

WESTON CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL

- Your Local Voice -

Email: info@wccc.com.au

Website: www.wccc.com.au

Phone: (02) 6288 8975

Fax: (02) 6288 9179

ABN: 52 841 915 317

PO Box 3701 Weston Creek ACT 2611

Information Meeting

ACT Forests' Reforestation Business Case

The Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC) hosted an information night to discuss the ACT Forests' Reforestation Business Case. This was held on Wednesday 17th September 2003 and was in response to residents who attended the WCCC's regular meeting in August 2003 who requested the meeting on ACT Forests' Business Case.

The keynote speaker was Tony Bartlett, Director of ACT Forests, who are a part of the Department of Urban Services. Mr Bartlett spoke of how ACT Forests were significantly impacted by the 18 January firestorms, losing assets such as their Headquarters and Depot near the Stromlo Forest settlement in Duffy, as well as about two-thirds of their remaining commercial forest. Nearly 11,000ha of commercial forest had been destroyed by the 2001 and 2003 fires out of a total estate of about 16,000ha. ACT Forests had contributed about \$112 million annually to the ACT economy and supported about 750 direct and indirect jobs.

The clean-up operation for the 2003 fires was a very substantial undertaking, covering some 100km² and involving 6-7 million trees. It will take about 4 years to complete and cost over \$11 million. Areas close to the residential suburbs of Weston Creek had been cleared and the trees chipped, whilst areas further away from the suburbs were being cleared and the trees heaped into windrows for later burning. Weather permitting, it is hoped that these windrows will be burnt this October. Exposed areas of the former forest had been reseeded with grass to reduce soil erosion and to attempt to reduce dust during the coming summer. Except for some parts of the water catchment area, none of the burnt forestry areas would be replanted until the outcomes of the Non-Urban Study and the Spatial Plan had been determined.

The Reforestation Business Case had been prepared during the first half of 2003 by Jaakko Pöyry Consulting and included input from leading independent forestry experts from CSIRO and ANU. It did not take into account the recommendations from the recently released McLeod Report, but aspects of the Business Case were being reworked to account for these later findings.

The Business Case put forward a strong argument for the reforestation of about 80 percent of the commercial forest burnt in the January 2003 firestorms. It would be a "working forest" built around a core of commercial operations, but also allowing for most of the recreational pursuits undertaken before the fires. Radiata pine was the preferred species for replanting, but other species would also be planted. Riparian zones and buffers would be replanted with natives. Once replanted, ACT Forests would have about 14,000ha within its plantations. The latest bushfire abatement measures would be incorporated into the replanted areas.

The "urban forest" concept for the Stromlo Forest area was briefly discussed and it was pointed out that this concept was markedly different to the former forest that was on the site.

The clean-up and reforestation costs, as well as the costs of a new Headquarters and Depot, would be covered by monies from the insurance policy that covered the burnt forest. It was expected that the replanted forest would have a rate of return of about 6.4 percent over a 40 year period. The total reforestation cost was expected to be about \$64 million.

Mr Bartlett also spoke briefly on efforts being undertaken to rebuild ACT Forests' Headquarters and Depot on the preferred site next to the Defence Force College in Weston. Stage 1 of the rebuilding work would be sheds for the rural fire fighting equipment and this planned to be completed before Christmas 2003. The Headquarters building would be Stage 2 and would commence after Stage 1 was finished for completion around April 2004. The Development Application for the rebuilding work was currently being assessed by the ACT Planning and Land authority and a decision was expected shortly.

A wide-ranging question and answer session followed. Several residents questioned the benefits of a softwood forest versus a hardwood, native forest. Concerns were also expressed on the viability of the forest and whether it could be made less prone to bushfires. Environmental concerns were discussed, particularly water quality and run-off, and the starkness of the burnt landscape. Residents also expressed concern about the burning of the windrows and whether there were any other unfulfilled markets for the damaged logs.

The most pressing issue to arise from the meeting was that residents want the future of the Stromlo Forest to be determined quickly since this will enable an early start to rehabilitating the area to reduce its starkness. Most residents did not want houses in this area, but would rather see it 'greened'.

Residents were encouraged to submit their concerns to the Non-Urban Study Steering Committee before the closing date of 23 September 2003.

WCCC
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