



LEARD STATE FOREST

Why is it special?

Leard State Forest includes the most extensive and intact stands of the nationally-listed and critically endangered Box-Gum Woodland remaining on the Australian continent. The thousands of hectares of Australian native forest within Leard are teeming with life - representing the most significant forest for conservation of the entire Wheat-Sheep Belt.

Surveys show Leard State Forest is home to 396 native species of plants and animals, and includes habitat for 34 threatened species and several endangered ecological communities. It has an extraordinarily high density of tree hollows, provides a major drought and climate change refuge, and creates the rare environmental conditions where population numbers of unique species can actually increase.

Leard State Forest is located approximately 80km NW of Tamworth within the Liverpool Plains province of the Brigalow Belt South bioregion, a nationally recognised biodiversity hotspot. Only 2.9% of this bioregion within NSW is included in secure protected areas, well short of the 15% protection target considered necessary by both national and international standards.

What's the threat?

The integrity of this significant forest safe haven is now at risk of collapse. There are plans for three large open cut coal mines to plough through the heart of the forest. This will heavily impact a diverse range of native species, already threatened and vulnerable to fragmentation.

Together, the three mines will span across one full length of the forest, clearing an estimated 3,500 hectares of Leard State Forest and approximately 5,500 hectares of native vegetation in total, much of which is highly intact and Critically Endangered Box-Gum Woodland.

The three coal mines are set to mine coal 24 hours per day, seven days a week, clear vast amounts of critical forest habitat and lead to significant light and noise disturbance. The coal mine pits will be hundreds of metres deep, significantly impacting surface water flows, depressurising the water table across kilometers of surrounding forest and agricultural land and impacting unique groundwater dependent ecosystems.

Cutting through the heart of Leard State Forest

Boggabri Coal is currently operating within Leard Forest and plan to expand their opencut coal mine to be approximately 5km wide and 5km long, clearing 1,900 hectares of native vegetation.

The Maules Creek proposal involves an open cut coal mine about the size of Boggabri, clearing a further 1,500 hectares of Leard State Forest, digging pits 320m metres deep and selling 10.8 million tonnes of coal every year for over 30 years.

Tarrawonga plans to increase open cut disturbance area by three times to expand into Leard State Forest and completely adjoin the Boggabri open cut pit. The mine life will increase from eight to 23 years and Goonbri Creek will be moved.

Swapping sanctuary for predation zone

The coal mines propose to protect a number of surrounding scattered and degraded areas to 'offset' the destruction of this high quality forest, leaving only fragmented edges. These proposed 'offset' areas do not nearly compensate for the loss of what is one of the most significant and intact remnants of a critically endangered ecosystem known to exist nationally. The current offset sites occur on highly disturbed freehold land containing bird species that lead to the decline of threatened woodland birds through nest predation and competition.

Forest management responsibilities sold out

Leard State Forest is public land and should not be destroyed for private gain. Clear felling and open cut mining massive expanses of state forest and endangered ecological communities is inconsistent with the objects of the Forestry Commission under the NSW Forestry Act 1916. It does not "*conserve and utilise the timber*", or lead to "*the preservation of the native flora*" or "*conserve birds and animals*" or "*provide natural resource environmental services*".

If the three mines go ahead, more of Leard Forest will be disturbance zone than critical habitat.

Box-Gum Woodland

Box-Gum Woodland is extremely rare, occurring on the fertile plains usually cleared for agriculture. More ample resources of water and nutrients mean Box-Gum Woodland trees often grow very large and develop hollows. These hollows are extremely important for a huge range of threatened animal species of parrots, owls and bats. Box-Gum Woodland trees also have reliable nectar flows and foliage growth, making them essential for nectar-feeding and insectivorous woodland birds and bats.



Diamond Firetail

Photo: Marj Kibby



Koala

Photo: Frank Maurer



Masked Owl

Photo: Ian Thomas

Threatened species at risk

The proposed clearing of Leard State Forest for open cut coal mines will impact negatively on the life-cycles of rare and threatened native species. It will lead to a substantial reduction in foraging and roosting habitat, fragmentation, edge effects, increased threats from invasive species, disruption of breeding cycles and will ultimately cause a long-term decrease in the size of the populations.

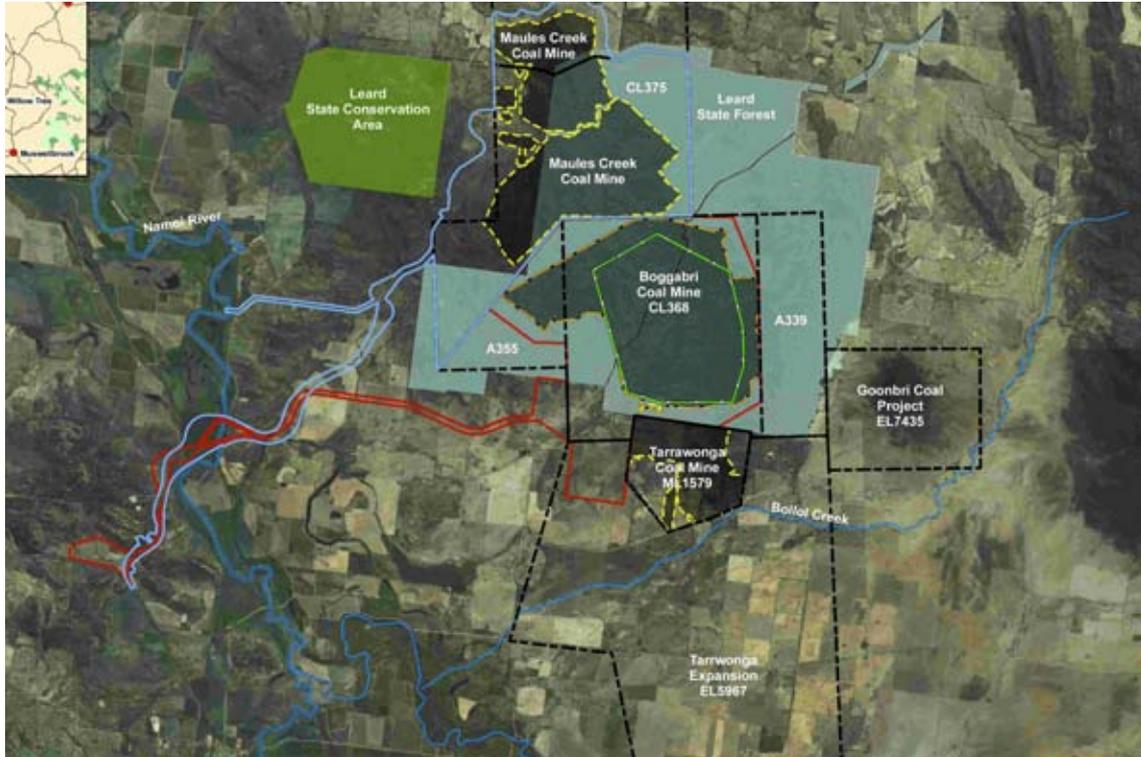
The clear felling needed for the coal mining process will interfere with recovery action and cause enormous negative impacts on up to 34 unique threatened species and their habitats, particularly hollow-dependent species and declining woodland birds.

Leard State Forest is one of only three known occurrences on public land of the Feathertail Glider in the Brigalow Belt South Bioregion and is one of only three core areas for the vulnerable Diamond Firetail. The list of significant threatened and vulnerable species to be impacted includes: Box-Gum Woodland, Weeping Myall Woodland, Swift Parrot, Turquoise Parrot, Regent Honeyeater, South-eastern Long-eared Bat, Spotted-tailed Quoll, Masked Owl, Border Thick-tailed Gecko, Spotted Harrier the Wallaroo and the Koala.

Massive carbon impact on community and climate

The Boggabri mine will produce up to 7 million tonnes of coal every year, with the combined production at more than 22 million tonnes per year. This is larger than any existing Hunter Valley mine, and will cause major impacts on local communities, their health, their way of life and their livelihoods.

The Boggabri mine alone will destroy the existing forest carbon sink and produce 16.9 million tonnes of greenhouse gases each year. This is equivalent to 10% of all greenhouse gases polluted every year throughout the whole of NSW. The cumulative impacts of all the mines are even greater and should be properly considered by the Minister and Department of Planning.



The footprint of the multiple open cut coal mines over Leard State Forest will devastate the region.

Recommendations

Clearing Leard State Forest for these three planned open cut coal mines will have an enormous impact on the fragile forest ecosystem and the native species it supports. It would also create a massive dust bowl and disrupt the local hydrology of the region, threatening the viability of local communities. The NSW Government and/or Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke must:

- Insist mining companies reapply and re-submit their Environmental Assessments with full consideration of the cumulative impacts of all three mining proposals on the ecological integrity of the forest, considering options for underground mining.
- Manage Leard State Forest in accordance with the objects of the NSW Forestry Commission.
- Meet state, national and international targets for threatened species conservation and biological representation.
- Reject Leard State Forest coal mines due to their impact on the Critically Endangered Box Gum Ecological Community, one of the most extensive and intact stands on the continent.
- Disallow any further open cut coal mining in this significant ecological safe haven.
- Mandate minimum wildlife corridor distances between coal mines of at least 1km across the state in line with the needs for effective glider corridors.
- Place a moratorium on coal approvals in Leard Forest until a Health Impact Assessment has been completed and its results analysed by Government.