



## **Assessment of Riverina Red Gum Forests**

**Submission prepared for NSW Natural Resource Commission**

**28 August 2009**

### **Introduction**

Timber Communities Australia (TCA) fully supports the NSW Government in its intention to make a forest agreement with respect to the Red Gum and woodland forests within the NSW Riverina and the South-Western Cypress State Forests. This initiative though is long over due, and TCA offers this submission with specific reference to Red Gum forest management.

Regional Forest Agreements (RFA) are imperative to provide resource security to the forest industry and employment security for the many whose livelihood relies on a stable operating environment. It is the absence of an RFA, and the environmental performance accountability that underpins RFAs, that has been the cause of recent conflicts over the management of Riverina Red Gum forests. These land use conflicts have already come at the expense of many rural forest industry jobs, and will in the long term, cause irreversible change in Red Gum forest health and cover.

TCA is critically aware that meeting sustainability objectives in the absence of environmental, social or economic criteria cannot be achieved. TCA rejects the notion that economic sustainability can be achieved in the Riverina through Red Gum forest-based tourism alone. Continued forest management practices, and the revenue and employment created by Red Gum forest industries, is essential in meeting long-term sustainability objectives.

The Terms of Reference (Point #3) seeks recommendation for water management and flooding requirements. TCA fully appreciates the necessity of regular flooding and the positive impact this has on Red Gum forests. TCA wishes to make an explicit point though:

Logging practices, which include thinning Red Gum forests, has been an essential in managing health Red Gum forests, especially in drought periods and in the absence of regular natural flooding. Without the practices of highly skilled forest workers over the last 150 years in Red Gum forests, the representativeness of Red Gum in the Riverina would be greatly reduced, and many stands would be featured by dominance in tree mortality and a lack of vigour in regeneration.

## **Addressing the Terms of Reference**

TCA considers the requests made of the Natural Resource Commission (NRC) are overly ambitious for the timeframe provided. It is not a realistic expectation to conduct an assessment of environment and heritage values, economic and social values, ecological sustainable forest management, and timber resources in such a short period of time.

There must be a significant stakeholder participatory and community engagement aspect to bioregional assessments. TCA is concerned that the ambitious timeframe for the NRC assessments will neglect any meaningful stakeholder participation, and from this, transparency and due process.

TCA notes that all the requests made of the NRC cannot be achieved in parallel. Point #2 & #3 cannot be started until the regional forest assessment (point #1) is completed, and has undergone appropriate rigours in stakeholder participation.

TCA recommends the NSW Government consult with the Tasmanian Government in regards to stakeholder engagement processes that specifically relate to RFAs.

TCA is also concerned that Point #2 & #3 do not consider social outcomes in their objectives. TCA considers this a fundamental flaw and recommends urgent inclusion to ensure social criteria is incorporated into the objectives of Point #2 & #3.

## **Communities**

The NSW Forest Products Association estimates that more than 500 people are directly employed in the Riverina Red Gum industry. Indirectly, it is estimated that an extra 12,000 people are employed due to the presence of this industry.

Forest workers are tax payers and timber industries are essential for rural economies. If the Red Gum forestry and wood products industry collapses in the Riverina, due to the expansion of national parks, this will come at a significant financial and social loss to communities.

National park jobs are government jobs, funded by tax payers. This form of employment, with its impact on rural community socioeconomics, cannot be compared with timber industries, which perpetuates private enterprise and small business innovation.

## **Tourism**

Tourism, forest conservation and sustainable forest management involving logging can and does coexist. Without this coexistence, long-term Red Gum forest protection and ecological maintenance cannot be achieved.

It is a furphy to suggest that tourism will somehow increase, where a native forest-based timber industry has been shut down, and a greater expanse of national parks created. TCA was unable to locate any credible information or case studies that formed a link between the demise in a forest industry, the expansion of national park estate, and the increase of tourism.

The Brigalow and forests of South East NSW certainly showed no evidence of an increase in tourism, when the forest industry was decimated and the national park estate significantly increased.

State Forests NSW provide as many, if not more, recreational opportunities in all forest areas, including the Riverina Red Gum forests, than recreational opportunities provide by national parks.

Overseas experiences show the successful coexistence of the conservation, tourism and native forest logging industry. The Black Forest in Germany supports millions of visitors each year, is one of the most iconic natural forest systems in Europe, yet is logged on a sustainable basis.

### **Forest flooding and logging**

Red Gum forests in the Riverina have been logged for 150 years, and since regulation of the river system through locks and weirs, this on-going logging practice has been essential in maintaining the health and vigour of these forests.

Red Gum forests naturally regenerate after flood events, with dense stands of young saplings rapidly developing into forests. Growth of these regenerating stands depends on access to water and soil resources. In reality, some young trees survive where others succumb to competitive pressures. This is a natural process, but as Red Gum trees age, their capacity to withstand competitive pressures reduces.

Without the physical removal of individual Red Gum trees within a stand through thinning and selective logging practices, tree die-back and a general reduction in forest health perpetuates. This occurs long before trees mature to the age where hollow-bearing habitat can form.

Thinning and logging practices are even more essential to Red Gum forest health as drought years and the regulation of the river system has resulted in far less flooding than historically occurred. With less water available, the resilience of these forests, and the capacity of individual trees to withstand competitive pressures is greatly reduced.

### **Active management approach**

As fire and fuel load management is fundamentally neglected by conservation reserve managers, a change of Red Gum land use from production to reservation will certainly deliver perverse environmental outcomes, though exposing vast areas to catastrophic bushfire events.

Reservation of Red Gum forests through national parks is threatening the health and very existence of Red Gum forests throughout the Riverina. The national park strategic approach fails to apply active management and regeneration practices, crucial to the long-term health of these forests.

Managing for fire in Red Gum forests is inextricably linked to biodiversity conservation, yet absent from the national park management approach. TCA views this as a fundamental flaw in the conservation reserve system. Major conflagrations result in reductions in the populations of many native species. They are killed either during bushfires or as a result of starvation or predation.

Historically Red Gum forests have largely avoided catastrophic fire events. This is surely attributable to the way in which Red Gum forests have been managed. Various

forms of fuel load reduction actions, including silvicultural thinning and logging is central to bushfire proofing Red Gum forests.

### **Forests NSW commitment to conservation**

Forests NSW through their sustainable operations in the Riverina have a demonstrated commitment to conservation objectives. The validity of this position is underlined by the RAMSAR approved management regimes conducted by Forests NSW in Riverina Red Gum forests. It was Forests NSW that initiated this process.

### **Conclusion**

TCA appreciates the opportunity to provide comment to the Terms of Reference to the assessment of Riverina Red Gum forests.

Whilst TCA supports regional forest assessment of Riverina Red Gum forests, TCA is concerned that the legitimacy and sustainability of Red Gum logging practices will be overshadowed by extreme green anti-native forest logging rhetoric.

Rural employment opportunities and the socioeconomic status of Riverina towns will be at threat in the situation where the Red Gum forest industry is reduced or shut down, as a result of production forest land tenure transferral to national parks.

Sustainable forest management, in the form of silviculture applications, such as selective logging and strategic thinning, is an essential practice in protecting the health and longevity of Red Gum forests.

TCA respectfully suggests the commission note that the development of an enhanced tourism industry will not in any way compensate for, or substantially mitigate, the social impacts attributable to reductions in Red Gum forest industry capacity.

TCA also recommends that any proposal to reserve parts of the currently production Red Gum forest estate in the Riverina, should require parties making such assertions to validate and substantiate those claims, as indeed should the commission where it decides to recommend any such action.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal tail extending to the right.

Jim Adams  
Chief Executive Officer  
Timber Communities Australia