**Track Preservation Report – NSWERA AGM February 2015**

As a result of prolonged lobbying by horse riders, including myself (Fiona Meller) on behalf of NSW endurance riders, in November 2012 the Office of Environment and Heritage released a document called “Strategic Directions for Horse Riding in NSW National Parks” which reflected the end of the “anti-horse riding” attitude of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The strategy identified and prioritised the delivery of horse riding opportunities in eight National Parks & Wildlife Service Regions, which are:

* Southern Ranges (Kosciuszko)
* Far South Coast
* Lower North Coast
* Central Coast Hunter Ranges
* Metropolitan North-East
* Blue Mountains
* Northern Rivers
* Northern Tablelands

During 2013 each of the priority regions consulted with local horse riding stakeholders and prepared detailed horse riding plans.

In last year’s State Delivery Plan for the National Parks & Wildlife Service, the NSW Government reaffirmed its commitment to providing improved horse riding opportunities in National Parks. The most obvious change has been in the attitude of local staff around the state. While there are still some anti-horse die-hards, the majority are now treating horse riders as welcome guests rather than enemies.

In January this year, we met with the Minister for the Environment, Rob Stokes, the Head of Parks Michael Wright, and other senior staff. The two main points that we raised in relation to the Horse Riding Strategy document were the painful slowness of progress to date, and the relatively token nature of the changes achieved so far – in other words the difference between what was promised and what has been delivered.

The recent appointment of a project manager to oversee implementation of horse riding proposals should see a lot more positive changes taking place during 2015.

But in 2014 we did nevertheless finally begin to see promises translated into actions.

Easter 2014 saw the first horse riders in 20 years legally entering a wilderness area. The Wilderness Horse Riding Trial began in April, with horse riding now allowed on a small number of closely monitored routes in declared wilderness areas.

In Kosciuszko National Park the Ingeegoodbee Trail and the Nine Mile Trail are once again open to horses; in Deua and Monga National Parks the WD Tarlinton Bridle Trail, Georges Pack Bridle Track and Shoebridge Bridle Track have been reopened; and in Mummel Gulf National Park, Dicks Hut Fire Trail and River Road Trail have been added as extensions to the Bicentennial National Trail.

To date most of these tracks have seen very little use from horse riders, so spread the word - encourage your fellow riders to visit these trails and then provide feedback through the survey link on the OEH website.

Also in Kosciuszko, a section of the Bicentennial National Trail was rerouted to take horse riders off a busy 100 km per hour highway. The specially constructed ’Boardmans Run’ was officially opened in May 2014 and offers 22 kilometres of shared use trail connecting the Tom Groggin and Geehi Campgrounds. Although this initiative was already underway when the Strategic Directions document was developed, it illustrates the dramatic improvement in the relationship between horse riding organisations and the National Parks & Wildlife Service.

More directly relevant to endurance riders, a large part of the course for the recent State Championships at Del Rio ran through Parr State Conservation Area, which is managed by the National Parks & Wildlife Service. They were extremely supportive towards the ride committee, especially in relation to an essential last-minute course change, and we have their full co-operation for the 2015 Tom Quilty event.

Some fantastic riding areas have been opened up in the Northern Tablelands region near Tenterfield, including homesteads with horse camping areas available for overnight stays in some fabulous riding country. Two messages that came through strongly were how much the local staff enjoyed working with horse riders because of our enthusiasm and co-operative, positive approach; and how important it is to maintain this dialogue, since NPWS staff generally know very little about horse riding, which can lead to wrong assumptions being made, and time and money being wasted.

This region was fortunate that the relevant Plans of Management did not prohibit horse riding. Other regions are progressing more slowly because Plans of Management must first be amended to remove the legal obstacles before changes can go ahead.

So far the only amendments to be finalised, apart from those allowing the Wilderness trial, are for Ku-ring-gai Chase and Garigal National Parks.

In Garigal, in addition to the four tracks already previously open to horse riders, three tracks may potentially be opened. These trails would provide safer access to horse riding facilities on Mona Vale Road and to trails in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park.

In Ku-ring-gai, only a few weeks ago The Cowan Trail, The Ryland Trail and The Duckholes Trail were reopened, and the Chiltern Trail will be reopened soon following modifications to the gate to allow horse access. Three new tracks are also under consideration for construction, including a link to reunite Ingleside riders with the Terrey Hills-Duffys Forest trail network.

Unfortunately access to some proposed trails in both parks was dependent on consent from private property owners which was not granted.

The biggest issue we are having with the Metropolitan North East Region is a belief by staff that any trail with a hill on it is unsuitable for horse riding because of potential erosion and maintenance problems.

We have had mixed success with retaining access to the Worimi Conservation Lands in Port Stephens. Horse riding along the beach will certainly be retained, but probably not in the bushland behind.

Most of the other Management Plan amendments are at various stages in the bureaucratic procedure. For each park, the proposals are being whittled back at every step of the process, with vigorous opposition from the conservation movement, and in some instances resistance from within NPWS.

Embarrassingly, my own Region, which is Blue Mountains, has been amongst the slowest to progress changes for Wollemi and Blue Mountains National Park, with lots of paper-shuffling and not much else. I am determined to change this in 2015!

Generally, we are seeing more and more horse-friendly plans of management, but even though we are winning back our trails, it's still important to provide feedback in the form of submissions when the draft plans are publicly exhibited. A submission is simply your personal comments and opinions on the plan of management, it can be a letter, an email or comments put into the NPWS website. I’ll continue to publish information in the newsletter and on the internet about upcoming draft Plans of Management. The only one currently open for submissions is Thirlmere Lakes to the south of Sydney.

I’d like to thank those of you who have taken the time during the past couple of years to write submissions. They DO get looked at and they DO make a difference. I get to review all submissions as part of my role on the National Parks & Wildlife Advisory Council Management Planning Subcommittee. The greenies have done everything they can to prevent me from having input on horse riding matters, claiming that it represents a conflict of interest for me, particularly when I have been the author of a submission on behalf of NSWERA. I can promise you that they have not succeeded in silencing me!

**Fiona Meller**