

28th March, 2010

The Committee Secretary,
Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

Submission to inquiry into Native Vegetation Laws, Greenhouse Gas Abatement and Climate Change Measures

Following are comments I wish to submit to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee inquiry into the above issues. These comments reflect my observations on some underlying causes for the frustration and resentment within the farming community associated with Native Vegetation Laws. They are made from my experiences as a grazier, although I also have a background in land and soil science.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the inquiry.
Yours sincerely,

Submission to Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee inquiry into Native Vegetation Laws, Greenhouse Gas Abatement and Climate Change Measures

I would like to make a number of brief points in relation to the inquiry into Native Vegetation Laws, Greenhouse Gas Abatement and Climate Change Measures.

Native Vegetation Clearing Laws

I have no issue with legislation to limit/prevent clearing of native vegetation from private land. Indeed, I regard such legislation as necessary and desirable given that we have become aware of the benefits of such vegetation in terms of provision of biological diversity and retaining ecosystem function, prevention of land degradation (salinity, erosion) and, more recently, storage of carbon. I do not think it appropriate that ownership of land transfers rights to an individual(s) that allows the land to be degraded in ways that are detrimental to current or future generations as we are all ultimately dependent on a healthy landscape. However, I think there are a number of issues in relation to the fair and equitable application of these laws and it on these issues that I wish to comment.

The beneficiaries of clearing legislation

Society as a whole (including future generations), as distinct from individual landholders, is usually the major beneficiary from the retention of native vegetation. This is particularly true where clearing would result in off-site degradation (salinity, reduction in water quality, and so on), in the loss of rare and endangered ecosystems or species, and/or in loss of significant ecosystem function. While it is true that a farmer's livelihood is dependent on a healthy landscape, so too is rest of society – urban citizens would also suffer greatly in a barren and depauperate land. Given this, it seems only equitable that the community should contribute to some of the cost of vegetation retention, which may include the cost of income foregone from alternative uses on the part of the landholder.

The issue of Australia having reputedly met its greenhouse gas emission targets that were agreed to under the Kyoto protocol, through reductions in clearing of native vegetation without compensation to landholders, is a prime example of an iniquitous situation with respect to farmers and graziers carrying the burden for the rest of society. This emissions reduction has been to the benefit of all Australians, with no specific benefits accruing from this reduction to the landholders; indeed, many landholders would argue that being unable to clear has been to their economic detriment. It seems that the rest of Australia has gone on with “business as usual” with respect to greenhouse gas emissions so that, had it

not been for the clearing bans, Australia's targets would have been exceeded. There is nothing equitable or fair in one sector of the community being forced to carry the responsibility for emissions reduction and its costs, for the whole community while others have continued with unchanged lifestyles and no financial costs and, in the case of many businesses, have gained financially from "polluting" as usual or even increasing their emissions.

With respect to the emissions reduction scheme proposed by the Coalition (and it is hard to know the details), it seems that the farming community will continue to be responsible for reducing emissions from the country as a whole, through land management practices that encourage the sequestration of carbon. Leaving aside the technical difficulties (there is considerable scientific debate on this issue), such a scheme continues to place the burden for emissions reduction on one sector of the community only. Even with rebates and payments for specific management practices as I understand is proposed (and the recent rebate scheme for home insulation should have highlighted the problem with such schemes), the proposal remains inherently inequitable – the majority of the community can continue to live in a way that does not consider the environmental consequences while landholders must manage their land in a way that does. I suspect a lot of resentment on the part of farmers can be attributed to this type of inequitable distribution of responsibility just as much as to the financial inequities.

To make matters worse, carbon sequestration in vegetation and soil has an upper limit that depends on climate and land types – in other words, such a mechanism for carbon sequestration can only cover emissions for so long, and the potential for sequestration diminishes as the climate becomes drier and hotter. So, not only are farmers carrying an unfair burden of responsibility, they are carrying it in a scheme which seems to be flawed in terms of adequately solving the problem of increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

Non-uniform application of clearing bans

If Australian society has decided that protection of remaining native vegetation is important, particularly where this involves rare and endangered ecosystems and species (including faunal species dependent on the habitat) or particularly important ecological functions, then this should be an absolute and not dependent on the particular land use that will be implemented following clearing. One is well aware of the frustration on the part of many farmers and graziers who have not been allowed to clear their land but who at the same time hear of developers and others being granted permits to clear remnants of significant ecosystems.

If society wishes to retain remnants of all our natural systems, why should governments allow particularly significant or good examples or last remaining areas, to be cleared for housing development around cities or along the coast? Who is making the decision that it is alright to irrevocably lose such areas and the associated ecological functioning, to human habitation (but not to grow food), and on what grounds?

The ABC's Four Corners Program recently drew attention to the fact that at least one farmer in the Liverpool Plains area of NSW had not been granted a permit to

clear native vegetation, but that a mining company would be given permission to clear the same land, even before investigations into effects on recharge and groundwater systems were completed. Are this vegetation and the ecological/hydrological systems it influences important, or aren't they? How can they be too important to clear for one land use, but not another? Is "importance" determined purely by economic considerations and, if so, how are the ecological benefits costed, particularly into the future when the importance of groundwater systems in potentially drier climates is hard to predict?

In summary, areas of native vegetation are either important or they are not. I think a problem is that Australians' perceptions of our natural flora and fauna, and its importance, have changed. Generally, we no longer see the native vegetation as something "undesirable" and to be cleared, as happened in the past. We have come to realize that conservation of native vegetation, the animal populations dependent on it, and its ecosystem services, are essential for our own well being, among other things. However, such conservation is the responsibility of the whole of society and not just particular segments, and also comes at a cost. It would seem that many Australians now want to conserve our ecosystems, but only provided it doesn't affect them and their lifestyle or cost them in other ways. It seems that society has yet to fully accept equitable sharing of responsibilities and costs, and to work out how to equitably solve the problems that might arise from retaining native vegetation generally and ecologically significant areas in particular. I consider that it is the role of governments to ensure this happens, and I can only urge the Senate Committee in its current inquiry to consider the issue of equitable distribution within the whole of society, of responsibilities and costs for maintaining our native vegetation.