



Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

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Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

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Date: 14 May 2019

The Hon. Melinda Pavey MP
Minister for Water, Property and Housing
GPO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Cc. Trish Doyle, MP,
Member for Blue Mountains

Dear Minister Pavey,

Katoomba Airfield, Medlow Bath

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society (BMCS) is a community based volunteer organisation with over 800 members. Its mission is to help conserve the natural environment of the Greater Blue Mountains, and to increase awareness of the natural environment in general.

The Society has a number of serious concerns about the process undertaken to date by the Department of Industry-Crown Lands (the Department) in relation to a proposed lease applied for by 'direct negotiation' over Katoomba Airfield.

BMCS cannot understand why a commercial lease is being pursued which is in direct contradiction of the land assessments carried out in the past, when incorporation of land into the surrounding national park was the recommendation.

The airfield is an inholding in the Blue Mountains National Park (BMNP) which is part of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. Our concerns include the lack of community consultation prior to the issuing of the current licence held over the airfield; the nature of proposed community consultation to be undertaken prior to the issuing of any long term lease; the environmental management of the airfield site and the impacts on the surrounding world heritage national park from the activities which the proposed lease would allow.

We wrote to the previous Minister for Lands and Forestry, The Hon Paul O'Toole in December 2018 regarding these matters. In the interim there has been a rising tide of community concern over the future of the airfield including the formation of a number of local community groups and the delivery of a petition calling for no commercialisation of the airfield and for its inclusion into the National Park. The petition, with over 10,000 signatures, has been given to the local Member of Parliament, Trish Doyle.

BMCS continuing interest in the Katoomba Airfield

The Society has been making representations about the future use and management of the Katoomba Airfield site since 1997. Previous use of the airfield for commercial joy flights was controversial and heavily opposed by the community, with residents in Medlow Bath, North Katoomba and areas adjacent to scenic lookouts in Leura, Katoomba and Wentworth Falls

particularly impacted. Walkers and park users also complained of low flying aircraft, including in remote areas. The current proposal has the potential for serious impacts on our local tourism industry, particularly those who visit BMNP for walking, camping or sightseeing.

The Society has raised continuing concerns about the management of the airfield site. The site contains two hanging swamps which are threatened by sediment flowing off the eroding airstrips. Sediment is also flowing into the Katoomba and Greaves Creek catchments and hence into the Blue Mountains National Park.

In 2000 and 2008 the (then) Department of Land and Water Conservation undertook two assessments involving community consultations on the long term future of the site. We understand in both processes the Department concluded, supported by Blue Mountains City Council and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, that the land should not continue to be commercially leased and that the site be incorporated into the Blue Mountains National Park and used for emergency and bushfire air operations only.

This was to occur on the expiry of the lease in 2008. The current commercial lease process is in direct contradiction of the land assessments and consultations carried out in the past.

Apparent lack of community consultation prior to the issuing of the current licence

Despite the outcomes of previous assessments and community consultations as well as ongoing community concern, the current interim licence appears to have been issued without any community consultation. It is understood that some government agencies were consulted but not community members such as potentially affected residents or visitors to the national parks or community groups with a known interest in the airfield's use and management. Nor are local communities likely to find out about a possible licence or lease being considered for Crown land through an Expression of Interest (EOI) published on the NSW Government's E – Tendering website (as happened recently with the Katoomba Airfield).

As a consequence of the issuing of the licence (which occurred under the previous Crown Lands Management Act), the framing of the community consultation appears to be limited to the terms and conditions of the lease, not a consultation on the long term future of the site including whether a long term lease should even be considered.

We believe the apparent lack of community consultation prior to the issuing of the licence goes against previous assessments and commitments made by the Department and represents poor public accountability and transparency, which is not in accordance with the objectives of the current Crown Land Management Act 2016, particularly;

1.3 (c) to require environmental, social, cultural heritage and economic considerations to be taken into account in decision-making about Crown land, and

1.3 (d) to provide for the consistent, efficient, fair and transparent management of Crown land for the benefit of the people of New South Wales

Additionally, the Department has advised us that it undertook an assessment of the Katoomba Airfield site which informed their decision to issue the current EOI for the site. We have asked the department whether this report is publicly available but have not received a reply. Given the public interest in what is being proposed for this site we believe this report should be made available.

Proposed community consultation prior to the issuing of any long term lease

The Department has advised the Society that *“in this instance, having regard to the location, nature and history of the site, more intensive community engagement may be expected”*.

However, under the Department's Community Engagement Strategy, where *"leases have a high impact on community use and enjoyment of land"*, then community engagement must be carried out *"at the level of participate"*. *"Participate"* engagement is described as *"a two-way process that enables collaboration between the community and decision-makers"*, and can include *"targeted meetings, interactive workshops, workshops (onsite tours/visit) and community advisory or consultative committee"*.

It is the Society's expectation, given the long term community interest in the site and the significant environmental issues associated with it, that the Department should adopt a *"participate"* level of engagement for the Katoomba Airfield lease proposal and that this consultation would precede and inform any decision to enter into a lease for the Airfield. We seek your commitment on this.

Inadequacy of Blue Mountains Fly Neighbourly Agreement (BMFNA)

In response to community concerns, the Blue Mountains Fly Neighbourly Agreement (BMFNA) agreement was developed between aircraft operators and the community to reduce the disturbance caused by aircraft, particularly joy flights, within the Blue Mountains. The BMFNA is a voluntary agreement under which aircraft operators agree to operate in a certain manner. It includes limits on operating heights in areas identified as environmentally sensitive (including large areas of the Blue Mountains National Park) and the frequency of operations.

As the BMFNA is a voluntary agreement, there is **no compliance monitoring or enforcement** and no avenues for residents to pursue when breaches occur. As a consequence, the BMFNA has proven totally ineffective in managing the impacts of commercial joy flights or other low-flying intrusive flights within the Blue Mountains. This is a key issue which needs to be considered in any community consultation prior to the issuing of any lease over the Katoomba Airfield.

We respectfully request your investigation of the current leasing process and your intervention to ensure that all options, including those that consider the best use for this public land, are canvassed.

Thank you for your consideration of the issues raised in this letter. We would be happy to supply any further information you require.

Yours sincerely



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