



Our ref: DOC20/34072

Your ref: SSI-7474

Mick Fallon
Senior Planning Officer
Transport Assessments
mick.fallon@planning.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mick

Inland Rail Narrabri to North Star – Submissions Preferred Infrastructure Report

Thank you for your email dated 9 December 2019 to the Biodiversity and Conservation Division (BCD) of the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment inviting comments on the Submissions Preferred Infrastructure Report (SPIR) for the Inland Rail Narrabri to North Star (N2NS) project.

BCD notes that following our letter to you dated 29 October 2018 endorsing the Biodiversity Assessment Report (BAR) Addendum (Final, October 2018) developed in response to the exhibited BAR, substantial changes have been made to the project footprint. The expanded footprint is based on lessons from construction of the Parkes to Narromine project.

BCD understands the N2NS section is now divided into two phases. Phase 1, the subject of this SPIR, includes 93 kilometres between Narrabri and Alice Street, Moree, and 80 kilometres between Camurra North and North Star. Phase 2 will consist of the remaining 15 kilometres between Alice Street, Moree, and Camurra North, and will be subject to a separate approval process.

The revised development footprint for Phase 1 is 2436 hectares, representing an increase of 1053 hectares to the previously assessed footprint. Ecosystem and species credits have subsequently increased compared to the October 2018 BAR Addendum:

- 42,861 ecosystem credits compared to 22,960 credits
- 4519 koala species credits compared to 2466 credits
- 11,778 finger panic grass species credits compared to 364 credits
- 5467 creeping tick-trefoil species credits compared to 3080 credits
- 23,738 Belson's panic species credits compared to 1898 credits

BCD has reviewed the following documents related to the SPIR:

- Appendix F – Addendum to the Narrabri to North Star Biodiversity Report
- Appendix G – Biodiversity Briefing Note
- Appendix I – Narrabri to North Star Biodiversity Offset Strategy (Phase 1)

BCD notes that Appendix F is the BAR Addendum developed in October 2018. Similarly, Appendix I (May 2017) is the biodiversity offset strategy developed for the exhibited environmental impact statement. Neither of these documents reflect the changes that are the subject of this SPIR.

BCD also notes that apart from updated extents of *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*-listed communities in Table 3, no updated assessment of the modified footprint on EPBC Act-listed entities and the likely significance of the additional impact has been



undertaken. BCD recommends the proponent approach the Department of the Environment and Energy to seek advice on how to proceed.

BCD's biodiversity and Aboriginal cultural heritage recommendations are provided in **Attachment A** and detailed comments are provided in **Attachment B**. Comments on hydrology and flooding will be provided in a separate letter. If you require any further information regarding this matter, please contact Renee Shepherd, Acting Senior Team Leader, via 6883 5355 or renee.shepherd@environment.nsw.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D Love'.

20 January 2020

Debbie Love
Acting Director North West
Biodiversity and Conservation Division

Enclosure: Attachments A and B

BCD's Recommendations

Inland Rail Narrabri to North Star – Submissions Preferred Infrastructure Report

Biodiversity

1. Complete a rapid field assessment to validate the edge matching of PCTs undertaken by desktop assessment. Results to be provided should include the field data collected, number of plots, photographs, and locations of rapid plots.
2. Develop an updated vegetation map, produced at a scale where individual PCTs are easily identified.
3. Provide BCD with updated spatial files, including the amended footprint, updated vegetation map, and location of rapid assessment plots.
4. PCTs included in the flora species credit polygons according to the Threatened Biodiversity Data Collection not previously identified in the BAR should be listed.
5. Amended species credit polygons, including in a spatial format, should be provided for all species credit species.
6. Provide details regarding how the additional impact to the koala was determined.

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage

7. The Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) should be engaged when designing and undertaking additional surveys for the modified footprint.
8. The RAPs should be consulted during the development of the Heritage Management Plan.

BCD's Detailed Comments

Inland Rail Narrabri to North Star – Submissions Preferred Infrastructure Report

Biodiversity

1. Field validation of the desktop assessment of the amended development footprint is required

Section 2 of Appendix G states that a desktop assessment was undertaken to determine the additional impacts to native vegetation as a result of the amended development footprint. No field validation occurred.

Whilst a desktop assessment does not conform to the Framework for Biodiversity Assessment (FBA) for the additional 1000-hectare impact, it is acknowledged that the collection of field data at present is compromised due to the ongoing drought conditions. Any data collected is unlikely to represent the structure, function and composition of the plant community types (PCTs) present in “normal” climatic conditions. Similarly, it is noted in Table 5 that the existing number of plots are adequate for the increased area of each vegetation zone, as required by Table 3 in the FBA.

Despite this, it is recommended that a rapid field assessment is undertaken to validate that the “edge matching” of PCTs that has occurred via desktop assessment is an accurate representation of what is present on the ground.

Recommendation 1

Complete a rapid field assessment to validate the edge matching of PCTs undertaken by desktop assessment. Results to be provided should include the field data collected, number of plots, photographs, and locations of rapid plots.

2. Amended vegetation mapping and related spatial files should be provided for review

The increased impact to PCTs is detailed in Table 3 and illustrated in Figures 1-7. However, the figures are not displayed at a scale that clearly shows the amended footprint, and they do not illustrate the PCTs being impacted upon. BCD is unable to provide feedback on the validity of the amended impacts to native vegetation without access to this information.

Recommendation 2

Develop an updated vegetation map, produced at a scale where individual PCTs are easily identified.

Recommendation 3

Provide BCD with updated spatial files, including the amended footprint, updated vegetation map, and location of rapid assessment plots.

3. Additional information on species credit species, including amended species credit polygons, is required

Section 6 states that targeted searches for threatened flora species will be undertaken during January and February 2020. BCD supports the proponent's proposal to assume presence for the flora species credit species that were previously recorded in the development footprint, namely finger panic grass, Belson's panic and creeping tick-trefoil.

BCD requests that where flora species credit polygons have been expanded to incorporate PCTs associated with the threatened flora species according to the Threatened Biodiversity Data Collection, the PCTs are listed for each flora species. Additionally, it is requested that amended species credit polygons are provided for all species credit species, including in a spatial format for review by BCD.

BCD will continue to liaise with the proponent regarding the calculation of flora species credits based on area of habitat compared to individual counts. The amended calculation of flora species credits provided in Appendix G in the SPIR is likely to be conservative.

Finally, an explanation is required that details how the additional impact to the koala was determined (173.79 hectares compared to 94.84 hectares in the October 2018 BAR Addendum).

Recommendation 4

PCTs included in the flora species credit polygons according to the Threatened Biodiversity Data Collection not previously identified in the BAR should be listed.

Recommendation 5

Amended species credit polygons, including in a spatial format, should be provided for all species credit species.

Recommendation 6

Provide details regarding how the additional impact to the koala was determined.

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage

4. Engagement with Registered Aboriginal Parties should occur

BCD notes that additional surveys are proposed for the modified footprint but understand that these have not yet been undertaken. As per the meeting between BCD and the proponent on 22 October 2019, BCD reiterate that it is important the proponent actively engage with the registered Aboriginal Parties (RAP) when designing and undertaking additional surveys. RAPs must be afforded the opportunity to determine the significance of additional harm to Aboriginal cultural heritage within the additional footprint, and consider the harm against the whole of the project area. Equally, as per the project requirements BCD recommend consulting with the RAPs when developing the Heritage Management Plan.

Recommendation 7

The Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs) should be engaged when designing and undertaking additional surveys for the modified footprint.

Recommendation 8

The RAPs should be consulted during the development of the Heritage Management Plan.