

From: David M Watson, Associate Professor in Ecology, founding member of the Slopes to Summit partnership

To: New South Wales Joint Regional Planning Panel

Re: Proposed Transpacific Cleanaway Composting Facility at 'Kalawa' Gerogery

Date: 16 August 2013

I am writing to express my concern over the medium and long-term impacts of this proposed development on the local environment and request that this letter be tabled at the 22 August meeting in Culcairn. I will attend the meeting in person and highlight the key points identified herein.

I am a research scientist based at the Albury campus of Charles Sturt University and have been conducting research on the ecology of temperate woodlands in south-eastern Australia since 1994. My three main areas of expertise are the biological consequences of habitat fragmentation, biodiversity conservation in agricultural landscapes and the ecology of plant-animal interactions. Additionally, I am an international authority on the ecology of birds and mistletoes.

Although I am supportive of turning domestic and commercial waste into compost, thereby reducing land-fill and making best use of the constituent organic matter and nutrients, I have numerous concerns with the intended location of this proposed facility.

1. LOCAL THREATENED SPECIES IMPACTS

The Yambla Range, or 'Tabletop' represents the largest and most intact remnant of grassy box woodland in Australia—it is an iconic site of international importance. It currently supports healthy populations of more than twenty species listed as vulnerable or threatened in NSW, including Squirrel Glider, Spotted-tailed Quoll, Turquoise Parrot and Little Eagle. The predominant habitat (White Box, Yellow Box and Blakely's Red Gum Woodland) is listed as an endangered ecological community (both in NSW and Federally), with less than 7% of the pre-European remaining in the Holbrook / Gerogery area.

2. WIDER LANDSCAPE IMPACTS

In addition to supporting significant resident populations, 'Tabletop' represents the source of many animals that range throughout the Billabong Creek catchment and wider region. It is this aspect that has motivated the prioritization of this area by the Slopes to Summit Partnership, a regional hub of the 'Great Eastern Ranges Initiative' which aims to enhance habitat connectivity in a 2,800km belt along the entire eastern seaboard of Australia. While extensive forest occurs in the higher elevation areas of the southwest slopes bioregion, the remaining woodlands at lower elevations are a series of disconnected remnants, most of which are too small or of insufficient quality to sustain resident populations of species facing local and regional extinction.

3. OFFSET MEASURES SHOULD BE SIGNIFICANT

While the development itself is relatively localized, the impact of greatly increased traffic volumes will have pervasive effects on the natural heritage of the surrounding area. As part of the upgrade of the Hume Highway to a dual carriageway, considerable efforts were made to minimize impacts on native fauna, with numerous rope bridges, glider poles and other crossing structures installed to facilitate animal movement. If this development proceeds, those squirrel glider populations in the vicinity of 'Five Mates Crossing' and all associated feeder roads will be most impacted, but further direct and indirect effects on a wide range of fauna are likely.

4. COMMUNITY IMPACT

The timing of this development application is especially poor, coinciding with two major initiatives centred on the Yambla Range to enhance habitat connectivity and promote an understanding of biodiversity in the broader community. The Bushlinks project (funded under the Australian Government's Clean Energy Futures / Biodiversity Fund) aims to safeguard native vegetation on private land, prioritizing riparian areas and rocky outcrops between 'Tabletop' and foothill forests on the eastern side of the Hume Highway. This project, overseen by the Holbrook Landcare Network aims to increase connectivity, improve habitat quality and raise awareness about the value of native vegetation, both for wildlife and for long-term carbon storage. The second project is the 2013 Bioblitz, organized by the Slopes to Summit Partnership. A three day event in early September comprising field surveys, fauna trapping and information exchange, this year's Bioblitz is comparing sites within Woomargama National Park with sites on private land adjoining the Yambla Range. The main aim of this event is to improve understanding about local flora and fauna, especially among land-holders and school children, with many hands-on activities and opportunities for participation.

5. TOURISM IMPACT—current and future

Many regions have their favourite locations, distinctive parts of the landscape to which people gravitate. The greater Albury region has several places which fit this bill, but 'Tabletop' is at the very top of this list—seen from across the plains, changing in shape as you drive along the highway. Constructing a large composting facility in this region may have advantages, but locating such a facility in a place of such grandeur and beauty would be a very short-sighted decision, greatly diminishing future opportunities for tourism and environmentally-sensitive development in the coming years. Although the property of 'Kalawa' including most of the Yambla Range is currently privately owned, numerous groups (both governmental and non-governmental) are interesting in acquiring the property, to manage this significant natural and cultural asset in perpetuity. Locating this facility on the flanks of this range would greatly diminish these longer-term opportunities, constraining future development and compromising the amenities of this beautiful corner of our countryside.

I thank the Joint Regional Planning Panel for considering this submission as part of their deliberations, and hope it helps clarify that any short-term benefits of approving this development would be greatly outweighed by medium-and long-term drawbacks.

Sincerely,



David M Watson