



HASTINGS BIRDWATCHERS INC

Submission by Hastings Birdwatchers on the Narrabri Gas Project Proposal

I am writing this submission on behalf of the Hastings Birdwatchers, a community group interested in birds and their conservation. We are concerned that this proposal, if it goes ahead will have a negative impact on threatened bird and other animal species in the Pilliga forest. Native birds are in trouble in Australia. The “State of Australia’s Birds Report 2015” (Birdlife Australia) highlights disturbing declines in many common species. This includes such common and iconic birds as the Laughing Kookaburra and Willy Wagtail, but also Rainbow Bee-eater, Crimson Rosella, Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo, Southern Boobook and Tawny Frogmouth, amongst others. Woodland birds are in even more trouble, with many of the once common ones listed as vulnerable to extinction in NSW. The Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot are now listed as critically endangered under the EPBC Act. The Regent Honeyeater relies on woodlands for feeding and breeding and the Swift Parrots migrate from Tasmania in winter to feed on woodlands and forests on the mainland. The threatened woodland birds in NSW were once common in the woodlands west of the Great Dividing Range. However, most of their habitat has been cleared or modified for cropping and grazing. In light of this dire situation, we are very concerned at the impact this project will have on threatened fauna and flora.

The Pilliga Forest is the largest remaining temperate woodland left in eastern Australia. It has outstanding conservation importance. It is designated as a Key Biodiversity Area under the Birdlife International scheme, one of “Natures Hotspots”. Its 500,000 hectares represents 18.7% of the Brigalow Belt South Bioregion. Only 4% of this bioregion is in conservation reserves. About 66% of the project is located within the Pilliga and this comprises mostly native vegetation. It contains 11 endangered ecological communities. 95 threatened and/or migratory fauna have been recorded there or are predicted to occur. This includes 61 bird species, amongst them a suite of once common woodland species that are now all listed as endangered or vulnerable under the TSC Act or the EPBC Act. Amongst them are many unique and beautiful birds, including the Barking Owl, now vulnerable to extinction in NSW. The Pilliga supports the largest NSW population of this species. The Pilliga is also a recharge area for the Murray-Darling Basin. Santos is proposing to place over 800 gas wells in 425 locations in this important habitat for threatened species.

Our concerns are:

- General concerns – the potential impacts on the aquifers, contamination of surface waters and the land by saline water, fragmentation and removal of habitat, increased risk of fire, increases in feral animal populations as a result of fragmentation and the risk of erosion and sediment runoff.

- For the Regent Honeyeater and Swift Parrot. These 2 critically endangered birds were not recorded in the study area of the Ecological Impact Assessment for the EIS. However, their movements are highly erratic, being dependant on flowering trees. It is estimated that the Regent Honeyeater population is about 350 individuals, where once there were tens of thousands. There was only one targeted survey for this bird, in the study area, in October 2012. It is possible that they use this part of the Pilliga when certain trees are flowering and the same may be true for the Swift Parrot, which is estimated to have a population of 1,000 individuals and was also only surveyed once in a targeted way, in July 2013. So the study area could contain food resources for the Regent Honeyeater, Swift Parrot and Superb Parrot and they may well be there, but not picked up in the surveys for the EIS. They have all been recorded in the Pilliga previously.

- That this project, should it go ahead, will greatly impact the many threatened species for which this forest is a stronghold. The Ecological Impact Assessment lists 17 amphibians, 186 birds, 45 mammals, and 41 reptiles. Of these, 27 species are listed as threatened under the TSC Act. One of these is the vulnerable Pilliga Mouse, only found in the Pilliga. Many species of mammals have already disappeared from the Pilliga and indeed from Australia and are now extinct. The threatened mammals that were recorded in the project area include the Black-striped Wallaby, Eastern Pygmy-possum, Squirrel Glider, Koala and 5 species of bats. The threatened birds recorded include many of the vulnerable woodland birds, such as Grey-crowned Babbler, Speckled Warbler, Diamond Firetail and Painted Honeyeater, as well as migratory birds listed under the EPBC Act. They will be impacted in a number of ways :
 1. Fragmentation of habitat. There will be many more roads and cleared patches for the wells and workers' accommodation. Fragmentation increases edge effects, creates barriers to the movement of species and increases threats to their survival, especially threats from increased numbers and penetration of feral animals.
 2. Removal of habitat. Although the actual area to be cleared is relatively small, there is a real possibility that it will involve the removal of over 10,000 hollow-bearing trees. This will have a big impact on hollow nesting and breeding birds and mammals, including the Barking Owl.
 3. Noise. This project will result in increased noise levels. Some species are more susceptible to increased noise than others. Studies have found owls and raptors are sensitive to noises, so the Barking Owl and other owls in the Pilliga are likely to be adversely affected, as could the Glossy Black-cockatoo. Noise disturbance will affect breeding behaviour and success. It is also likely to affect the ground dwelling woodland species, as well as bats that rely on echolocation.
 4. Traffic. During construction vehicle traffic will peak at 350 movements a day. Some fauna are especially susceptible to vehicle strike. This includes Superb and Swift Parrot, Masked Owl, Turquoise Parrot, Diamond Firetail and Hooded Robin.
 5. Fencing. There will be more fencing and nocturnal species are susceptible to entanglement, even without barbed wire. These include owls, emus, gliders, bats and macropods.

6. Feral fauna. Unless the proposed feral animal work and monitoring is carried on into the future, the increased fragmentation of the forest will result in increased numbers of foxes and feral cats. This increased predator pressure will impact all the native species.
7. Light. Increased artificial night light is likely to impact on the behaviour and survival of nocturnal species, including the threatened owls and bats.
8. Weed Invasion. Increased numbers of roads and vehicle movements will increase the risk of weed invasion and this will pose a risk to the threatened flora species.
9. Fire. There is an increased risk of accidental fire, as the gas is highly flammable and increased movement of people and vehicles will also increase this risk. This may change fire regimes and the structure of the forest.

The environmental assessment undertaken as part of Santos's proposal for the Pilliga concludes that there will not be significant impacts on threatened flora, fauna and ecological communities. Hastings Birdwatchers take a very different view. The clearing of native vegetation will only take up a small part of the forest, but the cumulative effect of fragmentation, noise, traffic and all the other disturbances will have a huge impact on the forest and all the species found there, especially the threatened ones. The Pilliga is a precious natural resource and should be managed as such, not subjected to all the disturbances that this project will inevitably bring. It cannot be emphasised enough that the western woodlands in NSW have been heavily cleared and/or altered since white settlement and this Pilliga proposal represents yet another major impact. It cannot be viewed in isolation from the relentless and cumulative destruction of woodland throughout NSW.

We urge the Government to reject this proposal, to move to protect this part of the Pilliga from future developments and ensure it is managed for its natural values and for future generations.

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