

Logging looms in national parks

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Contentious: A parliamentary inquiry has recommended logging in national parks. Photo: Steven Siewert

Logging would be allowed in NSW national parks and a freeze imposed on the declaration of new conservation areas under recommendations of a state government-dominated parliamentary inquiry.

An upper house committee into land use chaired by the Shooters and Fishers Party MP Robert Brown has made the recommendations in a draft report, obtained by Fairfax Media.

The report says the government should "immediately" consider opening national parks and other reserved areas for logging to ensure the viability of the timber industry.

The report urges the government to consider the possibility of a "tenure swap" between national parks and state forests, meaning sections of parks would be opened for logging and state forests, which are already subject to logging in NSW, would be reserved in return.

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Asked about the report, the government said it did not support commercial logging in national parks and had "no plans" to introduce it.

But a committee member, Greens MP Cate Faehrmann, has branded the inquiry a "kangaroo court" and said the government could not be trusted to rule against its recommendations.

"Barry O'Farrell said he had 'no plan' to let shooters into national parks before the last election. Now we've got shooters in national parks," Ms Faehrmann said.

"The Premier needs to rein in his cowboys in the NSW upper house who are intent on trashing our natural heritage for their own political interests."

Environment Minister Robyn Parker said in a statement: "The NSW government does not support commercial logging in national parks and has no plans to allow it. Once the committee's report is finalised and tabled in Parliament, the government will respond in the usual fashion."

Members of the committee travelled throughout NSW to speak to representatives of the logging industry, farmers and conservationists.

Their draft report says a key question for the inquiry was whether national parks provided "the best means of conservation and, if so, whether they are indeed fulfilling the conservation objectives they were designed to meet".

It says the committee concluded that "reservation is not the only means to protect biodiversity" and highlights concerns about the economic and social impacts of converting land to national parks.

"Important industries, such as the timber industry, suffered, communities are now struggling and calls are being made to reconsider the reservation of land as national park estate," it says.

The timber industry argues that land historically available for logging before being reserved as national park or a conservation area should be reopened to increase wood supply. The committee was "sympathetic to this cause" and recommends the government "identify appropriate reserved areas for release to meet the level of wood supply needed to sustain the timber industry".

The report highlights the need for action in the Pilliga region and presents a case study of the river red gum forests in the southern Riverina that were mostly given national park protection in 2010 by the former Labor government.

The committee heard the decision reduced timber volume from 60,000 cubic metres of sawlog to 10,000. This had reduced the number of timber supply mills from 20 to two and led to job losses.

The report appears to question the science of national park creation by placing inverted commas around the word science.

It recommends a moratorium on the creation of new national parks while an independent review is conducted into the management of all public lands.

Last year the government froze the creation of marine parks while the science behind them was reviewed, after recommendations of a committee chaired by Mr Brown.