

Developer moves on to Mid-North Coast

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A COMPANY that negotiated a controversial land deal with the State Government in the Lower Hunter is now buying up valuable native bush elsewhere in the state, including on the Mid-North Coast, that it hopes it can use as "offsets" for development.

The Hardie Holdings subsidiary Eco Trades exhausted its bank of high-conservation land in 2006 when it agreed to hand over 7400 hectares of land to the state's national parks system.

In return, Hardie was allowed to proceed with several large and controversial housing projects in the Lower Hunter, including one known as Sweetwater that the *Herald* revealed on Saturday had been ranked last in a Planning Department list of 92 suitable housing sites.

Despite Sweetwater being ranked unsuitable for development because of its high conser-

vation value and its distance from other towns, Hardie Holdings succeeded in getting the site included in the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy.

The Opposition Leader, Barry O'Farrell, condemned the process of developers doing private deals with the Planning Minister, saying it locked out community representatives and councils, lacked transparency and encouraged the use of well-connected lobbyists.

Eco Trades buys much of its land cheaply because rural zonings make it difficult to subdivide or get local government approval to build high-yielding projects such as apartments and townhouses.

It then hands that land over to the Government for park reserves in return for permission to build in areas previously excluded from urban planning strategies.

Planning approvals increase the value of the land, which Hardie usually on-sells to developers.

In 2005 Hardie recruited the manager of the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation's Threatened Species Unit, Robert Humphries, to target the kind of high-conservation land the Government wanted to include in the national parks system.

After joining Eco Trades, Mr Humphries was appointed by the Government to a ministerial reference group on "biobanking", as a representative of the NSW Urban Task Force, a developer lobby group.

Biobanking allows developers to offset damage done to plants and animals by their building projects by agreeing to protect sensitive land elsewhere.

Hardie's chairman and founder, Duncan Hardie, declined to comment but the Eco Trades website says it now manages 25 properties totalling nearly 20,000 hectares of valuable native bushland.

Some of the more recent land purchases have been on the Mid-North Coast, a region the Govern-

ment expects will attract an additional 91,000 people over the next 25 years, who will need a further 58,400 dwellings.

Hardie Holdings also has land at North Arm Cove, a little-known hamlet near Port Stephens, the Total Environment Centre says.

The Department of Planning's draft regional strategy, now on public exhibition, identifies three areas as problematic because they are either flood-prone, environmentally sensitive or lack infrastructure. They include West Yamba, South West Rocks and North Arm Cove.

However, the department said North Arm Cove was worth considering for development because "of potentially significant proposed environmental offsets associated with an adjacent proposal".

This is despite indications from the local Great Lakes Council that it was unlikely to remove the rural zoning at North Arm Cove.

LAND SWAP

