



Friends of Grasslands

supporting native grassy ecosystems

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Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories
House of Representatives
Email: jscncet@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into the allocation of land to diplomatic missions in the Australian Capital Territory

Friends of Grasslands (FOG) is a community group dedicated to the conservation of natural temperate grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia. FOG advocates, educates and advises on matters to do with the conservation of grassy ecosystems, and carries out surveys and other on-ground work. FOG is based in Canberra and its members include professional scientists, landowners, land managers and interested members of the public.

Through an accident of history, important remaining habitat of the flora and fauna of the grasslands and woodlands of south-eastern Australia survive on land in Canberra earmarked for development. The creation of the ACT leasehold land system last century reduced incentives for landholders to intensively farm land which, combined with the reservation of land for specific developments, spared flora and fauna from the clearing, ploughing, overgrazing and farm chemical use that has stripped much of New South Wales and Victoria of these species and ecosystems. Much of this biodiversity is supposed to be conserved as “matters of national environmental significance” under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. Examples include the endangered wildflower species, the Button Wrinklewort, and also the Yellow Box – White Box – Blakely’s Red Gum Grassy Woodland ecological community found over extensive portions of Stirling Park. In principle and in law, it is FOG’s view that sites of ecological significance in Canberra should not be developed, including for diplomatic missions.

Under a 2009 partnership agreement with the National Capital Authority (NCA) FOG has held over 30 volunteer work parties on National Lands at Scrivener’s Hut, Stirling Park and Yarramundi Reach. We have contributed over 2,000 volunteer hours in weeding and other activities to conserve the natural heritage of these lands so far. Consequently our submission is based on practical experience of some of the lands proposed for embassy development. One of the lessons we have learnt from work to conserve such sites is that development results in degradation of adjacent remnants particularly through weed invasion, rubbish dumping and increased recreational pressure and also from fire-control works if this requires clearing of native species or ground disturbance..

We write to respond in turn to the Inquiry's particular terms of reference concerning the allocation of land to diplomatic missions in the Australian Capital Territory as follows:

1. The NCA has competing roles in this exercise, as developer and manager of diplomatic estates versus that of custodian of natural and cultural heritage in the ACT. The NCA's Draft Amendment 78 proposes development of part of Stirling Park for a few diplomatic missions. While most of the land concerned is not of the highest conservation significance, some is Grassy Woodland and habitat of the endangered Button Wrinklewort. FOG has mapped plants of this species growing on the northern edge of the proposed site and submits that any loss through development constitutes degradation of ACT natural heritage values. FOG is therefore concerned that achievement of the best environmental outcome is underweighted in the decision-making process.
2. Concerning forecast levels of demand and supply for diplomatic missions, we do not consider that Federal Government agencies have been transparent in publicly justifying the demand for new diplomatic estates. If 30 new sites are required over 25 years (as stated in the NCA report), then we would like to see the Federal Government enunciate a coherent strategy for meeting this demand rather than piecemeal actions such as excising land at Stirling Park for only 5 to 6 sites.
3. Regarding the suitability of current property types and other options to meet the different needs of diplomatic missions, FOG supports some of the different ideas that have been raised by the NCA, such as reallocating any current assigned but undeveloped sites, and sub-dividing existing sites and developing a strata title option for smaller diplomatic missions. The Committee could make a considerable contribution to better management of the diplomatic estate without impacting our ecological heritage by recommending practical ways in which the Federal Government could expedite these options.
4. Concerning options for locations of future diplomatic estates, FOG is disappointed that development of Stirling Park has become the focus of the NCA's work without consideration of a wider range of options. In particular, we have seen no public explanation from the NCA of why the other sites of the 12 shortlisted by GHD for the NCA in 2007 have been ruled out. In particular, development of Block 5, Section 121 (the Curtin horse paddocks) was recommended to the NCA and by the NCA to the incoming government in 2009. FOG has not seen the NCA's detailed environmental assessment of the Curtin horse paddocks but they are not known to us as an environmentally significant site at this time. We ask the Committee to recommend further consideration of the sites identified by GHD in 2007.

We would be pleased to provide the Committee with further information concerning any of these points. Please contact Dr Jamie Pittock for further information – email Jamie.pittock@fog.org.au or mobile 0407 265 131.

Sincerely yours



John Fitz Gerald
President

29 January 2013