to underpin timber harvesting practices, to ensure that timber harvesting did not result in long-term negative impacts on forest ecosystems.

Since CBOC's main interest in the RFAs relates to the protection of wildlife and its habitats against major impacts from forestry operations, our comments on the RFAs centre mostly on the degree to which they have achieved Key Aims 1 and 2 above.

Overall Conclusion

CBOC considers that the three current native forest RFAs have not resulted in forest management that can be regarded as Ecologically Sustainable (ESFM), due to evident impacts on habitats of hollow tree-dependent fauna (especially) and on water quality and soils. Also, the RFAs have failed to provide long-term stability for the forests or industries utilising them. We see no advantages to NSW in renewing these agreements. Details relevant to each Key Aim follow.

Progress towards establishment of a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) reserve network (Key Aim 1):

We understand that progress during the currency of the present RFAs has been limited. In the Upper and Lower North-east sub-Regions, only 42% and 48% respectively of the target forest ecosystems have so far been included in reserves. Moreover, there is documented evidence that ecosystems inadequately sampled in the North-east Region tend strongly (and unsurprisingly) to be those on better soils and more gentle topography, and thus in greater danger of being damaged or lost. Reserve size in that region, at least, has apparently been governed more by allowing access to timber than by objective ecological principles. We do not know details of progress in CAR reservation under the other two RFAs (Eden and Southern).

However, despite the evident shortcomings so far in achieving the CAR reserve targets in the north-east (at least), the RFA process as a whole no doubt played a positive role in contributing to the establishment of many secure, ecologically valuable forested National Parks, Nature Reserves and Flora Reserves in all three regions during the period 1999-2010, and maybe later. That in turn has probably improved the conservation status of several wildlife species in these regions. In NSW we fortunately do not have hollow-dependent species in the dire predicament of Leadbeaters Possum (Victoria) or Swift Parrot (Tasmania) which have become critically endangered recently, at least partly due to logging under RFAs.

Notwithstanding the achievements outlined earlier, Key Aim 1 in the NSW RFAs has only been partially achieved. It would be useful to know details of what still needs to be done to complete the whole CAR reserve system in each region. **We consider that completing (belatedly) the proposed CAR system should be given a high priority, regardless of whether the RFAs are renewed or not.** This should also be an important priority for NPWS reserve acquisition. The inclusion of "temporary" or "informal" reserves (what use are they?) in this process should not be allowed, since they do not rate by international standards as contributors to the national or State reserve systems.

Protection of forest-dependent fauna - a major aspect of Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (Key Aim 2):

One of the most severe environmental impacts of native forest logging and silvicultural operations is the destruction of older trees with hollows of various sizes. Larger hollows in eucalypts, which are vital roosting and nesting places for many species of Australian birds (e.g. parrots and cockatoos, large forest owls) and mammals (e.g. possums, gliders, phascogales, some bats), form only when trees are *at least* 120-150 years old. Note that the large owl species Masked, Powerful and Sooty are listed as vulnerable in NSW. Older, large-crowned trees also provide the bulk of food resources (such as leaves, nectar, seed and sap) for a wide range of forest wildlife, and nesting sites for diurnal raptors.

Repeated logging tends to inexorably remove nearly all the older, larger trees over wide areas. Tree regeneration, if successful, has little chance of growing to a mature age of 120-plus years, since younger trees about 60-80 years old are favoured for timber production. A basic aim of eucalypt silviculture is to convert previously unmanaged forest containing a mixture of tree sizes and ages (often with a high proportion of old, hollow, and other "defective" trees) to extensive well-stocked stands of fairly uniform, vigorous young trees with a narrow range of age and size. This is clearly incompatible with maintaining habitats over large areas for hollow tree- and mature tree-dependent fauna.

Based on research in the 1980s and 1990s, prescribed numbers of large, old "habitat" trees with hollows are supposed to be maintained in logged areas of old-growth forest, in the hope that residual populations of hollow-dependent fauna can persist until the logged areas recover. This strategy also requires several old but sound trees to be retained per hectare, for recruitment to the hollow tree class as the initial habitat trees eventually decay and fall. (We do not know how successful these prescriptions are in maintaining viable populations of hollow-dependent wildlife long-term, over wider areas of logged landscapes.)

Even assuming that such habitat tree prescriptions work, the task of applying them and other wildlife prescriptions correctly in the forest is complex, requiring consistent dedication by skilled forestry field staff to "get it right" and ensure logging contractors comply with the prescriptions.

There is documented evidence of numerous breaches of protective prescriptions for flora and fauna during the RFA period. Wildlife breaches have included: failure to mark-up exclusion zones and habitat features; failure to complete koala surveying; failure to observe outcrop exclusion zones; and failure to retain recruitment and habitat trees. During the earlier stages of the RFAs (1999-2006), documented non-compliance "incidents" per year varied from 144 to 59 (Upper NE); 176 to 33 (Lower NE); 182 to 4 (Southern); and 189 to 53 (Eden). The numbers of incidents in regions per year did not tend to rise or fall consistently with time except in the Lower NE, where there was a noticeable improvement from 2002 to 2006.

Similar audit figures for years after 2006 are not available. However, we believe that declining Forestry Corporation funding and field staff numbers in recent years, critically including the loss of skilled personnel with long experience, would have made it increasingly difficult to accurately survey for threatened species, identify and mark features to be protected during logging operations, and adequately supervise these operations. Under this scenario, numbers of non-compliance incidents would likely have remained high.

Considering this evidence, it is very likely that many hollow-dependent and other tree-dependent forest wildlife species have suffered population decline in production forests during the RFA period, as their necessary habitat has been much reduced.

In light of documented declines in this arboreal fauna, we believe the precautionary principle in Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM) should prevail, i.e. instead of continuing logging because species have not yet been driven to extinction, ceasing logging to ensure that species have the best chance of recovery *before* they become extinct is a much more logical approach to management.

Due to the factors above, **the RFAs have not met the standards of ESFM in regard to the conservation of hollow dependent or old-tree dependent fauna species.**

A number of Federally Threatened bird species that are not dependent on hollows occur in State Forests - Rufous Scrub-bird, Eastern Bristlebird, Black-breasted Button-quail and Regent Honeyeater. The first three require certain conditions of understorey, and could be impacted at times by forestry operations including burning. They should be considered carefully in planning.

Another significant, recently emerging threat to moist forests in eastern NSW is Bell-miner associated dieback (BMAD), which could ultimately affect as much as 2.5 million ha of forest. BMAD is a complicated cascade of ecological and abiotic interactions that ultimately serve to promote dieback and sometimes death in canopy eucalypts. Logging is thought to play a role in BMAD via disturbance to the forest which promotes dense understorey growth favoured by Bell-miners; these birds aggressively exclude small insectivorous birds from their territories. The role of logging in this potentially major forest health problem further indicates that present forest management cannot be considered "ecologically sustainable".

Protection of water quality and soils (Key Aim 2):

In 2009, of the 1.29 million hectares of native forest managed by the now Forestry Corporation (FC), some 53% was estimated to be available for harvest. Therefore, considerable areas (totalling about 600,000 ha) were off-limits to logging, much of it due to factors such as steep topography, erodible soil, rock outcrops, creek and river riparian zones, and various other environmental exclusion zones.

Steep areas excluded from logging, mainly due to erosion risk, no doubt carry many valuable habitat trees vital for arboreal fauna. Slope limits for logging have long been in operation, based on extensive studies of soil erosion risk. We would deplore any attempts to extend logging to areas steeper than 30 degrees, in an attempt to eke out wood supplies. That would be likely to increase erosion and also endanger further large areas of older trees that have survived free from disturbance for decades and provide vital refuges for wildlife.

Little-disturbed forested catchments with mature trees are the best sources for clean water supplies. The monetary value of increased water supply in unlogged forest over several decades has been estimated in multiple studies to be much greater than the value of the wood foregone. This may well be the case in NSW, especially if water supplies for growing north coastal urban areas are considered (which come from catchments that are often a mix of National Park and State Forest lands).

Logging and associated road-building have documented negative impacts on both water quantity and quality. These operations in State Forests inevitably lead to variable levels of turbid water runoff,

which is supposed to be minimised by earthworks and retention of buffer strips of intact vegetation along creeks (to intercept and filter muddy water).

Non-compliance "incidents" threatening soil stability or water quality are likely in scenarios where effective remedial works can often be hard to design and complex to install (with temptations of "corner cutting"). Audit results show numbers of non-compliance incidents involving "soil erosion and water" between 2001 and 2006 to be fairly high in most years in all three RFA regions - highs of about 200-500 incidents in earlier years, generally decreasing to the 100s or less by 2006 (suggesting an improvement in technique and/or better supervision).

We consider that timber harvesting operations under the RFAs have almost certainly had some deleterious effects on soils and water quality, though we do not know how serious this has been overall. It is thus likely that operations under the RFAs have not met the goal of fully delivering ESFM with respect to these soil and water values.

Other factors

Much has been written about how native forest harvesting is operating at a considerable financial loss to the Government (and people) of NSW. We understand that continued native forest logging operations are supported by regular intervention using public funds, rather than by certainty and sound management via the RFAs. Standing timber volumes have historically been over-estimated, with a lack of available timber forcing sawmill quotas to be cut or logging intensity to be increased over time, leading to shorter rotation lengths.

Given these trends, the RFAs do not appear to have been successful in providing for long-term stability of the native forests or of the timber industry utilising them (Key Aim 3). Tree stocks in State Forests are becoming increasingly biased towards young ages and small sizes, of decreasing ecological and economic value.

It was originally intended that the RFAs would end the social conflict over State Forest use, by genuinely attempting to "balance" multiple uses. The early reservation of significant areas of previously unprotected forest ecosystems under the RFAs gave the agreements ecological credibility. Now, however, opposition to native forest logging outside reserves is increasing in NSW due to the shortcomings of the regulatory regime protecting environmental values and plans to intensify logging in the recent Integrated Forestry Operations Approval (IFOA). Also, confidence has been eroded through excluding third parties from taking legal action over logging breaches. Lastly, thorough reviews of the RFAs have not occurred since 2009 (c 10-year review). The Government appears unwilling to carry out thorough 20-year reviews before automatically extending the RFAs. Both of these proposals severely undermine the credibility of the RFA process.

Conclusions

1. CBOC considers that the NSW RFAs have generally failed to achieve their main aims regarding implementation of *Ecologically Sustainable Forest Management (ESFM)* (particularly regarding conservation of arboreal fauna). **The RFAs should not be extended** beyond the initial 20 years - i.e. after 2019, 2020 and 2021.
2. If any new RFAs are initiated (we doubt the need or desirability of this) or existing RFAs are extended, the following undesirable features **should NOT be included**: (1) Federal EPBC Act

accreditation of logging, leading to lower protection standards for wildlife; (2) Removal of public oversight of logging operations by excluding "third party" legal action on breaches of protective measures; (3) Any intention or consideration of "raiding" any reserves or other protected areas in future to eke out timber supply.

3. To their credit, the existing RFAs achieved the establishment of valuable forest reserves, aiming towards a "CAR" forest reserve system; a process not completed in any region (to our knowledge), and which should be an urgent priority for the State regardless of whether or not RFAs continue. In completing the reserve system, it is most important that sufficient viable populations of every tree-dependent fauna species are included in the system to allow species to survive future shocks (e.g. climatic extremes).
4. Provided that a truly "CAR", secure forest reserve system (including existing permanent parks and reserves) is established first in these three regions, we do not advocate a complete withdrawal from native forest wood production in the regions. This should not be necessary AS LONG AS ESFM practices are consistently adhered to.
5. How such a necessarily "pared down" hardwood forest management/utilisation system could be organised and operate requires real expert advice. Timber production might for example concentrate only on species that yield high quality timber, and only in stands where silvicultural treatments 40-60 years ago have already produced extensive areas of younger trees (e.g. blackbutt and spotted gum).

There may be a role for eucalypt plantations in supplementing or ultimately replacing native forest timber. A plantation program on the north coast between about 1996 and 2006 resulted in 7,543 ha being planted on degraded farmland. How these plantations have developed since then is not known. Existing and future plantations of eucalypts like blackbutt (on already cleared land) could feasibly provide increasing timber volumes over time, including sawlogs.

Yours sincerely,

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