

7 Nov 2016

To: Victorian Environment Assessment Council

Re: Statewide Assessment of Public Land Draft Proposals Paper

The Strathbogie Sustainable Forest Group welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft proposals paper for the Statewide Assessment of Public Land.

Since 2013 our group has been campaigning for improved management of native forest on public land in the Strathbogie Ranges. We have had detailed and on-going engagement with the Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning (Hume Region and Head Office) and Vic Forests. In this, we have worked closely with a number of other local community groups.

Most of the 200,000+ ha of the Strathbogie Landscape Zone have been cleared for agriculture. The remaining forest areas are concentrated on public land. Large parts of these forests are degraded from 100+ years of logging, planned burning, fragmentation and more recently the stress of climate change. They are largely isolated from similar-elevation forest to the south and east and in previous decades lost significant areas to softwood plantation establishment (8000+ ha).

Nonetheless, these forests still contain significant natural values, deliver valuable ecosystem services and contribute to catchment health.

We are deeply concerned that these forests, under current management, will suffer on-going degradation and slowly lose their resilience in the face of climate change and ever more demands to deliver multiple values to the public and government.

The policy documents that regulate how Strathbogie forest values are managed are seriously out of date (North East Forest Management Plan and Appendices to the Code of Practice for Timber Harvesting) and do not provide adequate protection for a number of threatened and iconic species (Greater Glider, Powerful Owl, Koala, Long-nosed Bandicoot, Brush-tailed Phascogale)

The Strathbogie Forests have very high biodiversity values at a regional scale, however, only a very small proportion of the remaining forest estate is formally reserved and the remainder is at great risk of either being burnt, clear-felled, or both.

It is with this context that we make the following submissions to the Investigation.

Recommendation 6: Our group supports the proposal that all state forest be administered under one Act and be reserved under a single land tenure.

However, we note that current tenure and management arrangements for state forests in the Strathbogie Ranges underline the need for this recommendation to go further and reinstate the government as the over-arching 'owner' and 'manager' of its own lands.

We currently have the situation that a substantial proportion of our public forests and plantations in the Strathbogie Ranges have been leased to the private company, HVP, on a long-term basis, with that company treating our public land as if it is private. For the remaining state forest area, its management has been out-sourced to the private company, VicForests, with the government again limited in its capacity to have oversight on VicForests' operations. Consequently, until these major

issues of who 'owns' and 'manages' Victoria's state forests are clearly resolved, we do not see that the legislative change of itself – while worthy – will improve standards of forest management.

Recommendation 11: Our group strongly supports the recommendation to assess Central Victorian Uplands and adjacent bioregions for their potential to improve the representativeness of the protected area system. We are keenly aware that the last public-land use investigation conducted in the area which encompasses Strathbogie Ranges was in the mid-1980s and incorporated the Strathbogie Ranges as part of a much larger study area throughout the foothills and highlands of northeastern Victoria. Consequently, because of the scale of that investigation and because it preceded the establishment of formal, strategic processes for identifying suitable areas to protect for conservation as part of a comprehensive and representative reserve system, few areas were set aside for nature conservation in the Strathbogie Ranges.

Our group and other local groups therefore welcome the proposal to undertake an assessment of these bioregions for their potential to improve the reserve system. However, knowing the complexities of land-use and biodiversity values occurring at the relatively local scale of the Strathbogie Ranges, we recommend that this assessment needs to be done at a much finer scale than bioregion to ensure that a representative reserve system is established. This would align with previous recommendations made by VEAC in the Remnant Native Vegetation investigation.

Recommendation 13: Our group strongly supports the proposed review of values, uses and appropriate land category for State forest where commercial harvesting of sawlogs has ceased.

However, we suggest that this recommendation needs to be reworded to encompass: (a) all commercial harvesting for either sawlogs or pulp; and (b) not insist that all harvesting has ceased. Rather, state this clause as 'is no longer economic'. From our experience in the Strathbogie Ranges, commercial harvesting of sawlogs has 'almost' ceased and there are now only a few employees in the industry but it has not technically ceased.

Recommendation 15. We generally support the recommendation to undertake an inventory of state government owned public land to determine its natural values. However, we propose that this recommendation could go further and suggest that 'these land parcels be assessed for their potential to improve the representativeness of the protected area system'.

Additionally, we submit that this proposed approach be applied to leasehold land, either leased to private companies - such as HVP in the Strathbogie Ranges – or to public bodies, as with the Crown land now vested to the University of Melbourne at Dookie. We are aware that the HVP land and Dookie College land both contain significant natural areas and therefore thin kit sensible that these types of leased public lands also be considered.

Sincerely,

Bertram Lobert

on behalf of the Strathbogie Sustainable Forests Group Committee