



The Hon Gabrielle Upton MP
Minister for the Environment
Minister for Local Government
Minister for Heritage

Mr Alan Page
Blue Mountains Conservation Society

By email: webmaster@bluemountains.org.au

Dear Mr Page

I write in response to the Blue Mountains Conservation Society's questions for candidates of the major parties ahead of the March 2019 State election.

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government is delivering strong actions and reforms that are modernising our land management and conservation laws, enhancing our protected areas, preserving our biodiversity and iconic species, improving how native forestry is regulated on both public and private land, cleaning up our environment and helping NSW transition to a low-carbon future.

Protecting our World Heritage National Parks

Questions 1.1 – 1.4

On 4 February 2019, the NSW Liberals & Nationals Government announced that if re-elected in March this year we will invest nearly \$150 million to deliver world-class facilities for our national parks and make it easier for everyone to enjoy our natural environment.

This investment will improve accessibility on over 1,000 national park walking tracks, with more than 200 of the most popular trails being substantially upgraded, including in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWhA).

This builds on our 2018-19 Budget commitment to invest \$1.9 billion to protect our environment and heritage, including \$632.3 million (\$2.5 billion over four years) for national parks, walking trails and public parklands.

There are more than 870 national parks and reserves in NSW and there are many reasons why there are different categories of protected areas. In addition to their role in conservation, national parks and reserves provide an important opportunity for nature appreciation, enjoyment and improving public awareness of our environment.

When assessing the merits of any proposed adaptive reuse, tourism or infrastructure activity, the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 includes checks and balances to ensure a possible proposal is appropriate for the environment and heritage values of the park, and for the community.

Further, a statutory Plan of Management sets out how a national park will be sustainably managed to protect and enhance its environmental, cultural and community values into the future. A plan requires consultation with the community, statutory committees, and approval by the Minister for the Environment.

A two-year trial of horse riding on trails in wilderness areas in four national parks was undertaken in 2014-16. It found there were minimal impacts from horse riding and that wilderness values were not adversely impacted. A report was published in July 2017 and is available on the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) Wilderness horse riding trial webpage.

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government is committed to conserving and protecting our unique biodiversity across NSW, and the biodiversity in the GBMWSHA is no exception. In particular, the Government has invested \$100 million over five years into the Saving our Species program, making it one of the largest conservation programs of its kind in Australia. Projects in the GBMWSHA include nearly \$200,000 being invested towards securing the Wollemi Pine – four strands of which are found within a few remote canyons in the Blue Mountains.

Question 1.5 – Raising Warragamba Dam

The Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley has the highest single flood exposure in Australia. The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government supports the dam proposal in order to reduce the significant risk that exists now for downstream communities.

For example, if a flood similar to the valley's worst since European settlement happened again, hundreds of lives would be in danger. Around 90,000 people would need to be evacuated and around 12,000 homes would be affected.

In preparing Resilient Valley, Resilient Communities, the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley Flood Risk Management Strategy, all options to mitigate flood risk were carefully assessed, including regional road upgrades, new dams, river diversions, dredging the river and raising Warragamba Dam. Options to operate the existing Warragamba Dam differently were considered as well as changes to the operation of the overall water supply system.

Raising Warragamba Dam by around 14 metres was found to be the most effective infrastructure option for reducing regional flood risk. It balances the safety of thousands of people living and working downstream with the impacts of temporary inundation on the upstream environment.

Raising the Dam for flood mitigation purposes will not allow one additional dwelling to be developed above what is already permissible. There will be a rigorous EIS process conducted in mid-2019. It's important that we find a balance between environmental concerns and the lives and property of people who already live downstream.

Questions 1.6-1.7

The NSW Government supports the Commonwealth Government's investment in a new airport for Western Sydney. The flight paths for Western Sydney Airport will be finalised much closer to operations commencing in 2026. This will include public exhibition and community consultation on the preferred design.

Construction of the Western Sydney Airport provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to catalyse new investment and attract great new jobs for people in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains.

Through the Western Sydney City Deal, the NSW Government has partnered with the Commonwealth Government and the eight local councils of the Western City, including Blue Mountains City Council, to invest in a range of city-building initiatives that will improve the prosperity, sustainability and liveability of Western Sydney.

This includes more than \$18 million for Blue Mountains projects as part of the City Deal Liveability Fund.

Expand our National Parks

Questions 2.1-2.3

The NSW Government acquires land for national parks to reflect and protect the wide variety of landscapes and environments in NSW. New parks and additions to parks are created through land acquired by purchase, donation or transfer. All land suggested for new or additional park land is assessed and approved before it is acquired.

On 4 February 2019, the NSW Government announced its newest national park which covers 3,680 hectares and contains some of the Southern Highlands' best koala habitat. This new national park will ensure that a vital koala wilderness area south of Sydney is preserved.

Appropriate Local Development

Question 3.1 – Residential Character Conservation Zone (R6)

The NSW Government recognises the importance of character to local areas and neighbourhoods and as such has developed guidance for local councils and other relevant planning authorities, state agencies and communities about the tools available to them to incorporate local character into strategic planning and detailed planning for places.

The Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) is working with Blue Mountains City Council on identifying areas where an overlay may be possible.

Question 3.2 – Deforestation and Excessive Land Clearing

The NSW Government has modernised the state's land management and conservation laws. The *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*, the *Local Land Services Amendment Act 2016* and supporting regulations commenced in August last year. The laws have a clear purpose – to maintain a healthy, productive and resilient environment.

This legislation also establishes strong offences and tougher penalties for illegal clearing and harming threatened species. In addition, the Land Management (Native Vegetation) Code contains a range of protections and safeguards for the environment. For example, clearing is not permitted on sensitive lands including core koala habitat.

NSW Government policies that regulate the clearing of vegetation in urban areas provide a robust framework for councils to protect urban bushland and trees while supporting landholders to manage their properties.

The 10/50 Vegetation Clearing Scheme allows land-owners in nominated areas to clear certain vegetation on their property without council permission, but it does not give them permission to harm threatened or protected species, such as koalas.

The NSW Government has also put in place initiatives such as Five Million Trees which aims to increase Greater Sydney's tree canopy to 40 per cent by 2030 by planting more trees in streets, parks, bushland areas and yards.

As outlined in the NSW Forestry Industry Roadmap, the NSW Government is committed to the long term and ecologically sustainable management of NSW's forests. The *Forestry Legislation Amendment Act 2018* provides increased penalties for breaking the rules from \$1,100 to \$15,000 and introduces other enforcement tools, such as remediation orders and temporary stop work orders.

In addition, the new Coastal Integrated Forestry Operations Approval (IFOA) commenced on 16 November. The Coastal IFOA replaces outdated rules that had been in place for nearly 20-years and sets more efficient, effective and enforceable rules to better protect threatened plants, animals, habitat, soils and waterways.

Questions 3.3. – Control Invasive Species

The NSW Government is committed to addressing the negative impacts of invasive species on the environment, economy and community. A clear goal under the NSW Invasive Species Plan is eradication of invasive species where possible.

The Plan supports the NSW Biosecurity Strategy 2013–2021 and identifies key actions to help prevent new incursions, eliminate or contain existing populations and effectively manage already widespread invasive species.

Question 3.4 – Medium Density Housing Code

The Government in principle supports Blue Mountains Council's intention to provide for the special character of its local areas through appropriate means.

Discussions have been held with council officers and it was agreed that consideration would be given to Council mapping special character areas and introducing clauses into Council's local environmental plan that will guide development in these special areas.

Climate Change and Coal Mining

Questions 4.1-4.3

All exploration and mining activity in New South Wales (NSW) must be conducted in accordance with an authority issued under the Mining Act 1992. Certain exploration and mining activities also trigger the requirement for additional approvals and other NSW legislation may also apply.

All mining proposals are assessed under an independent, rigorous and merit based planning system. Approved mines must also comply with stringent performance measures and monitoring by NSW Government agencies.

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government is committed to action on climate change. The NSW Climate Change Policy Framework includes objectives to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 and for NSW to be more resilient to climate change.

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government is also taking a broad range of actions to produce the right conditions for favourable energy outcomes. One action is creating the NSW Transmission Infrastructure Strategy. The strategy is the NSW Government's plan to facilitate priority transmission infrastructure which can deliver least-cost energy to customers to 2040 and beyond.

In December 2018, we completed the actions announced as part of the Renewable Energy Action Plan (REAP), which was released in 2013. The plan contained 24 actions to increase renewable energy generation in NSW, at least cost to energy customers and with maximum benefits to our state. All 24 actions have been completed, creating a strong and durable basis for the continued growth of the renewable energy sector in NSW.

As at January 2019, 90 projects totalling almost 18,500 megawatts of large-scale renewable energy projects have either been approved or are progressing through the NSW planning system. This represents close to \$26 billion in investment.

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government is also investing a total of \$1.4 billion from 2017 to 2022 to improve our energy security, place downward pressure on bills and reduce emissions.

In 2018 the NSW Liberals & Nationals government announced a major clean energy package to support an orderly transition to a modern energy system and deliver better energy outcomes for households and businesses. The package included the:

- \$30 million Regional Community Energy Program, to help communities build their own local clean energy projects and develop backup power systems
- \$55 million Emerging Energy Program, to encourage private sector investment in large-scale energy and storage projects
- \$15 million Solar for Low Income Households trial program, to provide up to 3,400 rooftop solar power systems for low income households
- \$50 million Smart Energy for Homes and Businesses, to allow smart energy devices to assist at times of extreme demand on the network
- \$20 million Smart Batteries for Key Government Sites Program, so government buildings with rooftop solar systems can offer demand response.

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government has also recently committed to take the pressure off household energy costs and lower emissions by supporting the rollout of up to 300,000 new solar energy and battery storage systems with no upfront costs through interest-free loans.

The *Empowering Homes* program will be open to owner-occupiers of a house with an annual household income of up to \$180,000. Loans of up to \$14,000 per solar-battery system and \$9,000 per battery systems will be available.

This new initiative will help to unlock up to \$3.2 billion in clean energy investment over 10 years, helping to boost NSW's renewable energy and reduce emissions. The batteries will add up to 3,000MWh of storage when the program is fully rolled out.

Question 4.4 – Independent Planning Commission Members

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government is committed to ensuring that the IPC panel includes qualified individuals that ensures environmental issues are able to be properly considered.

Members of the Commission are appointed by the Minister for Planning based on their qualifications and considerable expertise in a diverse range of planning-related fields.

Waste and Recycling

Question 5.1 – Single-Use Plastic Bags and Products Containing Microbeads

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government recognises that single-use plastics can negatively impact the environment. It is great to see the concerted efforts of the community and major retailers in NSW who have acted to reduce the use of plastic bags.

As you may already be aware, major retailers including Coles, Woolworths, Harris Farm Markets and IGA volunteered to phase out lightweight plastic shopping bags from their shops from the middle of 2018. Major supermarket chains have been the largest providers of single-use plastic shopping bags in NSW and the NSW Government

commends their proactive steps to address this important issue, without the need for a ban.

In 2016, Australian environment ministers announced a voluntary phase-out of plastic microbeads. This commitment is on track with 94 per cent of cosmetic and personal care products now microbead-free. The NSW Government remains committed to the national process to eliminate the final six per cent.

The NSW Liberals & Nationals Government is taking action on litter – a major source of plastic pollution. Plastic bags make up a very small percentage of our litter volume. Before the introduction of the NSW container deposit scheme, Return and Earn, drink containers made up nearly 50 per cent of the litter volume in NSW.

We introduced Return and Earn as part of our priority action to reduce the volume of litter in NSW by 40 per cent by 2020. The overwhelming response from the community means we have already exceeded our target. Over 1.3 billion eligible drink containers have already been returned across NSW. Eligible drink container litter volume has dropped by 44 per cent and NSW's overall litter volume has dropped by 48 per cent.

Yours sincerely



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