

THE NATIONAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA (NSW)

Policy on NSW Native Vegetation Clearing

Preamble

The 2019/20 bushfires burnt 5.4 million hectares of NSW bushland and grassland. 50% of the World Heritage listed Gondwana Rainforests of Australia were burnt by the bushfires in New South Wales and Queensland and 80% of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area was burnt.

On 27 June 2019 the Audit Office of NSW issued a Performance Audit by the NSW Auditor-General entitled “*Managing Native Vegetation*”¹ which stated that the Office had found land-clearing was “not effectively regulated” with “few tangible outcomes” for breaches. The Report found that “there is no evidence-based assurance that clearing of native vegetation is being carried out in accordance with approvals”, “responses to incidents of unlawful clearing are slow, with few tangible outcomes,” and “enforcement action is rarely taken against landholders who unlawfully clear native vegetation.” The Audit found that the Office of Environment and Heritage had identified about 1000 instances of unexplained clearing. Despite some 300 investigations in progress at any time, “there are only two to three prosecutions, three to five remediation orders and around 10 penalty notices issued each year for unlawful clearing”.

A March 27 2020 article² in the Sydney Morning Herald cited a NSW Government report which indicated that more than 37,000 hectares were approved to be cleared in the 2018-19 year, or almost 13 times the annual average rate of approval to clear 2700 hectares in the decade prior to the law changes in 2016-17. An April 1, 2020 Sydney Morning Herald article³ reported “despite bushfire damage to half of NSW state forests, logging has returned at pace to unburnt areas, while so-called “salvage logging” has been approved in 11 burnt state forests, prompting fears that vulnerable species will be pushed further towards extinction.” An article⁴ in The Australian Newspaper on April 29, 2020 *Biomass plant set to power up in NSW’s Hunter Valley* stated that the former Redbank coal plant in NSW’s Hunter Valley will be repurposed into a biomass fuels power station and that Hunter Energy plans to reuse waste wood products to create a biomass facility with an output of 151MW. Hunter Energy chief executive Richard Poole said that “bark, sawdust and straw were typical wood waste materials used and qualified as a carbon neutral energy source.” Talks had been held with a local supplier, and Hunter Energy said it could also use timber if the NSW government adopted bushfire hazard-reduction programs.

In April 2020, the National Trust adopted a Position Paper – “Deforestation” which noted that the NSW Government is planning to allow logging in more than 15,000 hectares of protected old-growth and high-conservation-value public forests. More than 29,000 hectares of previously protected old-growth forests on private land have already been opened up to logging in recent years. Also in April 2020, the Trust adopted a Position Paper – “Bushfire Hazard Reduction Burning”. For the purposes of this policy “native vegetation” is defined as any of the following types of plants native to New South Wales: (a) trees (including any sapling or shrub or any scrub), (b) understorey plants, (c) groundcover (being any type of herbaceous vegetation) and (d) plants occurring in a wetland.

Policy

1. The National Trust calls for a moratorium on code-based clearing of native vegetation in New South Wales until an independent review of the laws and enforcement resources is conducted.
2. The National Trust will strongly oppose the use of bushfire hazard-reduction programs supplying timber for new biomass power plants.
3. The National Trust urges that the recommendations of the NSW Auditor-General’s June 2019 Performance Audit “*Managing Native Vegetation*” with respect to Local Land Services, the Office of Environment and Heritage (now Department of Planning, Industry and Environment) and the Biodiversity Conservation Trust, be adopted and put in place by the NSW Government.
4. Recognizing that global climate change is increasing temperatures, reducing humidity and causing more extreme and more frequent days of catastrophic and extreme fire danger, the Trust supports moves to reach a greenhouse gas pollution reduction target of at least 65% by 2030.
5. The Trust calls on the NSW Government to ensure that no areas of forest currently protected will be opened up to logging, to end the remapping and rezoning of old-growth forest and rainforest on public and private land and to conserve native forests to protect biodiversity, store carbon and provide new tourism and recreational opportunities.
6. Given the enormous loss of native vegetation in the 2019/2020 bushfires and vegetation clearance over the past two centuries, the Trust believes, in principle, that remaining native forests and woodlands must be retained intact.

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Approved by National Trust Board: 1 July, 2020

¹ “Managing Native Vegetation – A Performance Audit”, Audit Office of New South Wales, June, 2019

² “‘Devastating biodiversity loss’ made worse by rise in land clearing”, Sydney Morning Herald, 27 March, 2020

³ “Despite the fires, logging continues in damaged forests”, Sydney Morning Herald, 1 April, 2020

⁴ “Biomass plant set to power up in NSW’s Hunter Valley”, The Australian Newspaper, 29 April, 2020