Qld: Scientists call for retention of long paddock

Ed: Embargoed until 0600 AEST, Thursday, August 28
BRISBANE, Aug 28 AAP - Scientists and conservationists say vital wildlife corridors will be lost forever if state governments sell off a network of stock routes in Queensland and NSW.

More than 450 ecologists and wildlife scientists today called on NSW Premier Morris Iemma and Queensland Premier Anna Bligh to protect the network, established in the mid-19th century to help transport livestock between properties and to market.

Director of the University of Queensland's ecology centre Professor Hugh Possingham was one of the signatories to the Long Paddock Scientists' Statement which is contained in an open letter to the premiers.

He said administrative changes imminent in both states threatened the future health and integrity of the vast network that is home to endangered plants and animals.

"Research shows the network supports some of the last strongholds of Australia's most threatened native animals and plants on public land and it provides some of the last connections of nature in our extensively cleared and modified landscapes, thus facilitating the movement of animals and plants across the landscape," Prof Possingham said.

Yesterday, drovers met in the NSW town of Dubbo, in the state's central west, to form the lobby group Mates of the Stock Route.

Wilderness Society campaigner Cecile Van der Burgh who was at the meeting, said the routes were managed by 47 rural land protection boards for their biodiversity values.

"A review has recommended to the (NSW) government that travelling stock routes should be ceded back to the Department of Lands unless the local boards can provide a business case for their retention, which means they have to be profitable," Ms Van der Burgh said.

"This means the Department of Lands can do whatever they see fit with their routes. They can lease them or sell them or do whatever they like."

Drovers and environmentalists wanted the remaining NSW network to stay connected after it had already receded from 2.3 million hectares in 1975 to 600,000 hectares in 2001, she said.

Last month, a report was released in Queensland for public comment aimed at finding ways of improving management of the state's 72,000km-long network of stock routes.

The report called for a user-pays system to fund local governments that manage stock routes and the division of the network into "active" and "inactive" routes, with different levels of management.

It backs a previously stated promise by the Bligh government not to sell off or lease the stock route network.

AAP rad/pjo/lh/cdh