

## Baradine Progress Association Submission

### **The Baradine community**

Baradine is a small town situated on the edge of the North-western Slopes and Plains region of NSW, right on the southern edge of the 420,000ha Pilliga Forest.

The town exists largely because of the timber industry that depends on continued access to the resources of the Pilliga.

Survey work conducted by members of the Baradine Progress Association has estimated that almost half of the jobs in the town are directly dependent on the timber industry. Employment is provided by three sawmills, numerous timber harvesting businesses and through State Forests of NSW, the State government forest management agency.

Baradine is also a local centre supporting the region's farming enterprises, consisting mainly of mixed cereal cropping and sheep and cattle grazing. As with most rural communities, the town has been hit hard by the continuing drought, but has been "drought-proofed" to some extent by the presence of the timber industry.

At the time of the last census, the town population was reckoned at 690. Facilities in the town include a modern hospital facility and surgery, police station, two schools, two pubs, two clubs, modern supermarket, chemist, newsagents, hardware and other small retail businesses. The Progress Association estimates that more than a quarter of the school children in Baradine belong to people directly employed in the timber industry.

### **Resource and Conservation Assessment Council – Brigalow Belt South Bioregion Assessment**

According to its website ([www.racac.nsw.gov.au/overview/whatis\\_racac.shtml](http://www.racac.nsw.gov.au/overview/whatis_racac.shtml)), the NSW Government established the Resource and Conservation Assessment Council (RACAC) to oversee the implementation in New South Wales of the Government's forest policy, which aims to balance the need for forest conservation and protection with the creation of ecologically sustainable forest industries. RACAC also considers other conservation and land management issues. Since 1995 RACAC has completed the Comprehensive Regional Assessments (CRAs) of the eastern forests of New South Wales, involving the collection and analysis of scientific, environment and heritage and social and economic data. The results of these assessments are a series of NSW Forest Agreements under the Forestry and National Park Estate Act 1998 as well as Regional Forest Agreements with the Commonwealth Government. These agreements will determine future conservation and management of the State's major forested areas.

Since 1999, as part of its Western Regional Assessments, RACAC has been running the Brigalow Belt South Bioregion (BBSB) Assessment. The BBSB covers a large portion (6.2%) of NSW extending from Dubbo to the Queensland border north of Moree, west to Coonamble and east to Merriwa in the Upper Hunter. Approximately 85% of the land in this bioregion is privately owned or leased, 11% is State Forest and the balance is managed by National Parks and Wildlife Service or other State government agencies. The State Forests of the Pilliga and Goonoo (near Dubbo) make up the bulk of the State Forest in the bioregion.

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The BBSB assessment has been conducted in 2 parts:

- Stage 1 (1999 – 2001) which was instituted as a direct result of the proposal to set up a charcoal production facility sourcing timber from the Pilliga and Goonoo State Forests to supply a proposed silicon smelter at Lithgow, and
- Stage 2 (2001 - ?) which was to determine the fate of the State Forests and ultimately the local timber industry – how much of the State Forests would be converted to National Parks and would there be enough resource left at the end of the day to allow the continuation of a viable timber industry.

Accessing RACAC's website ([www.racac.nsw.gov.au/rfa/wra/sbbra.shtml](http://www.racac.nsw.gov.au/rfa/wra/sbbra.shtml)) shows that RACAC itself has a different slant on the purpose of its assessment, however, from the Baradine community's perspective, the BBSB assessment has boiled down to this.

There is no doubt that the assessment has resulted in the production of some useful reports, many of which would never have been commissioned if this project had not been undertaken. In particular, the Aboriginal and European Cultural Heritage projects are of immense value in capturing information that might otherwise have been lost. Report WRA 31 Response to Disturbance and Land Management Practices has been of particular value in proving that timber harvesting is only a very minor contributor to ecosystem disturbance when compared with land clearing, wetlands modification, inappropriate fire regimes, feral animal predation and other destructive practices in the BBSB.

To its credit, RACAC committed significant resources to a comprehensive public consultation process. Indeed two members of the Baradine Progress Association gave up their time voluntarily to participate in a series of Community Stakeholder Workshops (CSWs) as part of the BBSB assessment. We were given the impression that the government was truly interested in the opinions of stakeholders and that our views would be taken into account. RACAC Chair Rick Farley continually assured us that “consensus is powerful” and encouraged us to reach agreement amongst ourselves as to the future of the BBSB.

The most significant outcome from the CSWs was the BRUS (Brigalow Region United Stakeholders) option (see appendix 1). The BRUS group constituted approximately 80% of the non-government stakeholders involved in the CSWs. The BRUS option attempted to balance the need for new National Parks in the bioregion with the need to maintain viable small communities, and, by association, a viable timber industry. The minority Green stakeholders preferred to present their own option, one that demanded over 75% of all State Forest in the Bioregion be converted to National Park and that sustainable yield of white cypress timber be slashed from 70,000 to 17,000m<sup>3</sup>/yr.

At public exhibition of the various options for the outcome of the BBSB held in Baradine in October 2002, over 500 people from the local community signed an attendance book indicating their support for the BRUS option. The Progress Association has a copy of this attendance book. These signatures were accepted as submissions to the BBSB assessment.

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A decision was supposed to be handed down in November 2002 in the last NSW parliamentary sitting prior to the March 2003 election. It was obvious to all stakeholders that the timing of the assessment outcome was politically driven and designed to provide justification for the declaration of huge areas of new National Park in the Brigalow Belt South just in time to buy Green preferences in that election.

The huge public support for the BRUS option, however, appeared to put a spanner in the works. How could the politicians appease the Greens with large new National Park declarations in the Brigalow Belt without upsetting the 30% of voters who live outside the coastal fringes of NSW? Simple answer, they avoided the issue of new parks in the Brigalow and fobbed the Greens off by promising an additional 65,000ha of new National Parks on the North Coast of NSW instead.

Unfortunately, this has resulted in the community now being in the uncomfortable position of having NO decision yet forthcoming on the future of the Pilliga, and by association, on the future of our town. Indeed it is our biggest fear that a decision will be held off until the next election, three and a half years away, when the politicians will be looking yet again to buy Green preferences using our State Forests as currency!

Such is the political football that the issue of conversion of State Forests to National Parks has become in NSW!

The uncertainty over the future of our timber industry and our town is stifling local economic development. It is almost impossible to get a bank loan to finance a housing purchase in Baradine. Capital investment in existing businesses is at a standstill. Businesses are passing up lucrative contracts because of the uncertainty over the timber supply. Community projects such as the development of a Forest and Heritage Centre, and the Pilliga Economic Development and Tourism Committee are on hold until the assessment outcome is announced.

The community has been put through four years of pain. If the State Government wants to convert our State Forests to National Parks, why doesn't it just do so and pay out the people who would be put out of business by such a decision? Sydney-based politicians appear to have little concept of the effect that their cynical manipulations are having on the lives of people who live and work in the bush!

Indeed, even if a Regional Forest Agreement is signed that allows the continuation of our timber industry, what is to stop the State government from breaking it the next time it needs to reach into the State Forests cookie jar to appease the Greens? The North Coast RFA was no protection to the industry in that part of the state. Only two years into a ten year RFA, the State Government saw fit to declare a further 65,000ha of new National Parks just prior to the last election solely as a Green preference buying exercise. The future of the forest industries in that part of the state has once again been thrown into chaos, this time by a deliberate act of State government.

## **Threatened Species Conservation Act 1998**

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The whole of the State Forests of the Pilliga are covered by a Threatened Species License under Section 120 of the NSW government's Threatened Species Conservation Act 1998. This license was sought during Stage 1 of the BBSB assessment and came into effect at the end of 2001.

There is no mention that in white cypress forests, judicial timber harvesting can have *positive* environmental benefits, despite the fact that there is a mounting body of evidence to support this contention.

The main impact of the Threatened Species License has been to make National Parks and Wildlife Service the final authority when it comes to administering timber harvesting in the Pilliga. State Forests of NSW has been relegated to the role of carrying out pre-logging surveys and ensuring logging contractor compliance with the TSL. One Progress Association member was recently told that in State Forests' Hunter Region Office, for example, upwards of thirty staff are employed to carry out environmental assessment works, yet there is no money in the budget to employ a trained silviculturalist!

Having NPWS in charge of timber harvesting would not necessarily be a bad thing if they actually knew anything about the State Forests of the Pilliga. The Threatened Species Licence that has been applied to the Pilliga has largely been lifted from similar documents covering coastal State Forests in NSW. It has been cobbled together without any specific understanding of the uniqueness of the Pilliga. Last year, members of the NPWS Western Directorate's Threatened Species Unit admitted as much on a visit to the Pilliga to discuss the ironbark firewood harvesting industry. The two NPWS employees also admitted that it was only their first visit to the Pilliga!!

Despite this rule of ignorance, the TSL has not affected the flow of timber from the Pilliga – only the methods by which it is harvested. However, uncertainty over the future of supply, in an environment in which Green agenda to close down the native timber industry seems to hold sway, is affecting both industry and community morale.

Who is to say that at some time in the future the TSL won't be manipulated by a Green-leaning State Government to make the harvesting of native timbers a totally unviable operation?

### **White cypress export industry**

White cypress is a specialty timber, highly valued in the construction industry because natural oils impregnating the timber make it termite resistant. This means that it can be used for house framing and flooring without having to treat with poisonous chemicals. The value of the white cypress industry in the Pilliga is reckoned at \$12.5 million annually.

Over the last 5 years, the local white cypress sawmilling industry has become increasingly export oriented. One third of all the white cypress milled from the Pilliga is exported, mostly to Japan and the USA.

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There is a strong demand, particularly from the Japanese building market for naturally termite resistant timbers for constructing dwellings in earthquake prone areas. Last June, the NSW government hosted a reception at Parliament House to celebrate the fact that white cypress had been officially accredited for use in the Japanese building industry – the culmination of three years hard work.

The irony of this celebration was that this reception occurred in the midst of the RACAC Brigalow Belt South Bioregion assessment. The then Minister for Forests, Kim Yeadon, *could make no promises* to the local timber industry of continued adequate supply of cypress pine to meet the demands of the Japanese market. One year later we are no nearer to learning the fate of our forests - how can businesses like our local cypress sawmills plan for the future in the face of such uncertainty?

### **Where to from here?**

The community is still waiting for the decision on the Pilliga Forest to be handed down.

Baradine Progress Association is hoping that this decision will guarantee the supply of timber from the forest to keep our local industries viable.

Unfortunately, under the current system, the best we can hope for is a Regional Forest Agreement. These have been proven not to provide any real security to the timber industry in light of what has happened recently to the North Coast RFA.

Aided by a supportive State government and a compliant bureaucracy, the Greens will still be aiming to kill off the native forest based timber industries in the name of “environmental protection”. In the future we fear the battle will simply become more covert and harder for small communities like ours to fight. Tools such as the Threatened Species Conservation Act 1998 work in favour of the Green agenda, not the needs of the community.

What is needed is a concrete assurance from government that it is committed to the continuation of a sustainable native timber industry based on the State Forests of the Pilliga – *sustainable for the environment AND sustainable for our community*.

We believe that this can be achieved – but only with a commitment from all sides to de-politicize the environment agenda and commit to working together to achieve REAL solutions to both social and environmental issues.

**Baradine Progress Association Inc.**

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