



Hon Craig Wallace MP
Minister for Main Roads
PO Box 15456
Brisbane Qld 4001

26 August 2009

via email: mainroads@ministerial.qld.gov.au

Dear Minister,

Re: New England Highway Upgrade

I have been directed by the State Council of Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (Wildlife Queensland) to bring to your notice our concerns about the proposed upgrade of the New England Highway between Geham and Hampton.

Wildlife Queensland is one of the longest established and most respected wildlife-focused conservation groups in Queensland. With over 3500 supporters spread across numerous branches throughout Queensland, Wildlife Queensland is a strong voice for our wildlife and its habitat.

Wildlife Queensland is apolitical. Our aims include;

- Preserve the flora and fauna of Australia by all lawful means
- Educate the community in an understanding of the principles of conservation and preservation of the natural environment
- Discourage by all legal means, the possible destruction, exploitation and unnecessary development of any part of the natural environment
- Encourage rational land use and proper land planning of existing and future development, and the use of the natural environment and its management

Wildlife Queensland is in full support of safe roads for both humans and wildlife. Wildlife Queensland is strongly opposed to the clearing of the road reserve for the upgrade of this stretch of the New England highway and advocates a reduction of the speed limit from 100kmph to 80kmph for this 10km stretch of road. The clearing of this road reserve will have significant impacts on biodiversity and the scenic and tourist value of this area. Wildlife Queensland acknowledges that the proposed upgrade is currently under review by your department so we urge you to take this opportunity to consider a more sustainable alternative to developing a safer road for humans and wildlife.

A safe and more sustainable upgrade is provided for consideration that will minimize the potential loss to tourism value and biodiversity.

Tourist Value

This section of road is one of the iconic drives of the New England Highway and is clearly identifiable with the experience of the High Country. The avenue effect of the tall eucalypt forest that lines the highway has resulted in it being referred to as "Cathedral Drive" and photographs of this drive have been used extensively in tourism marketing and many local, regional and state publications. There is no doubt that the removal of 1400 trees will drastically alter this landscape and its tourist value.

Biodiversity

This road reserve holds significant value for the biodiversity of the region. It serves as a critical corridor for wildlife movement due to much of the adjoining land being cleared. Corridors such as this are vital for connectivity and the ability for biodiversity to adapt to climate change. The removal of 1400 trees, many of which are mature hollow-bearing eucalypts will result in the destruction of habitat supporting a number of State and nationally listed threatened species including the Glossy Black Cockatoo (Vulnerable NC Act), Powerful Owl (Vulnerable NC Act), Koala (Vulnerable in southeast Queensland bioregion NC Act), Grey Goshawk (Rare NC Act, Migratory EPBC Act), Regent Honeyeater (Endangered EPBC Act), Swift Parrot (Endangered EPBC Act), Grey-headed Flying-fox (Vulnerable EPBC Act).

The vegetation community within the area is classified as Regional Ecosystem (R.E.) 12.5.6c and is "Endangered" according to the Vegetation Management Act. This R.E. is highly restricted and only occurs in isolated remnants between Toowoomba and Ravensbourne/Pechey. Queensland Ash (*Eucalyptus montivaga*) occurs within the site and is endemic to Queensland and closely related to the more southern New England Blackbutt (*Eucalyptus andrewsii*). At Hampton, it is growing almost at the southern limit of its patchy distribution. The only examples of Queensland Ash occurring further south than Hampton are in the highly fragmented vegetation of Middle Ridge in Toowoomba. The old hollow-bearing eucalypt trees provide valuable habitat for a range of arboreal mammals including Greater, Sugar and Squirrel Gliders, Common Brushtail and Ringtail possums and various microbats that are known to be present in this area. As well as offering shelter and protection to these arboreal mammals, these hollow-forming trees are also important nesting and shelter refuges for a large range of woodland birds including owls, the owlet-nightjar, kingfishers and hosts of parrots and cockatoos. For many species, the use of hollows is obligate and no other habitat resource represents a feasible substitute. A hollow suitable for occupancy by vertebrate fauna generally does not occur in eucalypts that are less than 120 – 180 years and large hollows are usually found in eucalypts greater than 220 years. Approximately 100 species of vertebrates that use hollows are listed as rare, threatened, or near-threatened on state or commonwealth legislation. Protecting hollow-bearing trees is vital for the conservation of these species (Gibbons and Lindenmayer 2002)*.

Alternatives

Statistics particularly those related to road safety are being used to justify this upgrade. These statistics need close scrutiny as it is of our understanding that they relate to the entire stretch of the New England Highway not the particular 10km stretch known as 'Cathedral Drive'. Once again Wildlife Queensland acknowledges the need for safe roads however is strongly opposed to the destruction of this key wildlife habitat in the guise of safety when there are a number of safe and more sustainable alternatives.

* Gibbons, P. and Lindenmayer, D. 2002 *Tree Hollows and Wildlife Conservation in Australia*. CSIRO Publishing

A reduction of the speed limit from 100kmph to 80kmph for this 10km stretch of road will save lives, save tourist value and save wildlife. By reducing the speed limit a driver adds only 1.5 minutes to their driving time. Another option is to resume a strip of the adjoining forestry land to create a new road for southbound traffic and retain the existing road for northbound traffic. This would dramatically improve safety while maintaining wildlife habitat and tourist value. Signage advising of wildlife zones may assist in users understanding the need for slower speeds.


If the biodiversity values and tourism values of this area are to be protected it is vital that the proposed vehicle inspection site which requires 200m of clearing on either side of the road in the Cathedral Drive strip be relocated to a cleared area elsewhere on the highway such as Cabarlah. Wildlife Queensland is of the opinion that should any clearing go ahead as a last resort the land must be offset.

Conclusion

Wildlife Queensland and its supporters anticipate a decision from your Government that delivers a safe road that maintains the tourism and biodiversity values of the area. Failure to do so will give us no option but to advise our members and supporters of the apparent lack of care for wildlife shown by your Government.

Wildlife Queensland would like to thank you for considering our comments; we will be awaiting the results of your review to determine future actions.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'F Maxwell', written in a cursive style.

Fiona Maxwell
Community Conservation Officer
Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland