

Matthew Hansen, Acting Manager - Natural Environment

15 November 2016

c/o Committee Secretariat
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Submission for Inquiry into Flying-fox Management in the Eastern States

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the Inquiry into Flying-fox Management in the Eastern States.

The Northern Beaches Local Government Area is defined by large areas of locally native urban trees and bushland reserves, particularly vegetated headlands and treed escarpments. The community, with Council, has worked relentlessly over many decades to maintain the urban forest with its multitude of threatened species and scenic vistas.

Historically, there have been flying-fox camps spread throughout the local government area. Currently there are three camps. These are: Cannes Reserve, Avalon; and within the Warriewood Wetlands in the former Pittwater LGA, and at Burnt Bridge Creek, Balgowlah in the former Manly LGA. Both camps predominantly contain Grey-headed Flying-foxes, which are listed as Vulnerable under the NSW Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995.

Cannes Reserve is an extremely small reserve, with a size of approximately 0.6 hectares and can contain up to 3000 animals. Residents regularly report a number of impacts caused by the flying-fox camp. The NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), the former Pittwater Council and various experts have been trying to mitigate the impacts for the last six years.

The Warriewood Wetlands camp has been known to host around 5000 animals. It is in a suitable location away from residential areas.

The camp at Burnt Bridge Creek, Balgowlah can contain up to 10,000 animals but is within a larger reserve with only some residential interface. Complaints have been received from some residents but not to the extent of those around Cannes Reserve. The former Manly Council have been trying to mitigate impacts since the flying-foxes became established in the reserve in 2010.

From Council's recent experiences in the management of these camps, we present the following comments:

1. General Comments

Council has undertaken dispersal at one of these camps to alleviate the impacts on the immediately adjoining residents (Cannes Reserve in July 2015). This camp varies

in size from several hundred animals to over 3000 at times. This reserve highlights the complexity in the proposed management of flying-fox within the urban context. The dispersal had short-term success in reducing the population to zero however flying-foxes returned within 6 weeks and have occupied the camp since this time.

At other locations, several high profile dispersals have been undertaken in the recent past, most noticeably the Sydney Royal Botanic Gardens. This is seen as a success and consequently our affected Northern Beaches community feels that the process is easy to implement with minimal risk and cannot understand why a similar approach has not been continued.

However, the Royal Botanic Gardens dispersal is one of the few successful attempts of dispersal within NSW, with the majority not resolving the problem and some even exacerbating the issues. The Botanic Gardens Camp was far removed from adjoining residents and as such the form of dispersal could be readily utilised and there were few immediate alternative locations that could be problematic. This underlines a key issue not addressed in the policy, that of developing, implementing and monitoring successful intervention measures. There is a dearth of research and limited co-ordination in studying the species to develop improved management options that are likely to be effective without the significant risks that currently exist.

Without a proactive science based program of research and monitoring, the ongoing management of problem colonies is likely to remain ad hoc, with mistakes being repeated. This incurs not only significant problems for the animals and the residents impacted by their presence, but significant and costly ongoing management for local councils and other land managers.

Overall it will be beneficial that management is to be streamlined with the level of licensing and reporting reduced in undertaking management actions. The previous situation has led to frustration for all stakeholders in camp management. Given that seasonal issues dramatically reduce the timeframes in which actions can be undertaken, it makes sense to have a situation where several management actions are addressed and can be approved at the one time, and without a multitude of onerous and often contradictory licence conditions.

2. Human Health

It is understandable that minimising any public health aspects are the overriding purpose of flying-fox management. However, this issue is neither well reported nor described by any of the various agencies responsible for public health. There are several issues relating to public health that need to be supported beyond the terms of the policy. These include:

- a. There is minimal monitoring of the spread of disease within the flying-fox population across NSW;
- b. Disease is only one health aspect; other chronic issues such as sleep deprivation and disturbance are specific to individuals and the long term consequences are not well understood;
- c. Additionally, ongoing stress from lack of amenity, potentially reduced property values, etc, is not easy to monitor and not readily accepted.

Overall, these criteria need to be included as a trigger for determining the level of management actions required. All camp sites have site specific issues (e.g. number of residents affected, size of the colony, size of bushland patch/reserve, etc) which also need to be considered in terms of human health.

3. Management Methods

There is no recognition or responsibility for the State or the Commonwealth to develop or at least assist in investigating improved management options or developing an understanding of flying-fox behaviour to assist in management of colonies.

Clearly these issues are beyond the ability of individual councils and many land managers to manage – they lack knowledge in this area which obviously contributes to the ongoing failure of the majority of management attempts. This lack of certainty impacts on residents, the community in general, the land management agency and the animals themselves. This lack of concise and clear management options increases anxiety for all stakeholders and means these issues are drawn out, particularly for existing camps, and often exacerbates the conflict.

The current State management policy also recommends the use of flying-fox experts. In the former Pittwater Council's experience, such experts all seem to have a difference in opinion. There is little uniformity in their consideration of management, with the only common theme being that no one knows what exactly will happen. Potentially an expert panel would be a possible way to ensure effective risk based management of camps.

4. Seasonal Issues

If management actions are not to occur because of seasonal issues such as maternity or temperature, this needs to be clearly stated in any policy. Currently the wording is vague (e.g. "not recommended"), when to date land managers have had to abide by these criteria and clearly animal welfare issues are at stake. There are also a number of contradictions and inconsistencies in the various licences currently issued to land managers with what is and isn't permitted at certain times of the year. The licencing bodies need to take a more practical view of certain situations for example if a camp is emptied via management actions then those actions should be allowed to continue throughout the year rather than having to automatically cease. Ceasing actions allows flying-foxes to re-establish, effectively undermining the intent, undoing any success to date and wasting time and resources in the process.

5. Camp Management Plan Template

The Camp Management Plan Template promoted by OEH currently contains some onerous and potentially costly requirements, particularly around monitoring. Many of these requirements are beyond the capabilities of local government in terms of expertise and cost. Once again these issues must be site specific and may require different levels of assessment based on the individual case. In some instances for example, there may be other agencies undertaking monitoring which could cover other land managers, but there is no centralised collation of who is doing what.

6. Timeframes

There is some uncertainty around the timing of various activities that needs to be resolved. For example councils would generally prepare a draft document which would then be placed on public exhibition. Can this document be assessed by OEH concurrently with the exhibition period? Can relevant licenses be applied for during the public consultation period? The current timeframes and requirements lead to situations where once the land manager finally gets all required approvals and licences they then have minimal time to effectively implement the management actions within the permitted seasonal period.

Many of these issues have come to Council's attention as learnings from our own camp management and the associated planning and licencing requirements. We acknowledge that

the subject of flying-fox management is complex and presents significant challenges however we feel that the above points require further consideration as part of this inquiry.

Council would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely

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NATURAL ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE