

Monday 10th October 2011

RE: Maules Creek Coal Project

Birds Australia Southern NSW and ACT Group (BASNA) wish to draw your attention to the Maules Creek Coal Project (the project) proposed by Aston Resources which will be assessed under Part 3A assessment process.

Birds Australia was founded in 1901 and works to conserve native birds and biodiversity in Australasia and Antarctica, through the study of birds and their habitats, and the education and involvement of the community. We are currently amalgamating with Bird Observation & Conservation Australia (BOCA) raising our total membership to over 10,000. We are respected in the scientific community through our active on-ground research and the publication of *Emu: Austral Ornithology*, the foremost ornithological scientific journal in the Southern hemisphere. Over 20,000 volunteers support Birds Australia with work at our observatories and reserves, which are conservation strongholds. Programs run out of our Discovery Centre educate large volumes of Australians about the protection of birds and biodiversity.

One of the main roles of BASNA is to bring attention to issues which we believe may cause the destruction of Australian native birds or their habitat. For this reason we are writing to you today.

While others have expressed their concern on the potential impacts of large scale open cut coal mining on ground water and agriculture, we wish to highlight the additional impacts of the project on the unique birds of Leard State Forest, particularly those listed as threatened under the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (TSC Act) and *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

A large number of threatened birds have been recorded to occur within the boundaries of the proposed mine site (the site). The project is expected to remove a large tract of vegetation (1,664.8 ha), a very high proportion of this are classified as Endangered Ecological Communities (544 ha). Independent surveys of this vegetation have been found by Ecological Consultants and associates of Birds Australia to act as important habitat for a large number of woodland birds facing extinction in the near future, because of this, BASNA express our objection to this development.

The Leard State Forest is one of the largest continuous remnant tracts of White box – Narrow-leaved Ironbark – White Cypress Pine grassy Open Forest a Box Gum Woodland, which is listed as a Critically Endangered Ecological Community (EPBC Act) and Endangered Ecological Community (TSC Act). The large size of Leard State Forest, and its proximity to Mt Kaputar National Park make it an important habitat for a wide range of threatened species including permanent resident species as well as nomadic and migratory species.

Leard State Forest is known to provide habitat for many species of bird listed as threatened under the TSC Act. The Critically Endangered Regent Honeyeater (also listed as Endangered under EPBC Act) is known to occur in the area. This migratory species requires flowering box and ironbark woodlands to survive thus Leard State Forest is likely to be one of the last remaining foraging sites in the northern limits of the species distribution. Leard State Forest is also likely to provide important winter foraging habitat for the Endangered Swift Parrot which migrates there from Tasmania every year.

Leard State Forest and the site support strong populations of at least 18 species of threatened birds which are listed as Vulnerable under TSC Act. Three of these are highly dependent on flowering eucalypts, especially those in Box and or Ironbark Woodlands; they are the Painted Honeyeater, Black-chinned Honeyeater, and Little Lorikeet. Other Vulnerable (TSC Act) woodland reliant species known to exist in Leard State Forest and the site include Diamond Firetail, Speckled Warbler, Brown Treecreeper, Grey-crowned Babbler, Varied Sittella, Hooded Robin, Scarlet Robin, Flame Robin, Turquoise Parrot, White-browed Woodswallow, Square-tailed Kite, Little Eagle, Spotted Harrier, Masked Owl and Barking Owl. The latter five species are top-order predators which require large tracts of undisturbed wooded habitat to breed; their populations will be highly impacted with the large scale clearing expected within the site.

For all of the listed threatened species, Leard State Forest provides habitat that is necessary for: foraging, breeding, roosting, and dispersal; the long-term maintenance of the species; the maintenance of genetic diversity and long term evolutionary development; and the reintroduction of populations and recovery of the species. Consequently, Leard State Forest is habitat critical to the survival of many of these species.

The project will involve the development of open cut mine with a final depth of 320 m, and a project area that will require over 1,600 hectares of vegetation removal. Habitat loss and fragmentation have been shown to be the leading cause of species loss from the landscape by a range of empirical and theoretical studies conducted in Australia and internationally. The direct vegetation clearance and habitat fragmentation in suitable foraging, and in many cases breeding, habitat for birds listed as threatened under the TSC Act is likely to reduce the viability of these species as a whole and place the local occurrence of these species at risk of extinction. This is especially due to the specialised habitat requirements of the species and the severe historical reductions in the extent and quality of habitat which they have been known survive in.

Leard State Forest is a sensitive, high value environment rich in biodiversity that would be severely impacted by an intense, long-term, high magnitude impact from the Maules Creek Coal Project over a large geographic area. We ask you to carefully consider the significance of the removal of over 1,600 hectares of habitat on threatened birds in the Leard State Forest, one of the most important remaining tracts of Box Gum Woodland in NSW and one of the last viable habitats for the aforementioned TSC Act listed threatened species.

We look forward to your response.

Yours Sincerely,

The Conservation Subcommittee

Birds Australia Southern NSW and ACT Group