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Sustainability of Current and Future Forestry Operations in NSW

Forest Ecology Alliance Submission – 13 October 2024

To: Independent Forestry Panel:

Peter Duncan AM (Chair), Professor Mary O’Kane AC, and the Hon. Mick Veitch.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute our submission for your consideration.

The Forest Ecology Alliance (FEA) is a volunteer, self-funded environmental organisation based on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales. Our members include ecologists, botanists, citizen scientists, and concerned residents dedicated to conserving native forests, waterways, and biodiversity on Gumbaynggirr homelands. We engage in field studies, coordinate citizen science ecological surveys, compile data, produce reports, and conduct community events to raise awareness about our forests. FEA operates as a non-exclusive alliance and are not affiliated with any political party. We frequently collaborate with other local environmental organisations.

We have serious concerns about the capacity of the Forestry Corporation of NSW (FCNSW) to act as responsible stewards of NSW State Forests. The corporation's primary focus is the industrial extraction of timber to meet contract quotas. While successive governments have placed greater emphasis on the economic benefits of state forests, there appears to be a rising public perception that the financial value of logged trees is far surpassed by the inherent social and environmental benefits of preserving standing forests. It is high time that government policy reflects the expressed wishes of many NSW citizens by ending native forest logging.

On the Mid North Coast, the sight of logging trucks daily traversing our highways and winding roads, laden with ancient growth from public and private forests, causes many residents ongoing concern. The increase in logging activities has led to smaller and smaller trees being harvested for woodchips, biomass, and pallets.

Escalated impact on our waterways and soil stability is undeniable. Primary producers in our area are aware of the flow on effect harm caused by logging throughout the landscape.

Our members spend countless hours in the forests, yet we see little evidence that FCNSW employees conduct adequate ecological surveys or prioritise forest health, despite claims that “...before we harvest a single tree, professional ecologists survey the wildlife, birdlife and vegetation in the area to identify threatened species and ensure the forest retains the conditions they need to thrive”

<https://www.forestrycorporation.com.au/sustainability/forest-research>

1. Sustainability of Current and Future Forestry Operations in NSW

To ensure the sustainability of forestry operations, we advocate for an immediate cessation of all current logging activities in NSW. The government policies governing FCNSW's harvest operations have repeatedly failed to provide adequate public accountability and transparency. This has entrenched unsustainable practices that continue to threaten our ecosystems.

Logging healthy, diverse native forests and converting them into plantations is inherently unsustainable. Canopy clearance not only exposes forests to invasive species but also leads to serious issues such as Bell Miner Associated Dieback (BMAD), which has increasingly affected our local forests. The need for urgent action is clear, particularly as aerial mapping has revealed growing infestations in our State Forests.

Millions of taxpayer dollars have been spent on parliamentary inquiries, (such as the 2021 “Long-Term Sustainability and Future of the Timber and Forest Products Industry”), conferences, studies, research, and to supplement the unprofitable FCNSW. Yet, the most obvious cause of species declines and environmental degradation, logging of the public forest system, continues.

2. Environmental and cultural values of forests, including threatened species and Aboriginal cultural heritage values

Forests support complex ecosystems, provide vital habitat for threatened species and provide recreational retreats to enhance well-being.

FEA hear the voices of our Gumbaynggirr friends and community members, who have generously shared their cultural knowledge and deep connections to the landscape. The rapid environmental changes in our region are causing significant distress among Gumbaynggirr people, who express that all elements of their landscape - from the smallest insect to the tallest mountain - hold equal significance and must be treated with respect. We have much to learn about profound connection to Country and a true sense of presence when visiting forests.

Historically, the voices of the Gumbaynggirr were not heeded when early settlers began the extraction of magnificent cedars and other native giants like rainforest species, Hoop Pine, Ironbark, Brushbox, Grey Gum, and Tallowwood. The systematic removal of these mature trees, which provide essential habitats, has severely impacted our forests. Now, the cumulative impact of habitat loss, such as hollow-bearing trees and dense understorey vegetation, has led to the rapidly decline of wildlife populations.

In the relatively short time that our citizen scientists have been monitoring threatened species in our area we have noted decreased numbers of key species such as Southern Pink Underwing Moth, Grey-headed Flying Fox, Koala, Southern Greater Glider and Glossy-black Cockatoo.

FEA have been particularly focussed on the decline of two Critically Endangered flora species, Scrub Turpentine and Native Guava. Both these once common bird-feeding species are highly susceptible to the invasive fungi Myrtle Rust. We find these now precious species struggling to survive in State Forests such as Little Newry and Newry State Forest, yet logging is still scheduled to continue.

3. Demand for timber products, particularly as relates to NSW housing, construction, mining, transport and retail

In 2020/2021 native hardwood logs comprised just 6% of NSW's log production and a similar proportion of sawn timber. Only a very small amount of timber used for housing comes from hardwood plantations, as most timber for housing frames and general building comes from softwood pine plantations.

The global supply of native hardwoods is rapidly disappearing. Industrialised logging in public native forests is no longer an option if we are to conserve life-giving ecosystems. Over 60% of a felled tree is either burnt or left on site.

There are already alternatives to native forest timber, such as composite structural timber and laminated flooring.

Most of the biomass taken from native forests is turned into low quality products, not houses. Government data (ABARES 2021) shows that 90% of it goes to make paper or woodchips. Only 4% percent of the biomass taken from native forests ends up as Sawn Timber. (Keith et al. 2014a).

We need sound leadership regarding timber demand and usage. The time has come for strong restrictions.

4. Future of Plantations and Private Native Forestry

The current NSW Private Native Forestry Code of Practice (PNF) specifies protection prescriptions for threatened species, but then allows landholders to self-monitor. As so few private properties have been ecologically assessed, existing species have often not been recorded on databases such as NSW BioNet. Currently across the Mid North Coast region we are watching landholders clear vital habitat and old growth, fragmenting vital breeding and feeding corridors.

When EPA are called to investigate habitat destruction breaches on both private and public land it is patently clear that they are under resourced, understaffed and incapable of instigating necessary legal action.

As a result, habitat and biodiversity losses across our region have been escalating in recent years, at the very time that both 2021 State of The Environment Reports at National and State level have clearly acknowledged that the environment is in dire need of support and that species decline is accelerating.

5. Role of State Forests

We are primarily concerned with the escalating compromised viability of the promised Great Koala National Park. We have no consistent evidence that, “As the park is established, the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) will treat all forestry operations within the Great Koala National Park assessment area as high risk. This means the EPA closely monitors all operations for compliance and will take appropriate regulatory action if non-compliances are identified” (Email reply to FEA correspondence received on 3 September, 2024 from Trish Harrup, Executive Director Conservation and Aboriginal Partnerships National Parks and Wildlife Service after our email was referred to her office by Minister for Climate Change, Minister for Energy, Minister for the Environment and Minister for Heritage).

We look on in horror as our taxpayer dollars are used to destroy koala habitat in the promised Great Koala National Park area. Ecosystems that support many threatened species are being destroyed on our watch. There is overwhelming evidence that the logging our area is exacerbating climate change, by releasing huge amounts of carbon from the biomass that is wasted and burnt, as well as making the forests far more flammable for up to seven decades after logging. It is damaging our waterways, and negatively affecting water security.

Community consultation, including indigenous input is vital, and is currently not conducted in any meaningful way, with community opinion either being ignored or used as a tick box exercise for government or corporations to essentially greenwash their activities.

Further, the originally proposed boundaries of the Park extended well south of Nambucca Heads, north of Coffs Harbour and much further west. To exclude some of these key areas such would significantly reduce the forests available to koalas and not include the originally targeted 20% (or approximately 4,500) of wild koalas in NSW.

6. Carbon and Biodiversity Opportunities

There must be realistic reassessment of the now clearly established unworkable, rorted offset scheme.

Biodiversity is EVERYTHING. The sooner we prioritise biodiversity protection the better.

FEA members wish we had more time to devote to this submission, but we are currently desperately trying to survey more than thirty forests in our region scheduled for logging. We hope that the panel consult with local groups such as ours to begin to understand what we are facing on ground.