

May 4, 2005

New Conservation Areas and Jobs for Western NSW

The Premier of NSW, Mr Bob Carr today announced a major new package of conservation and forestry initiatives for Western NSW, at the same time guaranteeing a secure future for local farming, coal, gas and apiary industries.

The Western Woodlands decision affects the Brigalow Belt South and Nandewar regions, stretching from Dubbo to the Queensland border and including the Pilliga, Goonoo, Terry Hie Hie and Bebo forests.

Mr Carr said the decision represents a fair and balanced outcome and follows five years of detailed scientific analysis and stakeholder and community consultation.

As a result, 348,000 hectares of icon forests will be permanently protected in a new Community Conservation Area.

“This is a win for conservation and for jobs,” Mr Carr said.

“It will also benefit local Aboriginal communities through the creation of at least 20 new jobs and the protection of their cultural heritage.”

The Government will also ensure that any timber worker affected by the decision will have a job either at or near where they now live.

The inland plains of Brigalow and Nandewar once supported vast tracts of temperate woodland and native vegetation. However, broad-scale clearing for agriculture has resulted in most of these woodlands being lost forever.

As a result, the Commonwealth Government has identified the Brigalow and Nandewar as “biodiversity hotspots” – vast areas of land boasting a wide array of plant and animal species.

The remaining forests on private lands are either severely degraded or concentrated in isolated and highly fragmented patches.

This 100-year plus history of intensive development has also resulted in one of the worst rates of extinction in Australia.

Previously common mammal species such as the Common Ring-tailed and Brush-tailed Possums have severely declined in number and are now extremely rare.

One quarter of the once numerous woodland bird species are also either declining in number or are dangerously close to extinction.

Protecting the region's remaining forests is crucial because they provide strongholds for the area's many threatened species.

Existing levels of permanent conservation protection in the regions is very low by national standards. Only 3.4 percent of Brigalow and 0.9 percent of Nandewar are protected in national parks or reserves, compared to at least 15 percent in coastal regions.

"The Government's decision will protect the very best of the remaining high conservation areas, while ensuring the continuation of viable and sustainable industries," Mr Carr said.

"Adequate resources will be allocated to ensure effective management of the conservation areas, targeting pests, weeds and fire management as high priorities."

As a result of the Government's decision permanent conservation areas in Brigalow will rise to 9.5 percent and in Nandewar to two percent.

Many icon forests will be permanently protected, including large areas of the West and East Pilliga, most of the Goonoo, Bebo and Terry Hie Hie forests.

Many rare and endangered icon species will be protected as a result of having their habitat protected including: (see Fact Sheet One, attached)

- Koala colonies;
- Squirrel Gliders;
- Turquoise Parrots;
- Glossy Black Cockatoos;
- Significant remnant colonies of Malleefowl;
- Populations of Black Striped Wallabies;
- Yellow-bellied Sheath-tailed Bat;
- Eastern Pygmy Possums;
- Regent Honeyeaters;
- Swift Parrots;
- Barking Owl; and
- Painted Honeyeaters.

In implementing this decision, the Government will use a new land tenure to create what will be known as a Community Conservation Area (CCA).

This new tenure is an internationally recognised conservation category. A CCA will be neither a National Park nor a State Forest. (See Fact Sheet Two, attached)

The CCA will provide for significant conservation outcomes, sustainable timber, minerals and other industries and are underpinned by strong community involvement.

The CCA will be created around the three main groups of forests in the region: the Goonoo; the Pilliga and the northern forests (such as Bebo and Terry Hie Hie).

Fact Sheet One

Brigalow: Conservation Initiatives

What regions are affected?

The NSW Government's Western Woodlands decision affects the 77,000 square kilometre Brigalow Belt South and Nandewar bioregions.

These regions cover nearly 10 percent of the State, stretching from Dubbo to the Queensland border. They include the well known Pilliga, Goonoo, Terry Hie Hie and Bebo forests.

Environmental condition of the regions

Seventy percent of the Brigalow and Nandewar regions have been cleared for agriculture and other developments over the past 200 years.

The Commonwealth Government has identified the Brigalow and Nandewar as one of the worst "biodiversity hotspots" in Australia and given it the highest priority for further permanent conservation protection.

In addition to broadscale land clearing, the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Heritage lists weed invasion, inappropriate fire regimes and predation by feral animals (in particular pigs, cats and foxes) as posing additional threats to local wildlife.

Scientists have reported that:

- At least 23 species of vertebrate fauna are extinct in the Brigalow, and a further 58 species are in danger of becoming extinct.
- At least 2 species of plants have become extinct with a further 48 in danger of becoming extinct.

What will be protected?

The following conservation icons will be permanently protected as a result of the Government's decision:

West Pilliga Forests

New conservation zones in the West Pilliga Forests will protect important areas of Narrow leaved Ironbark, Bimble Box and Pilliga Box Forests. These forests provide what is thought to be the last remaining strong hold of the rare Barking Owl in NSW, ensuring the area has high state and national conservation significance.

The long-term survival chances of at least 48 other rare or threatened species including the Koala, Squirrel Glider, Grey-crowned Babbler, Bush-stone Curlew and Painted Honeyeater.

East Pilliga Forests

New conservation zones in the East Pilliga Forests will protect large areas of remaining Bimble Box and rare Ironbark forests.

Important habitat for the threatened Malleefowl, Rufous Bettong, Barking Owl, Glossy Black Cockatoo, Squirrel Glider and the endemic Pilliga Mouse.

Up to 80 different ecosystems will be protected in this new reserve.

These forests are also particularly rich in Aboriginal cultural heritage, with 12 important sites having been identified and one major artifact site found.

Bebo Forests

New conservation zones in the Bebo Forests will protect habitat for three species of animal that do not occur anywhere else in NSW: the newly discovered Delicate Mouse, the Zig Zag Gecko and Dunmall's Snake.

It will also protect wilderness values and known populations of the endangered Black Striped Wallaby, Squatter Pigeon, Australia's rarest bat (Hairy-nosed Mastiff Bat), along with 17 other rare or threatened animal species.

Goonoo Forests

The new conservation zones in the Goonoo Forests will guarantee the survival of the largest and most diverse stand of Ironbark and Green Mallee woodland left in NSW.

It will provide a refuge for at least 236 animal and 284 plant species including the best remaining habitat for the endangered Malleefowl, Eastern Pygmy Possum, Regent Honeyeaters, Swift Parrots, Painted Honeyeater, Chocolate Wattled Bat, Chestnut-rumped Heathwren and Spotted Quail-thrush.

The Goonoo Forests also provide a strong hold for the vulnerable Glossy Black Cockatoo.

Terry Hie Hie Forests

Conserving the Terry Hie Hie Forests will protect the most significant Aboriginal cultural heritage values in the bioregions.

These forests also contain numerous rare reptile species, including the Three-clawed Worm Skink, Border Thick-tailed Gecko, Lined Earless Dragon and Bougainville's Skink.

Fact Sheet Two

Brigalow: Community Conservation Areas

Community Conservation Areas will be a new tenure of public land that will achieve both permanent conservation outcomes and provide certainty to the various industries operating in the region.

The CCAs will have defined zones, including:

- Permanent conservation zones;
- Permanent timber production zones;
- Zones that are for both conservation and other industries, e.g., gas and mining; and
- Zones that are for both timber and other industries, e.g., gas and mining.

Management of the new CCA will also link directly to management of the existing reserve system, including the icon Warrumbungle and Mt Kaputar National Parks and the Pilliga Nature Reserve through the creation of three new community-based advisory committees.

A critical part of the Government's decision, these advisory committees will bring together local communities and a range of social, scientific, conservation and economic interests involved in the CCA.

They will include local Aboriginal community representatives and the agencies responsible for managing the public lands which make up the CCA's core areas.

The Chairs of the relevant Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) will also be members and this arrangement will link public and private land management issues.