

PRESS RELEASE

Gerroa Environmental Protection Society - 19 February, 2015

Illawarra's nature treasures under threat from proposed changes to nature conservation laws

The Baird government is poised to scrap nature conservation laws that currently protect some of the Illawarra region's most important natural areas, including Seven Mile Beach, Saddleback Mountain rainforests and the Illawarra Escarpment, according to the Gerroa Environmental Protection Society.

The government is considering its response to a report by the Independent Biodiversity Legislation Review Panel, which has recommended scrapping the *Native Vegetation Act*, the *Threatened Species Conservation Act* and parts of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act*.

"If the Baird government adopts the report recommendations it would be the most far-reaching dismantling of environmental protection laws ever proposed in this state," **GEPS secretary Howard Jones said.**

"The Report acknowledges that some of its proposals could lead to loss of biodiversity and its approach is risk-based.

"These proposals open the door to increased clearing of native vegetation. The purpose of existing biodiversity protection laws is to reduce land clearing and protect biodiversity. This Report heralds a different purpose that aims to make it easier for economic activities like agriculture, logging, development and mining within native vegetation areas. The mechanisms they propose to achieve this is; reduced regulations, self-regulation, the 'broadening and deepening of biodiversity offsets' and divestment of responsibility to Local Land Services and Councils.

"If this approach is accepted, the native vegetation in the Illawarra would be vulnerable.

"Although 87% of the Kiama's original rainforest has been cleared, the areas that still stand are part of the largest area of subtropical rainforest in southeast Australia.

"Now that the council tree preservation orders no longer apply to this vegetation, its conservation depends on strong native vegetation and threatened species legislation.

"We fear that scrapping these Acts will make it easier for development to occur within this endangered ecological community."

GEPS will hold a protest at Saddleback Lookout at midday on Wednesday 25th February to highlight these threats to Kiama's rainforest.

"We also want to raise concerns about the consequences for landholders who have entered into Voluntary Conservation Agreements (VCAs) on their lands. **Howard Jones said.**

"The Report proposes to enable Voluntary Conservation Agreements to be swapped for Biodiversity Offsetting Agreements. This would mean the values of these already conserved lands could be used to offset clearing of vegetation elsewhere, resulting in overall biodiversity losses.

“When we signed the Voluntary Conservation Agreement on our property, we thought its biodiversity values would be conserved forever.

“We are horrified to think that at some time in the future our VCA protected land in this remarkable rainforest could become a tool to enable vegetation destruction in other areas.

“We want to know whether the Baird government intends to adopt the recommendations in this report and go down the Queensland path of tearing down environmental protection.

“We hope that candidates and media will keep them to their commitment to announce their intentions unambiguously before the coming election so voters can determine if this government seriously cares about the environment.”

Local landowners with Voluntary Conservation Agreements and GEPS members and friends will gather at Saddleback Mountain Lookout near Kiama to express their concerns about these changes at 12:00 on Wednesday 25th February.

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