

## THE CUMBERLAND PLAIN CONSERVATION PLAN (CPCP)

### Balancing Agricultural Production & Biodiversity Protection

Western Sydney is a fascinating mix of Agricultural, Lifestyle and Bush lands. This mix of uses have been balanced and supported for generations. This has been achieved by key plans targeting each outcome to the appropriate landuse. In particular the Western Sydney District Plan prioritises biodiversity protection in bushland areas and agricultural production in lands already disturbed by production. The CPCP fails to support this balance. Instead it includes large proportions of agricultural land in its 'Strategic Conservation Areas', prioritising the revegetation of agricultural land over the conservation of bushland. There are no up sides to this – it is a failure for the environment, a failure for sustainable agriculture and a failure for landowners & community.

### The Western Sydney District Plan

The Western Sydney District Plan understands that Western Sydney needs to support both Agricultural Production & Biodiversity Protection. The Western Sydney District Plan espouses "design-led place-based planning in the MRA to help manage environmental, social and economic values, maximise the productive use of rural areas, and incentivise biodiversity protection for remnant bushland vegetation."

The word "bushland" is the key word. The Western Sydney District Plan correctly identifies existing bushland as the priority for conservation efforts, while areas subject to past or ongoing agricultural use provide little or no value for conservation.

By contrast the CPCP includes large areas of Agricultural land in the Strategic Conservation Areas (SCA). This earmarks large areas of agricultural uses for revegetation. This generates two problems – it reduces support for the continuation of Agricultural uses of the land, and it prioritises revegetation where funds could instead assist the conservation of existing bushland elsewhere.

***The CPCP is in direct conflict with the Western Sydney District Plan. The SCA mapping should be revised to maintain an agricultural vision for agricultural land, and target conservation at bushland only.***

### Revegetation does not restore Cumberland Plain Woodland

It has been recognised for decades that revegetation is no substitute for the conservation of existing bushland. So why is the CPCP so determined to use it?

NSW Government ecologists Tony Auld & Mark Tozer reviewed this issue for Western Sydney in 2004 noting that '*Any revegetation should not be traded off against the key importance of retaining all existing remnants*'. This advice was ignored and vast revegetation efforts were made by Greening Australia on government land (now the Western Sydney Parklands).

The Western Sydney University undertook extensive research on this revegetation and demonstrated that the vegetation planted will never become the same as remnant bushland (read for example Nichols P, Morris EC, Keith D (2005) Restoration of Cumberland Plain Woodland: is it possible by planting trees?).

The recent 'scalp-and-seed' or 'grassy groundcover' techniques undertaken by Toolijooa and Greening Australia is no different. They publicised the early results of their Camden project as a great successes (mostly by including Couch weed as a native species!) but this 'successful' site continues to degrade – the *best* site for this technique presently has less than 20% native ground cover.

***The CPCP should reflect the scientific evidence and look to conserve existing bushland – revegetation detracts funds that could otherwise conserve existing bushland***

#### The Strategic Conservation Area (SCA) & Our Farm

The areas mapped in the SCAs on our farm are mostly not remnant bushland vegetation. Rather than 'maximise' the productive use of our rural area, the CPCP would minimise the productive use of our farm.

Over the 40+ years (three generations) of our family's ownership of the farm we have actively conserved whatever trees are left in the farmland area for shade for our animals and also to enhance the farm. We have never considered them to be worthy of conservation for a biobank (now called stewardship site).

The CPCP seeks to map not only 'bushland' (Cumberland Plain Woodland) but other 'degraded' land (land which has been cleared and cultivated over the last two centuries as farmland for agricultural purposes). It is a well-known fact in the bush regeneration world that the mere planting of trees in an area will not produce an ecosystem and the planting of local species on previously cultivated land will not reproduce Cumberland Plain Woodland - it will simply produce trees (and weeds).

Our farm is a prime example of inaccurate mapping of Strategic Conservation Areas as indicated on the attached 3 maps, as, I am sure would be many other areas within the MRA.

Of the ■■■ hectares of our farm, ■■ hectares is already conserved as a Biobank, leaving ■■ hectares as farmland. Of that ■■ hectares the Cumberland Plain Conservation Plan has mapped ■■ hectares as a CPW Conservation Area (which have been in cultivation via rotational grazing for nearly all of that time), leaving us with ■■■■ hectares of cultivation.

***The CPCP effectively sterilises our farm for any future planning or development and we believe is effectively land acquisition by the State with no compensation. The "Plan" is to conserve our property on the off chance that one day in the future it might be able to be reconstructed as CPW. This, in our view is not a "Plan".***

#### Failure to incentivise any further conservation of CPW

The CPCP relies on biodiversity offsets from landowners like us. If it is to succeed it needs to ensure that the best possible incentives are on offer to assist landowners conserve bushland as offsets.

Landowners will only voluntarily conserve bushland if it is economical to do so. However the NSW government have made changes to the scheme which now inhibit – rather than encourage – landowners to participate. Instead of addressing these issues the CPCP exacerbates them – ensuring that there will not be sufficient offset lands on offer to meet their requirements.

The 'free-market' based system of offset sale and purchase, which attracted the first landowners into the scheme, has now been centralised within the BCT. This has allowed the government to drive down the price of offsets through a regulated rather than a free-market. This has been achieved through the BCT's Conservation Tenders, purchasing offsets from developers at lower than previous free-market prices, and the decision to no longer publicise the trading price of offsets – leaving landowners blind as to what price the BCT has set for the offsets. This results in very little incentive for any landowner to participate in the scheme and many who could are deciding not to participate.

The CPCP also exacerbates a second problem – the use of existing public land as offsets. Government agencies do not need to earn a living off the land, nor do they pay tax on their land. This means government are able to sell biodiversity offsets for their land far cheaper than we can as landowners. The CPCP allows offset of public land which has already been conserved. It even includes reserves in its SCA priority offset areas (for example a host of reserves on the Georges River in Liverpool).

***If the CPCP means to succeed it needs to include mechanisms to ensure a market-based price for its offsets, and to make existing government land ineligible so that farmers who wish to can afford to offer bushland for conservation***

#### Future of our farm

We currently have a right to ■ hectare minimum subdivisions on our farm. With this CPW Plan overlaid with Wollondilly Local Council Plans (Rural Lands Strategy ((a misnomer)) and Scenic Landscape Plan) our farm will become property of the "State" - we are informed that it is for the benefit of Society as a whole and it appears with absolutely no consideration of us as rural landholders who are now expected to hold our land for everyone's benefit but our own.

Currently the right to subdivide ("optionality") and benefit is part of the basis for the pricing of offset credits. With the drive to retain current landholdings without subdivision, to lessen the costs of land for residential lot developers, that "optionality" is lost and so developers win twice. Their land costs are reduced and their offset costs are reduced.

We believe that the NSW Planning Department has totally overstepped its role. The Western Sydney District Plan should be re-drafted with a view to considering the ongoing viability of rural landholders both in the MRA and the Wollondilly Shire. Our understanding is that all Plans or Strategies must be based on Social, Economic and Environmental impacts. The impact of the CPW Plan and the other local plans which lie below it have a huge economic and social impact on rural landholders both within the MRA and the Wollondilly Shire.

## Expropriation of our Land

The Proposed CPCP land acquisition mechanisms include:-

*"Market purchase - Land would be purchased on a voluntary basis through a negotiated sale with the landholder. The Office of Strategic Lands would pay the market value of the land."*

The **CPCP** by mapping privately owned rural land as "Conservation" for sometime in the future (not sure when), and not certain if it will ever be required is effectively (and probably purposely) devaluing the land's market value so that by the time Planning makes it mind up whether it wants it or not the market value will be just a fraction of its current value - an advantage to the State Government or Developers in the future, but a huge disadvantage to rural landholders.

***If the CPCP intends to "freeze" our land for something that may or may not occur in the future then rural landholders should be compensated/subsidised to maintain it in its current state.***

## Conclusion

In conclusion - The idea that a NSW State Authority can effectively expropriate our land for a possible use sometime in the future with no real plan of implementation and leave the implementation to the subjective view of a local town planning officer defies belief in this Democracy we live in.

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The Oaks 2570

6th October, 2020