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VEAC: State-wide Assessment of Public Land.

The Wellsford Forest Conservation Alliance (WFCA) formed earlier last year to campaign for better protection for the Wellsford State Forest, home to 'The Big Trees' – the only nine remaining pre-European (400+ years old) Red Ironbarks on public land in Bendigo.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on past recommendations by VEAC and its predecessors as we are concerned that the present status of the Wellsford as a State Forest is now inappropriate.

The forest covers an area of 7,122 hectares and lies between and is adjoined to the Bendigo Regional Park to the west and the Mount Sugar Loaf Nature Conservation Reserve to the east with extensive links to the Bendigo and Axe Creeks and the Campaspe River.

The Wellsford State Forest was considered by the Environment Conservation Council (ECC) in its 2001 *Box-Ironbark Forests and Woodlands Investigation Final Report* acknowledging on p.231 that the Forest contained special biodiversity conservation values including habitat for and the presence of swift parrot, brush-tailed phascogale, Ausfield's wattle, Williamson's wattle, sand rush, cane spear grass, one large tree site and one fauna refuge.

The Final Report found the Wellsford State Forest to be of sufficient ecological importance to be included in the conservation reserve system, but due to pressure from timber millers centred at Rushworth it was classified State Forest, thus allowing saw log production. The Rushworth mill ceased production soon after 2001 and the production of sawlogs from this forest effectively ceased.

As the focus of the VEAC investigation is to assess the current reservation status of public land and to provide information and recommendations to assist in its management, we submit that the Wellsford State Forest is being poorly served by its present management which is primarily concerned with the production of wood, a use that has now ceased.

Due to the cessation of wood production the Wellsford State Forest has seen its primary purpose change from producer of wood to the conservation of natural values. It has become a significant biolink due to its position in the landscape, something that is especially important

because the existing Box-Ironbark forests are made up of fragmented remnants. In addition, the City of Greater Bendigo now sees the forest as a place to visit for passive recreation, something that is becoming very important in Victoria's increasingly urbanised existence.

The management of the conservation of flora and fauna and wood production are not compatible. The current management of the Wellsford State Forest for wood production requires substantial modification of the forest structure, damaging and degrading habitat in the process and resulting in loss of biodiversity. Maintaining present management practices aimed at wood production makes ecological sustainable management difficult, if not impossible, within the Wellsford Forest.

The management of the area of forest that makes up the Wellsford is confusing as it comes under three different management plans: the Bendigo Regional Park in the west adjoins the Wellsford State Forest that then adjoins the Mount Sugar Loaf Nature Conservation Reserve in the east. The forest would be better managed under one conservation management plan as a part of the conservation reserve system.

It should be noted that on Wednesday 28 May, 2014 the City of Greater Bendigo Council at its Ordinary Meeting considered a motion from its own Natural Environment Advisory Committee, "That the Natural Environment Advisory Committee supports the community campaign to have the Wellsford Forest included in the Greater Bendigo National Park and recommends that the Greater Bendigo City Council also supports the campaign." (P. 156 Agenda Ordinary Meeting of Council, 6.00 pm).

The recommendation was accepted and a letter to that effect was sent by Mayor Barry Lyons to the Minister for Environment and Climate Change, The Hon Ryan Smith, on 23 June, 2014.

The remnants of vegetation that exists within the cropping and grazing areas north of the divide, the Wellsford being just one, are the last refuge for many species that are just hanging on. The continued mismanagement of this forest will hasten the decline in species; it certainly will not enhance their prospect for survival.

WCFA therefore makes the following submission:

The Wellsford State Forest be placed into the conservation reserve system and managed as a whole along with the Bendigo Regional Park and the Mount Sugar Loaf Nature Conservation Reserve sections that make up the Wellsford area.

Managed bees and National and State Parks

We agree with the balance that the *Environment Conservation Council (ECC)* achieved concerning managed bees and the Box-ironbark forests within the *Box-Ironbark Forests & Woodlands Investigation Final Report June 2001*.

We agree with the recommendation given in the 2001 Report found on page 76, "Apiculture is recommended to be permitted in the national and state parks only at **currently licensed sites**," we also agree with Recommendation R39 p.77.

Bee sites come in two sizes one being permanent (1 mile radius before metric) the other temporary (0.5 mile radius before metric). The actual sizes of the sites remained the same with the advent of metric. Even when a forest became a national or state park and all sites became temporary in size the number of sites did not increase (ECC recommendation) to take up the gaps within the new state and national parks. This meant that the industry could be confident

that the number of hives would not increase when the status of a forest was changed to national or state park. Leaving the site numbers the same avoided overstocking.

Unfortunately the recommendation on p.76 of the Final Report (Apiculture is recommended to be permitted in the national and state parks only at **currently licensed sites**) has recently been changed to allow any number of bee sites. The only restriction being that they actually fit in without overlap. As all sites remain temporary in size the gaps created by the demise of the permanent bee sites can now be filled by temporary sites.

The Kamarooka and Whipstick sections of the Greater Bendigo National Park are case studies that can be used to see how the numbers of sites have increased across the State within the reserve system. As there has been a substantial increase in the number of bee sites in the Greater Bendigo National Park the number of hives that can now be run in these areas has had a corresponding increase. The changes to site and hive numbers go against the reasonable ecological expectations and concerns of the ECC recommendations.

This has been a damaging decision as it has led to an overstocking of conservation areas, from the point of view of bee numbers, with the resultant damage to the ecological values that come with national and state parks. This damaging decision has also been detrimental to the economic health of the beekeeping industry within these areas.

The increase in the number of bee sites goes against the recommendations of the ECC found on p.76 of the Final Report and will cause a great deal of damage to the ecological values found within parks in Victoria.

The consequences of this change also means that whenever the status of a particular area is changed to become either a national or state park, the number of bee sites, with the accompanying number of hives and resultant ecological damage, shall increase.

WFCA therefore makes the following submission:

Bee sites within National and State Parks across Victoria are returned to the original numbers and locations as recommended by the ECC in the *Box-Ironbark Forests and Woodlands Investigation Report final Report 2001*, p.76.

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