

River Red gum round about – again.- Active management the only solution.

On the 29th of June this year TCA along with the NSW Forest Products Association held an information night in Mathoura (NSW Riverina) to highlight the challenges that lie ahead of our communities and members who operate in and rely on the red gum industries for their livelihoods.

The meeting was attended by over two hundred (200) concerned members of the river red gum industry and communities.

Last week I spent two days accompanying the NSW Natural Resources Commission on their tour of the region from Deniliquin to Swan Hill.

To its credit the NSW Rees Government has, at least to this stage, not bowed to the cynical Bob Carr promoted calls to reserve the river red gum forests and has appointed the NRC to conduct a study of “the river red gum and woodland forests within the NSW Riverina IBRA and the South West Cypress Forests in order to determine conservation outcomes and a sustainable future for the forests, the forestry industry and local communities in the region”.

Of interest during the NRC tour it was clear to all present that the river red gum forests are in a seriously threatened state and that this threat is a direct result of the drought with many of the largest trees dead or dying and many areas of unthinned regrowth also under serious drought stress.

By contrast while also clearly under stress, areas of thinned managed forest are in far better health.

The picture shows drought stressed river red gum forest in the Mathoura region of NSW. Note large dead tree centre of picture and stressed but alive unthinned regrowth



What was also clear to all present was that the only way to address this situation was to take measures to manage the moisture regimes within the forests. The options to do this are either watering by flooding or active management of the water demand of the forests by thinning.

Much discussion during the tour revolved around how in the absence of significant sustained rainfall, this could not be achieved without the active management of these forests.

This in turn lead to much discussion about “outcome determined” management models as opposed to “tenure based” management models.

Many in our timber communities have long drawn attention to how in many ways simply locking up an area of forest into a reserve does not protect and in fact often destroys the very conservation values that are sought to be protected, and that in fact in many cases the ongoing active management of these forests would do far more to conserve those conservation values while still supporting industry and communities.

The river red gum forests are a very clear and undeniable example of the validity of this position which is further under lined by the RAMSAR approved management regimes conducted by forests NSW in the NSW river red gum forests.

As renowned Victorian river red gum forest ecologist and forester Barrie Dexter put it during the tour, “these forests require an average of about 650mm of water per annum to survive, the natural rainfall in this region is about 450mm per annum, in the past in most years periodic flooding has made up the difference often enough for them to survive”. “In the absence of flooding or rainfall, thinning of the forests is the only other way to manage water demand and have any hope of ensuring their survival”.

One might add also, and the survival of the industry and communities who rely on these forests for their viability including many farmers who supplement their incomes during drought through the river red gum industries.

It was pleasing during the tour to note that at least the NRC clearly had an open mind to these issues. Of more concern is the item in the terms of reference of the commission which reads;

The commission should have regard to the following as they relate to the bioregion:

- Opportunities for ongoing and future employment within affected local communities;

In this context one cannot help but note the unproven claims made by Bob Carr in his recent foray into this debate in which he makes claims associated with tourism replacing lost employment in the Brigalow and South East Forest region to name just a couple of the regions devastated by National Park declaration of his government.

The facts are that this alleged bonanza of tourism development has not happened in either of these regions or for that matter in any of the other regions around Australia where this offset to the declaration of a reservation of previously productive forest has been used.

In the river red gum forests there is already a significant tourism sector which is highly unlikely to increase if they are relegated to reserve status to slowly die. TCA has asked the NRC to consider asking the proponents of any such claims around tourism to substantiate those claims when made.

River Red Gum forests – for all – forever!

Jim Adams

CEO TCA.