

Submission
by Sylvia Hale, MLC
on behalf of the Greens NSW
on

the Draft Growth Centres Conservation
Plan



Sylvia.hale@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Ph: 9230 3030

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The Greens NSW have grave concerns about the Draft Conservation Plan as released by the Growth Centres Commission, on the following grounds:

1. A 'broad brush' approach

The Conservation Plan appears to assume that the 17,000 ha North-West Growth Centre and the 10,000 ha South West Growth Centre are identical. This is clearly not the case. The two areas are quite different in their topography and ecology and therefore in their flora and fauna. It is disturbing that the Conservation Plan devotes less than four pages to assessing the biodiversity of these two very different areas.

In its coverage, which is superficial at best, the report acknowledges that there are 3,868ha of Endangered Ecological Communities, 18 threatened plant species, and 22 threatened flora species that will be potentially affected by the proposed development. The absence of rigorous detail is highlighted when the report is compared with a January 2007 Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) Species Impact Statement (SIS) for a car park development at Duffy's Forest. This was for an area that, like in the Growth Centres Strategy, required the removal of Endangered Ecological Communities. The area in the RTA study was about 4000m² or slightly less than half a hectare, and resulted in a 59-page report outlining surveying techniques, assessment of impact of the development, discussion and description of the vegetation.

In comparison, the area of endangered ecological communities in the Growth Centres is approximately 3,800 hectares, or around 8000 times larger than the Duffy's Forest site. Yet the Draft Conservation Plan allocates only three 3 pages, plus maps, to the biodiversity assessment of two incomparably larger and more complex sites.

This glaringly inappropriate and superficial approach by the Commission indicates that the Conservation Plan lacks both rigour and transparency and that its purpose is not so much to assess the presence and conservation of threatened species as to facilitate large-scale development in the south and north west centres regardless of the environmental or social impact.

2. Biodiversity Assessment

Another glaring weakness in the Conservation Plan is its cavalier treatment of the complex issue of Biodiversity assessment.

There is no explanation as to how the assessment occurred. Given the paucity of detail on its methodology, one can only assume that the biodiversity assessment relied heavily on aerial mapping, although presumably all of the information regarding vegetation has come from National Parks and Wildlife Service 'Native Vegetation Maps'.

Indeed, there is no evidence of detailed, on-the-ground study to assess the areas' biodiversity. On-the-ground investigation is required to find endangered plants, insects and animals. A reliance on aerial mapping and the cover of eucalyptus species ignores the fact that areas with scattered or no cover of eucalyptus may still have high flora diversity.

If most of the vegetation data in the Conservation Plan is based on NPWS aerial mapping, there are obvious flaws in this method of assessment, which is mainly based on canopy cover. It does not, for example, provide any analysis of native grasses, a potentially rich source of biodiversity, and we are left with no understanding of where, if at all, these grasses exist.

The Conservation Plan lacks transparency because there is no way to verify the scant evidence provided. Maps give locations of threatened fauna but there is no way to determine what that fauna is. The Greens believe that there are inaccuracies in both sections and that overall the assessment is grossly deficient.

3. Biodiversity Certification

Given the above-mentioned weaknesses in the assessment formulae, we also have concerns with Biodiversity Certification as proposed to be applied to this site. These concerns arise from a lack of biodiversity assessment to support Certification, and from the considerable net loss of threatened species and Endangered Ecological Communities that will result should the Draft Plan be implemented.

We are concerned that the wide scale application of Biodiversity Certification may result in insufficient local/small area assessment taking place. In the Growth Centres, Biodiversity Certification will occur over an area of 27,000ha, of which 3,800ha has already been identified as having high conservation value. The biodiversity assessment should have been completed to the highest possible level of accuracy and detail, so that all threatened species, their distribution and their density are correctly identified.

A far more appropriate approach would have been to undertake a site-by-site SIS. The 'broad brush' approach adopted undoubtedly simplifies development approval, but overlooks the intrinsic differences of the two growth Centres, such as soil types. Because of the potentially greater number of endangered ecological communities in the larger South-West Growth Centre and the higher density of development proposed for the area, the South-West may be disproportionately affected.

As well, it is proposed that Biodiversity Certification will be in force for ten years. Such a long time-frame only allows for very occasional review and removes any requirement for further assessment. It also means that any assessment that is subsequently shown to be inaccurate will be difficult to rectify. Given the untested nature of Biodiversity Certification, the superficial assessment that has been undertaken, and the very large areas to which certification will apply, it would be prudent for the time-frame to be shortened to five years.

It is also worth noting that, since this is one of the first occasions that 'biodiversity certification' has been used in NSW, and that threatened species protection will, in effect, be suspended, it will actually work to undermine the existing Threatened Species Act.

4. Biodiversity Banking

Intrinsic to the success of the scheme is the concept of biobanking, the trading of offsets ('destruction' of the environment in one area can be offset by the 'creation' of new environment in another area). Yet many essential features of the scheme have still not been made public. If the Plan goes ahead, where will the proposed offsets be located? Is it planned

to purchase these offsets simultaneously with the clearing of vegetation in Western Sydney to provide some protection to species that rely on the specific vegetation types that are to be cleared? What guarantee is there that what is ‘traded off’ is comparable to what is provided as ‘offset’? The plan is vague on the details of how the offset areas are to be determined – and there is no indication that they will actually comply with principles agreed with DEC.

Biodiversity banking is a very crude approach to a process that requires a very sophisticated set of actions. Thus the Greens do not support the use of offsets to justify such massive land clearing.

5. Small areas of ‘remnant bushland’.

Another major conceptual fault of the draft plan is that areas of less than 4ha – dismissively labelled ‘remnant bushland’ - will be ignored and not considered separately for protection. Because it is deemed ‘too difficult to manage’, the government has abrogated any responsibilities for any remnant bushland smaller than 4ha.

The broad scale assessment planned for small-scale pieces of land is unlikely to be as thorough as a Species Impact Statement, which is not required for the Growth Centres. If an endangered flora species – such as the rice flower or the downy wattle - or threatened fauna – such as a species of local frog - are found in a small piece of land, they will have no protection against removal or destruction. The Plan also ignores the important role in the ecology of the area played by parks, links and corridors.

6. Impact on threatened species

The loss of native vegetation, as outlined above, will lead directly to the loss of threatened flora species and the loss of those fauna species that rely upon these areas for habitat. Because about 1300ha of endangered Cumberland Plain Woodland are to be cleared to make way for the developments, there are legitimate fears for both flora and fauna.

Information on various threatened species currently present in the Growth Centres areas highlights the impact of development on these species, particularly if there is no recovery plan formulated. The major threat here is fragmentation of populations arising from development. How will offsets appropriately compensate for their loss?

One way would be to insist that rigorous flora and fauna surveys be conducted to gauge the abundance and distribution of existing populations prior to construction. These records will assist in monitoring population decline and evaluating the mitigation measures. Moreover, ongoing monitoring and maintenance are integral for promoting the growth and safety of the newly relocated species.

It is also of concern that the recovery plans for Cumberland Plain Woodland are not finalised. Nor are they integrated into this plan.

7. How little additionally saved compared to what already protected

The argument that the Plan provides ‘adequate protection’ needs to be critically examined.

Currently 476 ha of land are protected through reservation, zoning or planning processes. There is proposed protection of further 967 ha (including 643ha of high quality vegetation). This gives a total of 1,443 ha, plus a further 880 ha to be protected via development controls (precincts?) = 2,323 ha out of a combined area of 27,000 ha

It is possible that 1,329 hectares of Cumberland Plain Woodland will be bulldozed under this Plan. This is 12% of all that remains of this vegetation type. 231 hectares or 13% of Shale/Gravel Transition Forest is also unprotected under the Plan. And currently, much of the land to be protected under the Conservation Plan is flood-prone (and therefore – in theory - already protected).

Overall, the plan will result in the loss of 1,800 ha of endangered vegetation within the Growth Centres.

8. Precinct Planning

The material about Precinct Planning typifies what is wrong with the Conservation Plan overall. It embodies a series of broad generalizations, with no clear guidelines and no timeframe given.

According to the Commission, “a draft Precinct Plan can be prepared by the Growth Centres Commission, or by a local council, or a landowner or landowners on behalf of the Commission”.

But the Commission goes on to acknowledge that “preparing a Precinct Plan will involve further study or research, including detailed investigations into appropriate land use options, physical environmental constraints (topography, vegetation, bushfire mapping, mapping of water courses etc) and infrastructure constraints”.

There appears to be an assumption in all this that Councils will carry the burden of monitoring and regulating these precincts. Yet Local government is already stretched to the limit, and no new resources are allocated by the Commission for the work that will be involved. This reliance on councils to have the ability and expertise to formulate and adopt suitable precinct area controls is but another example of unacknowledged cost-shifting.

9. Conclusion

The Greens NSW submit that the development of the Growth Centres, as outlined in the so-called Conservation Plan, will result in the continued decline of biodiversity in Western Sydney. The Plan’s ‘broad brush’ approach ignores the diversity that will be overlooked that will result from the failure to utilise more sophisticated approaches such as the currently required Species Impact Statements.

The methodology in the Biodiversity Assessment is faulty and this in turn leads to weaknesses in any scheme of biodiversity certification, which is the basis for the use of offsets.

Although the Biodiversity Banking Scheme relies on offsets, there are no clear details as to how these offsets will be determined, specifically as regards similar ecological communities. And, despite the proposed offsets, there will still be a net loss of vegetation (such as the

Cumberland Plain Woodland). Indeed, the plan will result in the loss of 1,800 ha of endangered vegetation within the Growth Centres.

Given the magnitude of development proposed in the Growth Centres, the lack of rigour and transparency in the assessment process, the Draft Conservation Plan should be rejected, and Biodiversity Certification withheld until such time as acceptable methodologies for ascertaining, preserving and maintaining endangered ecological communities are determined and implemented.

Sylvia Hale, MLC