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The Director

Ecological Communities Section

Protected Species and Communities Branch

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

By email: EPBCNOM@dcceew.gov.au

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Submission: Assessment and draft Conservation Advice for the Wetlands and inner floodplains of the Macquarie Marshes.

Healthy Rivers Dubbo is a community grass roots group dedicated to providing a strong voice for our local rivers, the Wambuul/Macquarie and Castlereagh, and for the Murray-Darling Basin as a whole. As ambassadors for healthy rivers, wetlands and groundwater, we have been active in our community calling for transparency and accountability in all aspects of water management.

Healthy Rivers Dubbo is pleased to have the opportunity to write a submission supporting the Draft Conservation Advice for the Wetland and Inner Floodplains of the Macquarie Marshes. **We support this ecological community as being listed as critically endangered.**

The Marshes is an internationally significant Ramsar listed site which is one of the last surviving breeding colonies of birds such as the straw-necked ibis and magpie geese. It covers 200,00 hectares and is an ecological haven, supporting reed swamps, river red gums, woodlands and floodplains. A highly diverse range of wildlife depends on the health of the Marshes, including many threatened species of birds and fish including silver perch, olive perchlet, Australian painted snipes and the Australian bittern. The Marshes supports up to 20,000 water birds, increasing up to 500,000 after flood events.

The Marshes are traditional Country of the Weyilwan People, and also support ecosystem reliant services such as cattle grazing and tourism. The decision to disallow the Marshes as Critically Endangered in 2013 was a missed opportunity, and one that cannot be repeated.

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The conservation status of the Marshes must be updated to be listed as critically endangered.

In relation to 6.2.1 - decline in geographic distribution:

Extensive peer reviewed scientific evidence has determined a serious decline of the health of the Marshes because of factors including changes to flow regimes due to the building of dams and the diversion of water, and climate change. There has been a decline in River Red Gums, native fish species, bird species and the frequency of their breeding events, and a reduction of frog species also resulting from the reduction of flows.

Healthy Rivers Dubbo asks that the draft listing includes areas in need of restoration, not only areas currently in good condition. It is also important to recognise the cumulative impacts when considering the listing of the Marshes. In addition to supporting the Draft Conservation Advice, Healthy Rivers Dubbo supports the use of Buffer Zones to ensure the protection of the Marshes from external impacts, the protection of environmental water flows including clear targets and methods for flow delivery and updating the drought of record to help prevent further climate change threats escalating (see additional threats to be listed below). It is clear there are already multiple threats at play regarding the degradation of the Marshes, including some not currently listed on the draft advice. We recommend additional threats be listed in section 4 including:

4.1.1. Key threatening process:

Mining: The NSW resource regulator has recently approved mining exploration for gold and copper in the Macquarie Marshes. This must be avoided. The marshes are incredibly sensitive and one of the most biologically diverse wetlands in the Murray-Darling basin. Hundreds of thousands of water birds are supported here when the conditions are right, but currently they are in decline to a myriad of threats.

Mining is too risky and could contribute to the extinction or further degradation of the fragile ecosystems. The Marshes are home to one third of all fish species in the Murray Darling catchment, over 200 bird species and up to 18 frog species. These habitats rely on the marshes for survival and must be fully protected from future impacts including mining. This needs to be clearly defined and explained in future Conservation Advice. Currently, the process for mining exploration licenses are weak, and do not sufficiently protect the environment from serious risks of degradation.

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NSW Water Management: Currently the government does not include up to date data about climate change in its water management rules and procedures. Extraction limits are worked out based on how much water has been taken from rivers in the past, not how much water can be taken before the environment suffers. Water allocation rules ignore the most severe droughts that have occurred in recent years. Due to dams being emptied too fast and dangerously depleting crucial drought reserves, Healthy Rivers Dubbo supports expanding threat one to add the cap on the drought of record within hydrological changes.

Conclusion

The iconic Macquarie Marshes are teeming unique, rare and endangered water birds that find refuge here as nesting spots and fertile foraging grounds. This area is an intricate patchwork of complex ecosystems that are interconnected and must be protected. The future unpredictability of climate events due to global increases in temperature creates an uncertain future for the Marshes. Not listing it as an endangered community during this opportunity is too great a risk.

For more information contact

Committee

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