

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Reassessment of old growth mapping and environmental values on coastal state forests

The Premier requests the Natural Resources Commission (the Commission) to independently oversee a program to reassess existing old growth forest mapping and associated special environmental values on coastal State forests.

This will help ensure the NSW Government can meet its commitments to no net change to wood supply and no loss of environmental values under the new Coastal Integrated Forestry Operations Approval (IFOA) (the Twin Commitments), while continuing to improve the evidence base of NSW's forest estate.

Background

The NSW Government is committed to ecologically sustainable forest management and the use of best available evidence to support decision making. Recently, the government has remapped Threatened Ecological Communities, stream and koala habitat on State forests to support the implementation of the new Coastal IFOA. In addition, new fish habitat modelling has been completed to improve protections of threatened habitat across NSW.

In 2017, the Premier asked the Commission whether the NSW Government could assess the accuracy of old growth forest mapping and rezone as appropriate as a means to maintain wood supply and environmental values. The Commission engaged the Office of Environment and Heritage's Native Vegetation Information Science Branch to independently remap a number of pilot sites in north coast State forests.

The Commission identified significant inaccuracies in current old growth forest maps, in terms of forest extent or location. The Commission recommended a mapping process to identify and reassess sites that were incorrectly mapped as old growth forests that could offset timber supply shortfalls should they be verified.

In addition, the Commission recommended approaches to ensure environmental values are maintained, including steps to assess high-quality habitat and protect potential unmapped old growth forest areas. The Commission also recommended the Government adopt measures to ensure an open and transparent approach to implementing its recommendations.

The NSW Government adopted the Commission's recommended framework to reassess old growth forests in 2018.¹

Scope

In line with the Government's response:

- The Commission will oversee a program to reassess old growth mapping on specific coastal State forest sites to ensure the Government's twin commitments for no change in wood supply and no erosion of environmental values are met.
- The Commission will oversee the Office of Environment and Heritage's development and implementation of a framework for assessing the special environmental and conservation values of potential sites as part of this process

Consistent with the Commission's 2018 recommendations, any remapped sites must maintain the NSW and Australian Governments' commitment to JANIS old growth forest ecosystem type targets as defined in the relevant Regional Forest Agreements if subsequent rezoning was to occur. Forest ecosystem types can contain both commercial and non-commercial timber species.

¹ NSW Government response to the Natural Resources Commission reports – advice on the IFOA remake – May 2018

The Commission will establish linkages with this task to the NSW Government's new cross-tenure ecological sustainable forest monitoring, evaluation and reporting program.

The Commission will consult the community to build trust and provide transparency.

Roles and tasks

The Office of Environment and Heritage will:

1. develop an old growth reassessment protocol taking into account relevant definitions and assessment criteria for old growth,
2. develop a framework for assessing the special environmental/conservation values to be applied in circumstances where old growth forests are confirmed absent in the existing mapping,
3. implement the old growth reassessment and remapping, and the environmental values assessment under direction of the Commission and deliver map and assessment products to the Commission.

The Commission will:

1. oversee the information gathering and special environmental value reassessment work, including independent environmental assessments carried out by the Office of Environment and Heritage.
2. develop an overarching assessment and decision making framework that includes:
 - o a method and process to identify and reassess areas in state forests that:
 - are currently mapped as containing old growth forests, but may not contain old growth forests
 - are currently not mapped as containing old growth forests, but may contain old growth forests
 - o a method to verify any change in wood supply on State forests arising from implementing the settings in the new Coastal IFOA
 - o the Office of Environment and Heritage's framework for assessing the special environmental/conservation values
 - o a methodology to allow decision makers to determine the implications for the twin commitments – at the site and landscape scale – of changing existing reserve boundaries, based on the assessment.
3. consult the community on:
 - o the methods to reassess old growth and assess special environmental and conservation values, in collaboration with the Office of Environment and Heritage
 - o the areas proposed to be reassessed
 - o any other matters directly related to the scope of works.
4. advise the Government on:
 - o a proposed assessment and decision making framework for old growth forests in State forests, including stakeholder feedback, for Government's consideration,
 - o if the proposed framework is adopted by Government, information about the reassessed and remapped old growth areas, including stakeholder feedback and implications for the twin commitments at the site and landscape scale.

In undertaking the work, the Commission will also consult with the Environment Protection Authority, the Forestry Corporation of NSW, Department of Primary Industries, Local Land

Services, the community and industry. Consultation with the relevant Australian Government agencies may be required.

Timeframes

The Commission will:

- within 9 months of receiving this request - develop and seek community feedback on a draft assessment and decision making framework
- within 12 months of receiving this request - provide the Premier, the Minister for Environment and the Minister for Lands and Forestry with a proposed assessment and decision making framework

and, if the assessment and decision making framework is adopted by Government:

- every year until 2022 - reassess and remap old growth areas and provide advice to government about implications for the twin commitments at the site and landscape scale.