

Public submission

VICTORIA JACK

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Wilderness Society Submission on the sustainability of current and future forestry operations in NSW

For more information about this submission, please contact: Dr Victoria Jack, NSW Campaigns Manager,



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About the Wilderness Society

The Wilderness Society is an independent, community-based, not-for-profit environmental advocacy organisation. Our vision is to transform Australia into a society that protects, respects and connects with the natural world that sustains us. The Wilderness Society has a long-standing organisational interest in the conservation of coastlines and oceans. As an organisation, we are powered by more than 150,000 supporters from all walks of life who share our commitment to giving nature a voice to support the life that supports us all.

Overview

This submission is made to the Independent Forestry Panel's review into the sustainability of current and future forestry operations in NSW, ahead of the NSW government developing its Forestry Industry Action Plan.

The review comes as pressure builds to protect high conservation value forests in NSW from native forest logging, following recent industry transitions in Victoria and Western Australia. The Wilderness Society supports a transition to a plantation-based industry as the viable option for a sustainable forestry industry in NSW.

Native forest logging in NSW is occurring in high conservation value forests that contain some of the best expressions of Australia's unique contribution to the Earth's biodiversity. These forests are essential to the survival of threatened species, such as the koala and greater glider; they hold First Nations cultural heritage; they clean our water and soil; and they mitigate climate change by sequestering and storing carbon. These environmental and cultural values are being degraded by native forest logging, led by a state-owned logging agency—Forestry Corporation of NSW—that routinely engages in unlawful or illegal logging practices. All of this is costing NSW taxpayers millions of dollars per year in subsidies.

After the unprecedented destruction of the Black Summer Bushfires, the imperative to protect high conservation value forests in NSW from native forest logging is even more

urgent. The NSW Labor government—indeed the NSW parliament—should take the opportunity to lock in this transition now, to ensure it is too advanced to be rolled back by the time the Coalition returns to power (potentially as early as 2027). Forestry workers and families—who continue to be misled about the longevity of NSW’s native logging industry—should be properly supported through this inevitable change. As the transition is implemented, an immediate priority must be a cessation of logging in the following areas: within the proposed footprint of the Great Koala National Park, areas with Gondwanan rainforest values or adjacent to Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area, and areas of habitat critical for the survival of threatened species.

Focus areas

- **Sustainability of current and future forestry operations in NSW**

Native forest logging in NSW is not sustainable, ecologically or financially.

The science is clear: native forest logging in NSW has a range of impacts—as outlined below—that compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This, by definition,¹ means it is not sustainable (Brundtland, 1987). Native forest logging in NSW also falls short when measured against the United Nations Forest Instrument’s definition of sustainable forest management, which aims to “maintain and *enhance* the economic, social and environmental values of all types of forests, for the benefit of present and future generations” (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations, 2020, para 1). Logging does not enhance NSW native forests but degrades them (Ward et al, 2024). The unprecedented devastation of the Black Summer Bushfires, from which forests are still recovering, has made the situation more urgent and serious.

Native forest logging is driving iconic Australian species, such as the koala and greater glider, towards extinction in NSW. Logging of native vegetation for timber or woodchip occurs in areas of high conservation value for forest-dependent threatened species and destroys their habitat (Ward et al, 2024). Ongoing logging in NSW affects the habitat of at least 150 species considered at risk of extinction, due mostly to historical deforestation and degradation. Thirteen of these species are listed as critically endangered, which means there is a 20 per cent probability of extinction within 10 years—unless the NSW government takes urgent action to protect their habitat (Ward et al, 2024).

Native forest logging is causing damage to forest ecosystems. The activities associated with forestry (both native forest logging and plantation forestry)—which, in addition to vegetation removal, include roading, modification of water courses and disruption of soil structure—cause a range of adverse environmental impacts. In native forests, beyond habitat destruction these impacts include reduced water quality, landscape scale habitat fragmentation, introduction of invasive species, and reduced capacity for carbon sequestration and storage.

¹ The United Nations definition of sustainability is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

Native forest logging is making forests more vulnerable to bushfire and more likely to burn out of control. When forests are logged and then regenerate, they are more flammable and contribute significantly to fire risk (Lindenmayer & Zylstra, 2024). Logged forests burn at higher severity than intact forests (Lindenmayer et al 2022). This amplifies the effects of climate change, which is making bushfires worse and more frequent.

Many of the impacts described above are evidence that existing regulation of native forest logging in NSW is failing to ensure that logging operations are sustainable. NSW Forestry Corporation is a rogue actor that routinely flouts environmental regulations. In July 2024, the NSW Land and Environment Court found that NSW Forestry Corporation has “a pattern of environmental offending, has not provided any compelling evidence of measures taken by it to prevent its reoffending, and does not accept the true extent of harm that it has caused by its reoffending”. The agency’s extensive history of illegally damaging the environment over many years includes, for example, felling hollow-bearing trees, felling trees in protected rainforest areas and felling trees in areas subject to protections following the Black Summer Bushfires. This culture of criminality at NSW Forestry Corporation is driven by an inability to satisfy timber supply contracts without logging threatened species habitat and thereby breaching regulations. Enforcement is not sufficient to fix this broken model and make logging of NSW native forests sustainable. At the federal level, the Regional Forest Agreements mean that logging in NSW is exempt from being assessed and approved under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

Native forest logging is financially unsustainable as it relies on taxpayer-funded government subsidies to continue operating. Forestry Corporation has a long history of poor financial returns. In the past three years its native forest logging division lost \$44 million, according to its annual reports. This situation is not expected to improve, with drivers of poor financial performance intensifying (Frontier Economics, 2023).

The Wilderness Society supports a transition to plantations as the viable option for a sustainable forestry industry in NSW. Forestry workers and families—who continue to be misled about the longevity of NSW’s native logging industry—should be properly supported through this inevitable change. As the transition is implemented, an immediate priority must be a cessation of logging in the following areas: within the proposed footprint of the Great Koala National Park, areas with Gondwanan rainforest values or adjacent to the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area, and areas of habitat critical for the survival of threatened species.

- **Environmental and cultural values of forests, including threatened species and Aboriginal cultural heritage values**

Communities have worked tirelessly over decades to secure the protection of the forests of the NSW south and north coasts, and of the Great Dividing Range and Australian Alps. These forests are henceforth referred to as the “forests of the NSW coast and ranges”. In some cases communities (including local groups, scientists and environmental organisations), with support from governments, have been successful in securing protections. However, other large areas of forest with high conservation value or even

outstanding universal value remain available for logging. These forests hold a wide variety of environmental and cultural values. Many of these values—including biodiversity, cultural heritage and carbon storage—are threatened, compromised and destroyed by the degradation caused by native forest logging.

The forests of the NSW coast and ranges contain some of the best expressions of Australia's unique contribution to the Earth's biodiversity. The listing of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area are only a limited representation of the globally important values that are present throughout the region's forests. There have been legitimate and well developed proposals for wider representation of the region's forests (including forests currently subject to native forest logging) within the World Heritage system. This includes a proposed expansion of the Gondwana listing and several considerations of additional separate nominations for the region's eucalypt values.

The forests of the NSW coast and ranges are recognised as globally important for a variety of values. These include an extraordinary depth of evolutionary history and having among the greatest levels of diversity and species richness for a number of species groups. This includes Gondwanan rainforest species (Kooyman et al, 2013), flowering plants (Mishler et al, 2014; Thornhill et al, 2016), marsupials (Tomlinson et al, 2023), early global forms of songbirds (Mitchell et al, 2021) and ancient Australian frog species (Slatyer et al, 2007). This means that for a distinct part of the Earth's evolutionary history, these are among the most important locations on the planet for their conservation. The recognition of part of the region as one of the world's "biodiversity hotspots" only goes part of the way to show how globally important these forests really are (Williams et al, 2011).

The complexity, history, diversity and richness of the forests along the NSW coast and ranges are a testament to the ability of the region's biodiversity to endure climatic shifts on a geological time-scale. Recent modelling by CSIRO has also indicated that this region (presumably because of the diversity of landscape features and connectivity of vegetation) is likely to be among the most important climate refuges for Australian biodiversity into the future (Harwood et al, 2022). This reinforces the need to reduce and remove threats that can be controlled (such as native forest logging), and maximise nature conservation in this area.

In addition to their importance for the conservation of evolutionary history and biodiversity, these forests are complex ecosystems that provide a wide and dynamic array of important benefits and services. This includes supporting biodiversity and providing habitat for wildlife, including threatened species. It also includes water quality and flow regulation, recreation, supporting ecosystem health and storing carbon. The region has been identified as one of the top locations on the planet for conservation at the intersection of biodiversity, carbon and water (Jung et al, 2021); as well as one of the key locations for the conservation of unrecoverable carbon (Goldstein et al, 2020).

Further to these environmental values, native forests hold significant cultural heritage—especially for First Nations peoples. Forests are Country and, as such, Traditional Custodians have a strong and ongoing spiritual connection to these lands and the waters

within. Forests are places of story and responsibility for custodianship. Forests hold cultural sites such as scar trees, camp sites, artefact scatters, hammer stones, stone arrangements, old walking tracks, rock art, birthing sites and creation story places. They are places of cultural practice and activation, such as collecting bush tucker and medicine, men's and women's activities, ceremony, tracking and hunting, use of cultural fire, dance and ceremony, language use and knowledge sharing (Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation, 2022). For Gumbaynggirr Traditional Custodian Micklo Jarrett, for example, the cultural heritage value of Gumbaynggirr forests is linked to the presence of sacred sites and their role in providing habitat for totem species:

There are sacred places for totems where ceremonies took place, including in the forests that are now being logged. We call them *miirlarl* (sacred place). Ceremonies are held there to ensure the continuation of the species that were associated with this special *miirlarl*.²

Given environmental values are the individual and shared community or societal beliefs about the significance of the state of the natural environment, public opinion on native forest logging and forest protection are indicative of their values. Various surveys have found high levels of concern in the community about native forest logging. In NSW, 70 per cent of people support an end to native forest logging. There is majority support for ending native forest logging on public land across Australia from all major voting intentions, with the highest level of support among Labor voters (79 per cent) (Australia Institute, 2024).

Despite strong public support for the government to protect high conservation value forests in NSW, these forests continue to be logged in part because NSW laws explicitly minimise opportunities for communities to have a fair say in environmental decisions. For example, privative clauses in forestry legislation seek to prevent community members from challenging forestry decisions after successful community-led campaigns to protect forests in the past. The public has a right to participate effectively in environmental decision-making, as established in the United Nations Rio Declaration (to which Australia is a signatory), yet a lack of transparency and accountability in relation to native forest logging in NSW has eroded public trust in the industry and the government's capacity to regulate it. This has been borne out in submissions made by members of the public on the rare occasion that we are consulted about forestry matters in NSW.³ In addition to protecting high conservation value forests from native forest logging, the NSW government should move to rectify laws and policies that deny the public a fair say in environmental decision-making.

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

The dominant outputs of the native forest logging industry are low-value products (Lindenmayer & Taylor, 2022). In NSW, this includes woodchips for export (Pentarch, no

² Personal communication, Micklo Jarrett, 12 October 2024.

³ For example, see:

<https://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/-/media/epa/corporate-site/resources/forestagreements/review-submissions-2018/name-withheld-22.pdf>

date), pallets and firewood (Forestry Corporation of NSW, 2023). In contrast, almost 90 per cent of sawn timber comes from plantations (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry, 2023). A plantation-based industry is capable of meeting the demand for timber, as has long been the case in South Australia and New Zealand (Lindenmayer & Taylor, 2022). Plantations supply high quality and composite timber products. It's also possible for many hardwood products to be substituted with alternative materials. For example, pallets can be obtained from other sources such as plantation hardwoods, softwoods or recycled plastics.

- **The future of softwood and hardwood plantations and the continuation of Private Native Forestry in helping meet timber supply needs**

The Wilderness Society supports a transition to sustainable plantations, the management and logging of which are credibly certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. Hardwood and softwood plantations already provide almost 90 per cent of Australia's log production.

Native forests are increasingly prone to wildfires and this has negatively affected available timber for harvesting. Plantations provide a faster crop rotation, increasing the likelihood of producing a viable crop, and can be more resistant to major wildfires than long rotation native wood production forests (Cary et al, 2021).

The plantation sector should be expanded but this must occur on previously degraded lands rather than by clearing native vegetation. Establishment of plantations must not result in the destruction of natural ecosystems. Conversion of even limited areas of native forest to plantations, as is currently occurring in parts of NSW (Cadman et al, 2024), must be prevented. Plantations must be appropriately located and limit impacts on water catchments. There should be investment in plantation processing technology to support the capacity for production of high quality products.

- **The role of State Forests in maximising the delivery of a range of environmental, economic and social outcomes and options for diverse management, including Aboriginal forest management models**

The existing approach to managing state forests in NSW is failing—as demonstrated in other sections of this submission—to maximise the environmental, social and economic opportunities that public native forests present. Critical habitat is being destroyed, cultural heritage degraded, carbon sinks removed, ecosystem services compromised—and this is costing NSW taxpayers millions of dollars per year in subsidies.

The management of NSW native forests should be based on a model designed to conserve natural and cultural values. Such an approach will provide the maximum collective benefits to the community by leveraging the capacity of forests to conserve biodiversity and cultural heritage, store carbon, provide ecosystem services, and deliver recreation and tourism opportunities. This transition should be undertaken with urgency—not only because there is a compelling environmental need to do so, but also to prevent other industries making speculative resource grabs that could delay or

complicate the transition. Such bids—for example, a recent mining licence application within the proposed boundary of the Great Koala National Park—could leave the NSW government (and therefore NSW taxpayers) open to claims for compensation.

Only 9.6 per cent of NSW is protected in conservation areas (NSW Environment Protection Agency, 2021). Scientists agree that we must protect at least 30 per cent of lands, fresh waters and oceans by 2030 to have any chance of stemming the dual crises of biodiversity loss and climate change facing our planet (Dinerstein et al, 2019; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019). As part of the Global Biodiversity Framework’s 30x30 initiative, the federal government has set a national target to protect and conserve 30 per cent of its landmass and marine areas by 2030. The Wilderness Society welcomes the NSW government’s commitment to work collaboratively with the federal government to meet that objective. The addition of public native forests currently classified as state forests to the protected area estate would be a substantial contribution.

The future management of state forests in NSW should be informed by the rights and aspirations of the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters of these forests. First Nations access to Country and involvement in land management enable cultural practice and are a key pathway to cultural heritage protection (Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation, 2022). Accordingly, there must be an increase in the extent of First Nations-owned and managed land, along with greater First Nations participation in decision-making. It should be noted that the one-month online consultation period for this review, which did not proactively identify and reach out to relevant stakeholders, is not sufficient to ensure the views of Traditional Custodians in regard to the sustainability of current and future forestry operations in NSW are adequately understood.

- **Opportunities to realise carbon and biodiversity benefits and support carbon and biodiversity markets, and mitigate and adapt to climate change risks, including the greenhouse gas emission impacts of different uses of forests and assessment of climate change risks to forests.**

It is well established that forests have an important role to play in sequestering and storing atmospheric carbon—the primary driver of climate change. Intact native forests are critical to this role in that they store significantly more carbon than logged and regenerated native forests (Keith et al, 2014). In fact, all climate action pathways limiting warming to 1.5c rely on intact forests (Oosterzee & Preece, 2023). Biodiversity plays a crucial role in maintaining healthy ecosystems, and healthy ecosystems are associated with lower rates of carbon emissions (Dooley, 2024). As such, a well-protected forest estate in NSW has a major role to play in addressing the threats to our collective future. The best way to maintain the biodiversity values of native forests in NSW—and thereby leverage their capacity to help meet climate goals—is to stop them being logged (Ward et al, 2024) and to secure their long-term protection.

In addition to protecting intact forests, another way to reduce and sequester emissions is through land carbon and strategic restoration of landscapes. Land carbon initiatives currently present both opportunities and risks for the protection and restoration of

forests. To have merit, it is essential that land carbon initiatives meet key integrity tests, including but not limited to genuine additionality, the use of accurate methodologies and transparency of reporting. This is not a permanent way of reducing atmospheric carbon in the long term, and therefore cannot offset emissions of carbon from the burning of fossil fuels (Climate Council, 2016). Accordingly, it must not be made possible for the fossil fuel industry to continue mining fossil fuels while assuming these emissions are being offset by increasing land carbon.

Native forests face a multitude of threats as a result of climate change. Increased intensity and frequency of wildfires has already had profound effects on forest wildlife and on timber resources. Maintenance and restoration of native forest ecosystems and connections between forest ecosystems will be vital in securing their long term ability to adapt to these stressors.

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