



## West Belconnen, ACT +

Tony Adams

AT Adams Consulting

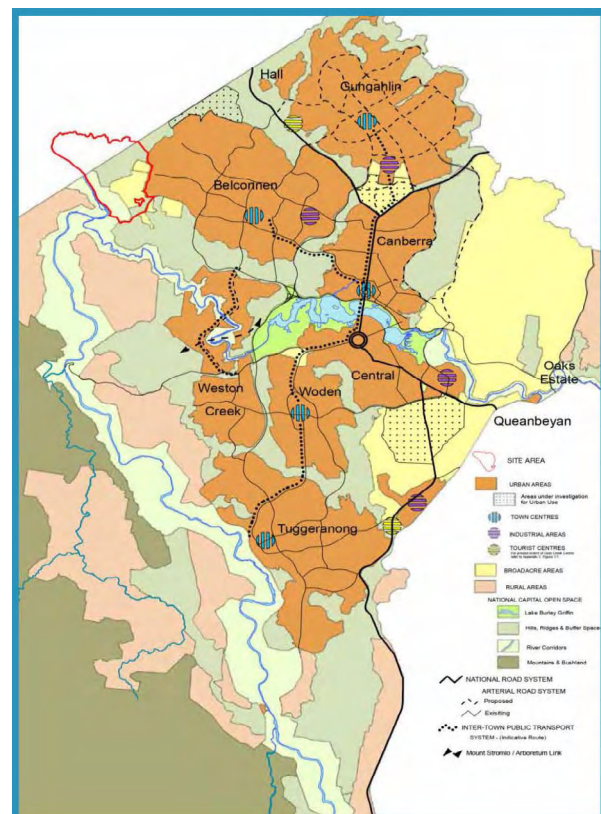
**Abstract:** The West Belconnen project in the north-west of the ACT encompasses about 1600 ha of land and has been proposed by the ACT-wide ACT Planning Strategy (2012) as an area suitable for investigation for urban development. The site includes land in both the ACT and in adjoining NSW which form a single geographic unit effectively contained by the Murrumbidgee River and Ginninderra Creek and the existing urban area. This paper will examine two aspects of the work that has been undertaken on this site over the last several years as part of the planning process that will define urban development opportunities that may exist on the site. A key concern has been the need to recognise and accommodate areas of Yellow Box–Red Gum Grassy Woodland and Pink-tailed Worm-lizard habitat (both listed under ACT and Commonwealth environmental legislation). The first aspect discussed will be the approach that has been taken for defining portions of the site that warrant protection. The second aspect will be an outline of a conservation corridor management trust, proposed to ensure that the area identified for protection benefits from a level and style of management commensurate with its environmental values. It is a management model that is relatively novel within the ACT although not uncommon in other jurisdictions. Development of the conservation trust is at this stage a 'work in progress'. The paper will present the current position as it is being presented to ACT Government agencies for review.

Thank you for this opportunity to talk about the land development project at West Belconnen. The project straddles the border of the ACT and New South Wales (NSW), and is managed by the Land Development Agency of the ACT Government, and by the Riverview Group which is in charge of the entire project. This is an urban development project. It is a large area and has the potential to accommodate a large number of dwellings which at the moment we estimate at about 11,500.

First I will talk about the approach we have taken to defining the portion of the site that we will protect. Second, I will outline the conservation corridor and management arrangements for protecting what needs to be protected.

The project area is outlined in red on the map (right). It is essentially an extension of Belconnen in the north-west of the ACT and it spreads over into New South Wales.

The next map (next page), at larger scale, shows that the area is immediately to the west of the suburbs West Macgregor and Holt and the Holt golf course. The project area in total covers about 1600 ha, with Belconnen waste-tip right in the middle of it. On the NSW side of the border is the Murrumbidgee River and to the north the Ginninderra Creek, so the NSW portion of the land is effectively





## 'Grass half full or grass half empty? Valuing native grassy landscapes'

Friends of Grasslands' forum 30 October – 1 November 2014

Friends of Grasslands Inc. ([www.fog.org.au](http://www.fog.org.au)) supporting native grassy landscapes

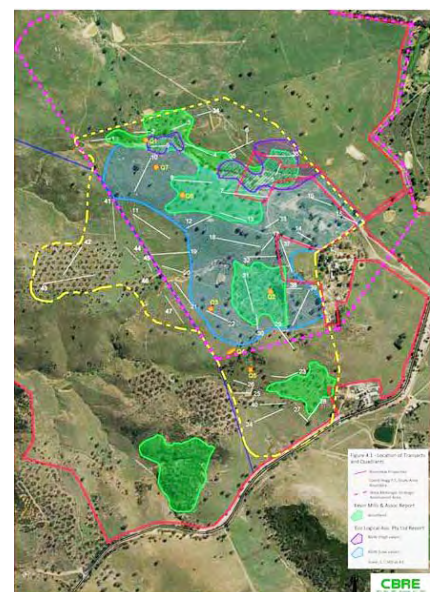
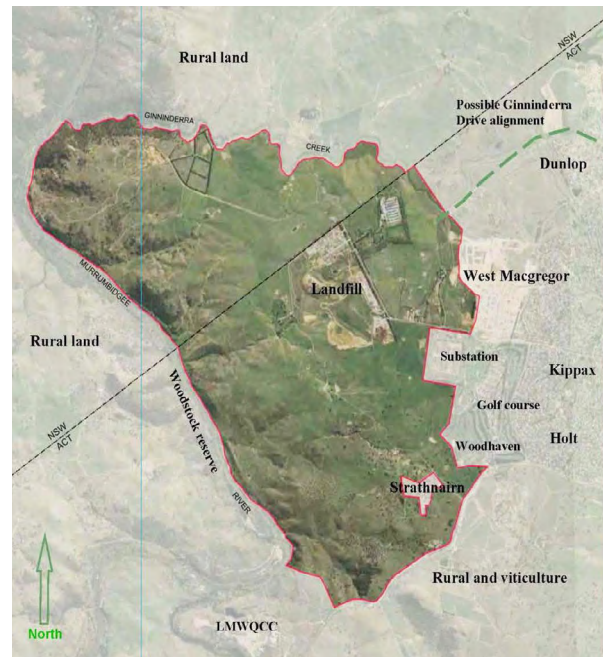
a peninsula. There is no road access at all from NSW into this area, and the people who live out there access the rest of the world along Parkwood Road and through the ACT. It effectively is part of the ACT. Some of you may be familiar with Strathnairn Arts Centre, which is near the north-western extent of ACT, and the Lower Molonglo water quality treatment plant (LMWQCC) is also out there. There are many logical reasons why this is a good site for urban development.

The reason we are doing this greenfield development is that the population in Canberra is growing. There are very credible arguments that the carrying capacity of Australia, of our continent, is in fact where it ought to be – that we do not need any more people, nor should have any more people. However, the population is not under the control of the ACT Government, either Australia-wide or locally. The local population is growing and will reach half a million before we know it. That means an additional 200,000 people in the next 40 years. We need to plan for them and do that in the best possible way. They will all want somewhere to live, and the West Belconnen project has the potential to accommodate some of that growth. The ACT Government has a 50 : 50 policy on growth: that is, half of the growth of Canberra should be housed within developments such as apartments in urban infill, and the other half should be in developments in greenfield sites. What we are attempting to do at West Belconnen is to achieve the goal of a sustainable community of international significance in the nation's capital.

Our approach has been to work out which parts of the site may be suitable for urban development before we start the planning. This is not the way such development has been done in recent times in Canberra or in other parts of Australia, but it is the way it ought to be done. Over the last several years therefore we have carried out a series of scientific investigations to establish what values are present on the site, before we decide what to do with it.

### Vegetation values

Woodland areas had been identified on the project site previously (green areas on the image at right) and in our own early investigations. Therefore we had the entire site examined to determine where woodland values might exist. Kris Nash and David Hogg made a fairly thorough analysis of the areas outlined in yellow (at right), and defined a number of vegetation units that had different values and different qualities from those previously listed but all related to woodlands and the grassland understorey (Nash & Hogg 2013). The areas in blue (low quality) and purple (high quality) were defined as Yellow Box – Red Gum Grassy Woodlands that meet the definition of this threatened ecological community in both Commonwealth and ACT legislation. You can see that some of this area is very bare of trees but, as you would know, the understorey values are very important aspects of this community.





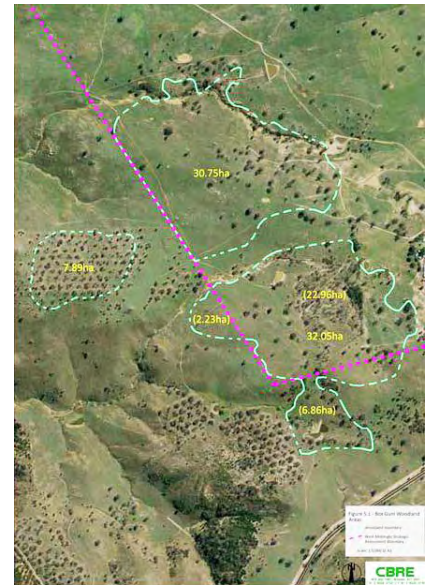
## 'Grass half full or grass half empty? Valuing native grassy landscapes'

Friends of Grasslands' forum 30 October – 1 November 2014

Friends of Grasslands Inc. (www.fog.org.au) supporting native grassy landscapes

The image at right was taken after our early work, and the purple line is significant because the land to the left side of it is currently zoned as river corridor, which is a sort of conservation zone. Land to the right side of the purple line is currently zoned as broadacre, which is a sort of development zone. About 53 ha of the ~70 ha of threatened woodland outlined in pale blue on this image is currently on land that is zoned for development, and that is why it has been important to do this work before starting to think about what should or should not be developed.

Just as a curiosity, the little ~8 ha patch defined as woodland in the river corridor was artificially planted by the National Capital Development Commission years ago, but they planted the right species in the understorey and the resulting vegetation is now of high quality, qualifying the patch as listed woodland. When we first saw that area, before the surveys, we thought it would be a good spot for a carpark or a picnic spot, but now we know that cannot be. The photo just below is the sort of country we are talking about – beautiful!



### Fauna values

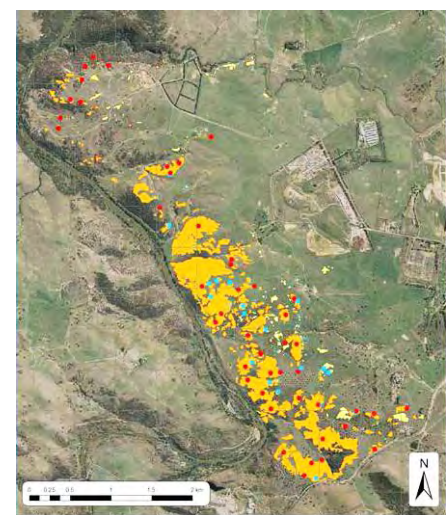
Another survey defining areas for protection was made by David Wong and Will Osborne in relation to Pink-tailed Worm-lizards *Aprasia parapulchella*. The general overview\* we had of the site indicated that this was another species that was of particular importance, being both Commonwealth- and ACT-listed.

David Wong has a technique of using photography to identify potential habitat areas – and they were numerous, as shown in yellow on the image below. Will Osborne then went on-site and examined all those areas. There were two surveys a few years apart; the blue dots (image at right) record the first findings, by Kevin Mills, and the red dots are those identified later by Will Osborne. The dots are places where Pink-tailed Worm-lizards were actually found.



This has turned out to be a population that is very significant locally, and that makes it a significant population worldwide also. It really is quite extensive, tending to be at the top of the bank or in the steep land down towards the river.

The area also had potential for these other fauna species to occur there: Golden Sun Moth *Synemon plana*; Little Eagle *Hieraetus morphnoides*; Varied Sittella *Daphoenositta chrysoptera*; White-winged Triller *Lalage tricolour*; Superb Parrot *Polytelis swainsonii*; Painted Honeyeater *Grantiella picta*; Murray River Crayfish *Euastacus armatus*; Macquarie Perch *Macquaria australasica*; Siver Perch *Bidyanus bidyanus*; and Trout Cod *Maccullochella macquariensis*. The Golden Sun Moth is quite important on another part of the site, and we found a pair of nesting Little Eagles. None of the other listed species have had a big impact on the land involved.



Pink-tailed Worm-lizard Habitat and Records - West Belconnen - Ginninderra  
W. Osborne 2012  
Confirmed occurrence (specimen skin) Site surveyed - PTWL not recorded  
K. Mills Pty Ltd 2009  
Confirmed occurrence (specimen skin) Site surveyed - PTWL not recorded  
Habitat Class  
Potential habitat for Pink-tailed Worm-lizards  
Degraded or low quality potential habitat - unlikely to be occupied

\* several reports by Kevin Mills & Associates, 2009 – 2013; details available from AT Adams Consulting.



We ended up with land we are calling a conservation corridor, which is essentially the river corridor with its boundary extended to include the woodlands and the Pink-tailed Worm-lizard habitat that was outside the river corridor. In total, the conservation corridor through the ACT and NSW occupies about 577 ha; the photo at right shows the type of landscape it includes.



### **Managing conservation**

Having put the corridor in place, what is the next step? How do we manage it? We want to maintain the environmental values; therefore bushfire will be a problem, as will recreation pressures.

The first thing we need to do is establish a baseline from which we shall be able to measure future changes.

- Sarah Sharp started that work for us and she and Robert Jessop Pty Ltd are continuing it, making a baseline ecological survey of the entire corridor rather than just the areas where the endangered species and communities are.
- A University of Canberra team is doing some study of the Little Eagle, including radio-tagging if possible.
- There are many sub-catchments and we have a team doing a trial to see how to manage water flow into one of the sub-catchments in the corridor (Brown Engineering, AECOM, Jane Roberts, Peter Fogarty).
- Geoff Butler has done a very comprehensive piece of research on weeds and weed management across the entire site.

The second thing we want to do is to set up an environmental trust to own and manage the entire corridor, both in ACT and in NSW. We have organised a consultants' report on how that trust will be structured (Elton Consulting 2014) and another group (TRC Consultants) is currently preparing a draft plan of management that the trust would use to manage the entire property. The default option is to give the proposition to the ACT Government and let them manage it, and that could still occur. We think a trust is a better option for this project, so that there would be just one group managing the whole corridor, both sides of the border.

The trust would focus on this particular piece of land and the values associated with it, and would be in the hands of the local community and local experts, rather than a less-involved government agency. Such a trust would have a board, and consist of relevant people. It would be financially sound because it would be set up with a funding base from the development project itself. This is normal normal procedure in NSW and it will have to be followed for that portion of the site, anyway; it could be extended to include in the ACT.

The trust's board of directors would cover business management, science, etc., and it would have various committees, such as a land management committee to actually manage the site, and a social sustainability committee for education, outreach and managing the volunteers that would be part of this exercise. There would be a fund committee to look after the money. It also would have staff, with two or three or four or five volunteers as well as its own permanent dedicated staff.



## References and Further reading

- Butler G. & Associates (2014) *Weed management Plan for Proposed Riverview Development West Belconnen*. August 2014.
- Elton Consulting (2014) *An Environmental Trust for West Belconnen*. Elton Consulting, Canberra. [http://www.planning.act.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/40992/Elton.\\_2014g\\_Environmental\\_trust.pdf](http://www.planning.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/40992/Elton._2014g_Environmental_trust.pdf)
- Nash K. & Hogg D. (2013) West Belconnen Woodland Areas confirmatory ecological assessment.
- Osborne W. & Wong D. (2013) The extent of habitat for the vulnerable Pink-tailed Worm-lizard (*Aprasia parapulchella*) in the West Belconnen–Ginninderra Creek investigation area: Confirmatory distribution surveys and mapping. 10 May 2013.
- Robert Jessop Pty Ltd (2015) *West Belconnen Vegetation Survey Summary*. Report prepared for The Riverview Group. August 2015.
- Sharp S. (2015) *Procedures Manual. Baseline condition assessment*. Report prepared for The Riverview Group.

Tony Adams has over 40 years' experience in urban and regional planning and property development across all states of Australia and the ACT, in the public and private sectors. He has recently established his own practice to enable him to provide specialist and focused advice on planning and property development matters. His clients have included the Riverview Group, Westfield and other national retailers, clubs and associations, property development companies, ACT and Commonwealth Government agencies and state and local government. He is a Fellow of the Planning Institute of Australia and past president of the ACT Division, and is a Certified Practising Planner.

\* This record of the talk given at the forum has been checked by the presenter, but not peer-reviewed. To find out more, contact the presenter, via their institution or by email to: [info@fog.org.au](mailto:info@fog.org.au).