

Submission for the Inquiry into National Parks, Conservation Reserves and Marine Protection Areas

Executive summary

Australian Forest Growers (AFG) is the national association representing and promoting private forestry in Australia. Formed in 1969 as the Australian Forestry Development Institute it is the oldest forestry representative body in Australia. AFG has around 1200 members in 23 regional branches in key forest growing regions nationally.

Australian Forest Growers (AFG) directs the following comments specifically to national parks and conservation reserves which support native forest communities including, tall wet forests, dry eucalypt forests and woodlands. AFG has grave concerns relating to the environmental, social and economic outcomes delivered by the present terrestrial national park and conservation reserve system in Australia. We would like to acknowledge however the many challenges relating to public conservation in Australia, which are both very intricate and require considerable resources. Unfortunately though, it is our belief that management of forested national parks and conservation areas presently involves gross management negligence that is delivering poor biological conservation outcomes, is exposing rural communities to disastrous wildfires, as well as harbouring unmanaged noxious plant and feral animal populations.

AFG recommendations

- Impose fire control and mitigation obligations and responsibilities underpinned by sound policy.
- Allow active management to reinvigorate ecological health, such as controlled disturbance (i.e. mechanical thinning), regeneration and monitoring.
- Significantly intensify noxious weed and pest animal control programs.
- Prevent any further transformation of public land into national parks or conservation reserves and reconsider increasing the application of multiple-use forest structures.

Warwick Ragg, Chief Executive

The following table summarises AFG concerns, as well as exploring potential options for change;

<i>Sustainability</i>	<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Issue</i>	<i>Way forward...</i>
Environmental	Management	<i>Passive</i> reserve management not delivering adequate forest health and biodiversity outcomes, featured by poor monitoring and evaluation practices.	Incorporate forest intervention practices in mosaics to reinvigorate ecological health, such as controlled disturbance, regeneration and monitoring.
Environmental	Management	Inadequate plant weed and pest animal control severely compromises overall ecological value of public reserves.	Increase resources towards noxious weed and pest animal control programs, including forest intervention techniques.
Environmental	Fire	Many forested reserves in their present condition are threatened by un-natural and ecologically devastating wildfires.	Embody fire mitigation obligations and responsibilities underpinned by sound policy, like State Forests and private landholder practice.
Economic	Management	The <i>real</i> cost of adequate biodiversity conservation works is substantially greater than current Government investment.	Stop any further transformation of public land into reserves and consider multiple-use options for public reserves.
Economic	Fire	Damage to rural property and infrastructure adjacent to public reserves, due to uncontrolled and uncontrollable fire, that started or intensified within reserves.	Embody fire mitigation obligations and responsibilities underpinned by sound policy, like State Forests and private landholder practice.
Social	Employment	Employment opportunities are focused within national parks, featured by dwindling forestry jobs and declining rural livelihood.	Stop any further transformation of public land into reserves and consider multiple-use options for public reserves.
Social	Fire	Loss of life and livelihood, and other negative impacts to rural communities, due to wildfires starting and intensifying within reserves.	Embody fire mitigation obligations and responsibilities underpinned by sound policy, like State Forests and private landholder practice.

Management obligations

Issues relating to biodiversity conservation, noxious weed and pest animal control and fire management in forested national parks and conservation reserves are of critical concern to AFG and many others. National park management in Australia is based on a “non-intervention” passive approach to native forest management which is delivering arguably poor biodiversity conservation outcomes and providing harbour for destructive wildfires. Non-intervention can be demonstrated by declining forest health in some public reserves¹, as well as the horrendous impact to life and property caused by the recent wildfire events in Southern Australia. The biological value of many national parks is also severely compromised by the presence and abundance of noxious weeds and pest animals, also being a function of “non-intervention”.

Adequate management for biodiversity conservation and fire in terrestrial national parks and conservation reserves clearly requires vastly more resources than current Government investment. State Forests on the other hand are far more accountable in management practice, and are underpinned by heavily regulated legislation and in many cases, internationally accredited certification. Ironically, its commercial, sustainable timber production that funds the regeneration and reinvigoration of forests, as well as putting in place adequate measures to mitigate and reduce frequency and intensity of fire. Sadly, the “preserve only approach” to conservation is not delivering long-term biodiversity outcomes and perpetuating un-natural and devastating wildfire.

The national park and conservation reserve management of forested public land needs to embody procedures and practices, underpinned by sound legislative obligations. National park accountability into issues such as forest health and changes in biodiversity conservation requires far more focus in policy and practice. Noxious weed and pest animal control programs require far more resource allocation. Fire control and mitigation measures in national parks, based on adequate resource allocation and more rigorous staff training is also an area of the highest priority for decision makers.

Presently, newly declared national parks are not bound or obliged to allocate on-going funding to manage that national park area. These actions are unacceptable and appropriate resources need to be allocated to these newly declared national parks. Governments declaring new national parks should be bound to make adequate provision as a recurring budget expenditure item, to adequately resource appropriate management, at least consistent with the practice of other landholders.

Role of fire

The national park system fails to recognise the role and impact of fire in many of Australia’s natural forest systems. As recent history has shown, many national parks in Southern Australia have experienced high intensity fires that have been responsible for considerable damage to natural forest ecologies, as well as surrounding property and human life. Through a lack of overarching legislative obligations in active fire management in the national park system, the natural integrity of reserved areas is at threat from imminent, high intensity fire.

National park managers are not made accountable for their inaction relating to fire management and mitigation, and therefore fire related problems in national parks are generally poorly understood by the wider community. State forest operational structures on the other hand utilise highly qualified and experienced human resources, following strict and transparent regulatory obligations. Many private native forest owners have also far better infrastructure and programs put in place to address fire issues, as compared to national parks. Some self motivated private native forest owners utilise well maintained road networks throughout forests, which is critical for fire control access, but a practice often absent in vast areas of national parks.

Proper fire management obligations not only deliver effective fire mitigation outcomes, but also provide a basis for monitoring and evaluation of forest systems as they respond to fire. The National Park system however relies on management philosophy based on “non-intervention”, thus leaving many reserves at threat of disastrous wild fire, with no means to evaluate forest changes or any obligation for accountability. Fire related issues need to be of critical importance to public reserve managers and significant change in the way the national park system address fire is long overdue.



Photo: Showing a Blue Gum plantation stopping a major fire leaving unmanaged native bushland. National park fires are often responsible for severe damage to surrounding property, but not all trees are a fire risk. Fire is not necessarily a product of forests being a component of the landscape. Managing forests for fuel load reduction for instance can reduce wildfire severity. In fact, fires can stop on their own accord in forests where fuel loads are significantly smaller than the surrounding national park. It is the active management for fuel load reduction and fire prevention in forests which determine the capacity of a forest to perpetuate fire.

Biodiversity conservation

Increasing recent studies from Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, NSW and Western Australia are showing the lack of human intervention in national parks is resulting in declining forest health. The “non intervention” approach in public reserves does not guarantee the protection of biodiversity, or the sustained perpetuation of the biological value of natural forests, in particularly eucalypt forests. Also, the speculation that biological conservation outcomes are improved nationally by increasing the area of the national reserve system is questionable as a measure of biodiversity outcomes. National park management are also not obliged to adequately monitor forest health and biodiversity changes and are therefore not adequately responsible for in-park conservation outcomes.

Declining forest health in national parks can be attributed mainly to a change in natural disturbance events, such as indigenous fire regimes. Historic “firestick farming” practices conducted by traditional Aboriginal peoples assisted the evolution of Australian forests, which are now dependent on disturbance events like fire, to maintain the ecological integrity of natural terrestrial ecosystems. Declining forest health in public reserves is a response to a lack of human intervention, where significant areas of Australia’s national parks are featured by proliferation of un-naturally high levels of native and exotic shrubs, under mostly un-healthy eucalypt canopies². A breakdown of natural processes of nutrient cycling, competition, mortality and recruitment through a lack of disturbance are features of forest health declines. The eucalypt component of native forests is particularly dependent on disturbance events like fire to maintain intrinsic values, ecosystem functions and plant/animal associations. Regrettably, national park management in Australia ignores indigenous knowledge by failing to recognise human intervention as a conservation tool and is missing the mark in relation to achieving real biological conservation objectives.

Modern State Forest and private native forest silviculture systems are focused on managing the forest for a wide range of values and are underpinned by maintenance, improvement and perpetuating healthy forest stands. *Florence 1996* discusses silviculture as an important tool in maintaining the health of eucalypt forests, yet the national park system fails to acknowledge active forms of forest intervention in national parks and conservation reserves. Now that 21 million hectares of native forest is in some form of public reserve, it is negligent that modern, auditable silviculture practices are not endorsed as an effective and essential conservation tool within Australia’s national parks and conservation areas.

Noxious weed and pest animal control

Many national parks and conservation reserves, including our most internationally recognised are presently harbouring environmental weeds and feral animals. The presence and abundance of noxious weeds and pest animals in national parks compromises biodiversity conservation outcomes, reduces tourist interest, as well as

burdening landholders adjacent to national parks with excessive costs relating to on-going noxious weed and pest animal control programs.

Skeleton resource allocation and increasing reliance on friends groups and other volunteers is a recurring feature of weed control programs in national parks and conservation reserves. This and the lack of prioritisation in comprehensive weed and vermin control programs in national park management, is delivering unacceptable outcomes. It is imperative that national park and conservation reserve management re-prioritise noxious weed and pest animal control programs for environmental and economic benefits, in particularly for rural communities adjacent to public reserves.

Rural socio-economic

Since the 1980's the Australia's National Park estate has increased significantly, with many State Forests being transferred into some form of public reserve. This has resulted in significant socio-economic changes in some rural communities, as timber mills are removed or scaled down and jobs across the forest sector vanish. This is a poor result for some rural communities and is hypocritical of the Federal Governments commitment to ecological sustainable development. The multiple-use forest sector can play a big role in reinvigorating rural community wealth and job creation and examples are prevalent overseas. Finland for instance, which is a major timber exporter, has a rich multiple-use forest culture which has a trickle-down effect on the countryside by boosting rural livelihood⁴. Instead, Australia has nearly a \$2 billion annual timber deficit, with rural communities featured by declining wealth and employment opportunities. Increasing the national park estate in Australia can only perpetuate rural socio-economic decline, except in areas that are internationally recognised for ecotourism values, such as Kakadu, Ularu and the Great Barrier Reef.

Conclusion

National Park management must be held more accountable for their management actions, which needs to be underpinned by adherence to strict and transparent policy. At present, national park management are not legislatively obliged to report on issues such as the monitoring and evaluation for forest health and biodiversity outcomes. Regulations governing fire mitigation in national parks are also incredibly poor, especially in comparison to legislative protocol followed by State Forest management. Noxious weed and pest animal control programs in many public reserves are also poorly resourced. In the same way State Forests are heavily regulated, national parks and other conservation reserves should be also.

The national park system requires far greater resources from Federal and State Governments to administer essential and effective management practices, to reverse forest health decline and minimise the impact of wildfire. As it may be economically impossible to fund national parks to effect these changes, it may be more realistic to re-

prioritise the multiple-use values that public forest estates encompass. AFG believes that sustainable, auditable timber harvesting can fund far more effective biodiversity conservation works and fire control and mitigation measures, than the “non-intervention” approach to national park management, currently institutionalised.

AFG recommendations for national park management reform

- Impose fire control and mitigation obligations and responsibilities underpinned by sound policy.
- Allow active management to reinvigorate ecological health, such as controlled disturbance (i.e. mechanical thinning), regeneration and monitoring.
- Significantly intensify noxious weed and pest animal control programs.
- Prevent any further transformation of public land into national parks or conservation reserves and reconsider increasing the application of multiple-use forest structures.

References

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