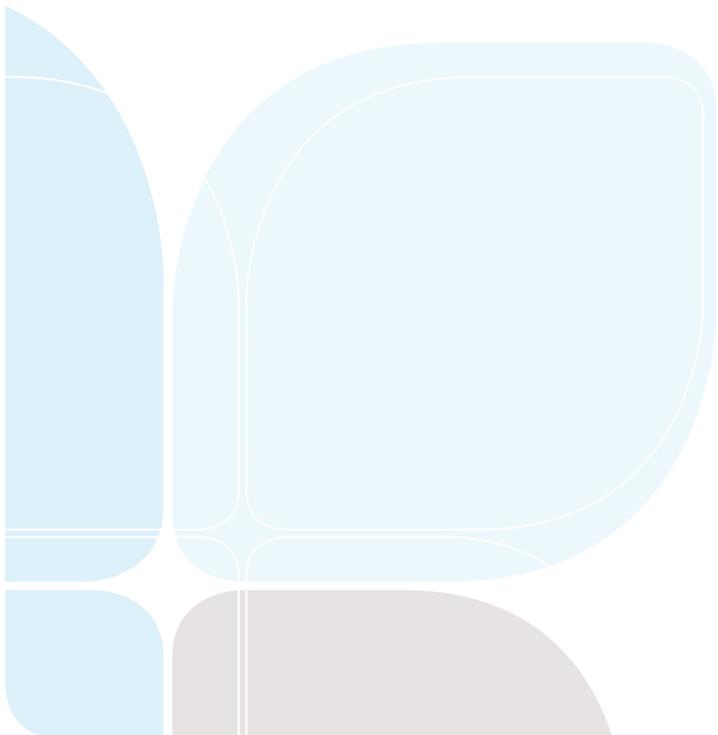




Local Land
Services
Hunter

Submission on draft Hunter Regional Plan

February 2016



Hunter Local Land Services (LLS) is pleased to make a submission on the Draft Hunter Regional Plan (the Plan). Hunter LLS works with land managers and the community to improve primary production within healthy landscapes and to assist rural and regional communities to be resilient, profitable and sustainable into the future.

Our interest in the Plan relates to its potential influence on Hunter LLS Local Strategic Plan's goals and priorities. There are several actions in the Plan which Hunter LLS could assist in implementing. The draft Hunter Local Strategic Plan is attached.

General Comments

Hunter LLS supports the vision and four goals of the Plan, and a strategic approach to land use policy and planning in the region.

- It would be helpful if the Plan described the interdependence of the goals – for example, a healthy environment underpins a healthy regional economy, which also underpins robust regional communities, and vice versa. These goals all work together and are not mutually exclusive.
- In general, the Plan's implementation and governance arrangements need strengthening. There are also a number of areas where clearer planning controls and mechanisms for translation into local planning instruments are required (for example Actions 2.1.3, 2.4.2).
- The Plan needs to make reference to other strategic planning initiatives either complete, or close to completion in the region, such as the Upper Hunter Strategic Assessment.

Specific Comments

Direction 2.1 Promote investment to grow regional rural and resource industries

Hunter LLS supports this direction, and makes the following comments:

- There is a much wider range of "important primary industries" in the region, beyond the stated viticulture, equine and oyster industries. In terms of value of production, employment and area occupied, the beef cattle, dairy and poultry industries are also important. Hunter LLS would expect to see these industries, and appropriate land use planning mechanisms to support them, identified at a minimum.
- We are concerned that the definitions of "important primary industries" and "strategic agricultural lands" are too limited. A more comprehensive and rigorous economic and biophysical assessment of important primary industries and the lands which support them is required. Hunter LLS is willing to work with DPI in their work to map important agricultural lands across the region (Action 2.1.3).
- Actions 2.1.2 and 2.1.3 regarding identification and support of important primary industries should be combined and resturctured along the lines of Action 2.1.1 ("Identify energy and mineral resource lands to support sustainable growth of mining industries and diversification of NSW energy supplies"). Energy and mineral resource lands and agricultural lands need to be put on an equal and objective footing.
- The Plan should resolve problems where some land use policies in the region, such as minimum lot sizes, have caused rural lot sizes to decrease below a level where farming isn't viable. These policies can degrade the productive capacity of the land, and also increase biosecurity risks and risks from natural hazards, and therefore do not support Direction 2.1.
- Action 2.2.2 "Develop strategies for enhancing tourism infrastructure to increase national competitiveness" should also recognise internationally significant natural assets such as the band of wetlands on the western

fringe of Newcastle, and migratory shorebirds of the Hunter Estuary, that contribute to tourism industry opportunities and amenity.

Direction 2.4 Manage competing and conflicting interests in rural and resource areas to provide greater certainty for investment

Hunter LLS supports this direction, and makes the following comments:

- Agricultural and high environmental value land uses exist before and after mining. Water is required by agricultural and high environmental value land uses before and after mining. These points need to be recognised in the Plan.
- The Plan is virtually silent on planning for post-mining land use and rehabilitation. An action should be added to clarify how goals for post-mine land use and standards for rehabilitation will be determined.
- Cumulative impact assessment of mining activities also needs to consider cumulative impacts on biodiversity, as well as impacts on agricultural lands and water resources (as already stated).
- Action 2.4.3 on managing biosecurity risks through land use planning is positive. Hunter LLS would be willing to assist in implementation of this action.

Direction 3.1 Protect the natural environment and biodiversity

Hunter LLS supports this direction, and makes the following comments:

- More clarity is required on the criteria used to map high environmental value areas. In particular, riparian areas of major watercourses, biodiversity refuge areas, wetlands of international importance, and other high environmental value freshwater and marine ecosystems should be included.
- Hunter Local Land Services works with landholders and agencies in the region on actions to improve habitat connectivity. We would like to see land use planning instruments complement the voluntary efforts to establish connectivity, rather than work against it. As such, Action 3.1.2 should be strengthened. In addition, the Watagans to Stockton Corridor was recently identified as a priority project for the Hunter Estuary by estuary managers (refer Direction 6.1 Draft Plan for Growing Hunter City).
- Whilst maintaining or improving connectivity is important for some environmental outcomes, it should not be at the expense of other strategic environmental planning approaches including conserving critical habitat for threatened species, or improving land management for riverine health outcomes.
- We support Action 3.1.3 “Encourage greater participation in private conservation schemes to provide more flexibility and options for investment in conservation, including biodiversity offsets”. It is important that at least like-for-like offsets are secured, and that finance and contractual arrangements are sufficient for ensuring in-perpetuity management of the environmental values (including management of threats to those values such as invasive species). Offset management arrangements should allow continued agricultural land uses, such as grazing, where appropriate management practices will improve or maintain environmental outcomes. Where sourcing suitable offset areas is difficult, could the Department consider acquiring land for the purposes of habitat rehabilitation, for example around the M1 motorway extension and the airport expansion?

Direction 3.2 Secure the health of water resources and coastal landscapes

Hunter LLS supports this direction, and makes the following comments:

- Actions for protecting water supplies should be emphasised separately to other actions about water quality, estuaries and coastal lakes. Currently the water supply action lacks emphasis in the Plan given the challenges that this region is likely to face over the next 20 years, and doesn't reference the interests of Hunter Water and MidCoast Water.
- Hunter LLS is currently developing a project in collaboration with other agencies and stakeholders in the Hunter Estuary to produce an annual Hunter Estuary Report Card, with water quality as one of a range of indicators. This may assist in monitoring implementation of this Plan.
- Action 3.2.2 – we are unaware of the risk-based decision-making framework for the NSW Water Quality Objectives. This framework should be referenced in the Endnotes.
- Action 3.2.3 – “develop regional boating plans” should also include “and mitigate impacts on sensitive aquatic environments and shorebird habitat”.
- Figure 14 is missing data on the 1 in 100 Flood Area, particularly in the Newcastle LGA.

Direction 4.3 Build the region's resilience to natural hazards

Hunter LLS has roles in the management of the Hunter Valley Flood Mitigation Scheme, and also provides emergency management preparedness and response services for the agriculture sector. This is outlined in our Strategic Plan.

The Hunter Valley Flood Mitigation Scheme invests in structures that have a bearing on estuarine health as well as providing the flood mitigation services. Hunter LLS has been funded for a review of the scheme which will be undertaken by the Office of Environment and Heritage during 2016-2017. The results of this review will have a bearing on land use planning in areas adjacent to the Scheme.

Direction 4.4 Strengthen the economic and cultural self-determination of Aboriginal communities

Hunter LLS supports Local Aboriginal Land Councils in land management training and identifying economic opportunities from the use of their land. This is outlined in our Strategic Plan. We may be able to assist the lead agency for implementation of Action 4.4.1.

Correct identification of land held by Local Aboriginal Land Councils

It has been identified by the Hunter LLS Aboriginal Community Advisory Group that many of the maps in the draft Plans identify the land held by Local Aboriginal Land Councils as 'National Park and Reserve'. In particular, Figure 11 of the draft Hunter Regional Plan showing areas of high environmental value identify the Biraban Local Aboriginal Land Councils landholdings at Morisset as 'National Park and Reserve'. Whilst many sites held by Local Aboriginal Land Councils may be vegetated and of high conservation value, they are not National Parks or reserves and the maps should be updated to more correctly identify Local Aboriginal Land Council holdings in the region as private land holdings.

More information

For further information on the points within this submission please contact Claire Parkes, Senior Strategic Land Services Officer (Planning) at claire.parkes@lls.nsw.gov.au

