



Hunter Bird Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia

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Submission from the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc against the Hexham Train Support Facility Project

The Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. (HBOC) objects to this proposal for the following reasons:

The site provides habitat for threatened avian species: Eastern Grass Owl, Black-necked Stork, Australasian Bittern, Australian Painted Snipe, Magpie Goose and migratory shorebirds. It also provides habitat for wetland dependent species not listed as threatened e.g. Black Swan, Chestnut Teal, Grey Teal, Eastern Great, Intermediate, Little and Cattle Egrets, Royal Spoonbill, Australian Spotted, Baillon's and Spotless Crakes.

The site will require the destruction of Endangered Ecological Communities including Freshwater Wetlands on Coastal Floodplains and Coastal Saltmarsh, important habitat for the above mentioned avian species.

The project site is located in the larger Hexham Swamp complex. Hexham Swamp (ca.2500 ha) is the largest wetland on the floodplain of the lower Hunter River and supports extensive areas of estuarine wetland (Winning & Saintilan 2009). Estuarine wetlands are among the most productive of natural systems and provide support for food chains and habitat for a wide variety of species (Williams *et al.* 2000).

Hexham Swamp is part of flood planning by Newcastle City Council: Hexham Swamp acts as a large storage basin for local runoff, before discharging into the South Arm of the Hunter River, for the western half of the city of Newcastle (Haines 2009, p.20). This project will cause changes in the hydrology (Ecological Investigations 2012) and further fragmentation of the Hexham Swamp complex.

Hexham Swamp is included in the *Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia*, and is listed on the Register of the National Estate as part of the Hunter Estuary Wetlands (Environment Australia 2001) which recognises the importance of the large size of Hexham Swamp and the value of the Hunter Estuary Wetlands to wetland biota (Winning & Saintilan 2009).

Hexham Swamp was recognized as an important component of the Green Corridor from the Watagan Ranges to Port Stephens (Draft Lower Hunter Regional Conservation Plan 2006).

Hexham Swamp is part of the Hunter Estuary Important Bird Area based on internationally significant numbers of Chestnut Teal, Straw-necked Ibis, Red-necked Avocet and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. All of these species use Hexham Swamp.

The site is adjacent to the northern section of the Hunter Wetlands National Park which has been part of the Hunter-Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority's Hexham Swamp Rehabilitation Project which commenced in the 1990s costing taxpayers millions of dollars. This investment should not be compromised by commercial industrial interests.

In NSW 50% of wetlands have been lost or degraded since European settlement (Olsen & Weston 2004).

The project allows for a bulk fuel storage area with a capacity of up to 400,000L of diesel fuel. In view of projected climate change with its inherent risks to estuaries the storage of this amount of dangerous substance next to a wetland the size and conservation value of Hexham Swamp is both unwise and highly risky.

Approximately 380,000m³ of earthworks (imported fill) for the construction of the railway formation, access road, drainage and building foundations will be required. Hexham Swamp is already subject to barriers which will prevent the landward migration of habitats in the event of sea level rise associated with climate change. This can only further impede the future value of Hexham Swamp as a barrier against sea level rise.

While two offsets have been earmarked, they are located at some distance from each other and do not provide continuous habitat. The northern offset is immediately adjacent to the future F3 extension which is only in its conceptual stage and its route can be changed by Roads and Maritime Services which have the power to acquire land and override other claims. Thus there is no certainty that the northern offset will remain in perpetuity.

The disadvantages of Hexham Swamp as the preferred site are spelt out in Chapter 5 of the Ecological Investigations Report and, in our opinion, outweigh the disadvantages of other sites considered:

- Will result in the partial loss of a SEPP 14 Coastal Wetlands area;
- Site is located within the Hunter River floodway area;
- Significant access works necessary to the Tarro Interchange;
- Potential Aboriginal cultural heritage issues to be addressed in the locality of the access road;
- Construction challenges including:
 - Major interface with the ARTC's HRR Project;
 - Potential for flooding of the site and the high water table;
 - Existing infrastructure including gas mains will require mitigation works; and
 - Soft ground and tidal conditions – poor bearing capacity of soil base.

The principle disadvantages of the other sites involve property acquisition and the need for earthworks which may be more costly, time-consuming and less convenient to QRN. They are not disadvantages in the same order of magnitude as those presented by the Hexham Swamp option which places the project on an environmentally sensitive area on a floodplain.

Australian Rail Track Corporation have applied to construct five rail lines and this project is applying for approval to construct 10 rail lines, all parallel to the existing Main Northern Line. This is nothing short of converting the northern section of Hexham Swamp into a railway yard and is in direct conflict with its proven and acknowledged conservation value underpinned by scientific evidence.

Prepared by A.Lindsey for the Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc. 20 December 2012

References

- Eco Logical Australia (2012). Ecological Investigations Report prepared for QR National.
- Haines, P. (2009). Newcastle Flood Planning, Stage 1. prepared for Newcastle City Council.
- Olsen, P. and Weston, M. (2004). Birds Australia, The State of Australia's Birds, Water, Wetlands and Birds. Supplement to *Wingspan* **14** (4): V.
- Williams, R.J., Watford, F.A., and Balashov, V. (2000). Kooragang Wetland Rehabilitation Project: History of Changes to Estuarine Wetlands of the Lower Hunter River. (NSW Fisheries Office of Conservation, Cronulla, NSW.)
- Winning, G. and Saintilan, N. (2009). Vegetation changes in Hexham Swamp, Hunter River, New South Wales, since the construction of floodgates in 1971. *Cunninghamia* **11**(2): 185–194.