

For The Secretary, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage, Parliament House, Canberra. ACT

### **Inquiry into the Impact of Conservation Controls imposed on landholders.**

Australia has now been affected by European culture for 200 years. It is therefore surprising that there are native vegetation remnants still remaining. More than 50% of the native vegetation within the intensive agricultural use areas of Australia (eastern and southern seaboard), have been cleared. Even now Australia is still among the leaders in the world for annual broad acre native vegetation clearance. Unless methods are put into place the remaining native vegetation remnants will eventually go the same way as the rest of the over developed and over populated areas of earth. The arid and semi-arid regions will end up like the Sahara Desert and the remnants of the higher rainfall zones will be restricted to the steep elevated areas. As new technology invokes new ways to make use of land resources then there will be the inevitable encroachment on the remaining vegetation remnants. Therefore to retain Australia's remaining bio-diversity, it is imperative these remaining remnants, particularly wetlands, within the intensive agricultural use areas are preserved or managed in a controlled, non-destructive way.

If these remnants are left in the hands of the present owners then commercial pressures will inevitably lead to the remnants being utilised or plundered in one way or another as population levels increase, technologies advance or the property changes ownership etc.

It is therefore submitted, that all remaining significant vegetation remnants in high agricultural use areas be returned to the "crown" and put into a perpetual environmental trust. In addition, pastoral areas need to be judicially managed and regulated. It cannot be expected that the owners or pastoral lease holders will maintain and look after the remnants, as present regulation only invokes a tax deduction for expenditure, which is not a viable commercial option or incentive for non-productive land. As it is impractical for governments to buy back the land due to budget constraints, then these remnants need to be returned on a **full tax rebate basis**, so that the full value of the land is returned to the owner.

One might surmise that such land has no commercial value when not cleared. In some respects this may be true. If it had commercial cropping value then it probably would have been cleared long ago. Most land has some pastoral value, although in agricultural areas this value is not commercially realized. Once cleared and degraded the land can never be returned to its original condition, and the cost of attempting to restore the land to its original condition is extremely expensive, and the real expense (not taking into account any government subsidies or voluntary labour) would in most cases, exceed the commercial value of the land.

Although the return of the land on a full rebate system is effectively the same as a buy back, there is actually no exchange of money involving extra government charges, and the rebate can be carried out over a number of years so as to not harm the economy. However, if the tax rebate concession was excessively extended then inflation upgrades would need to be invoked.

In addition, the tax rebate system could effectively be used to obtain Carbon Credits for Australia. Any foreign country or large company wishing to obtain international Carbon Credits could if they wish actually buy back the remnants through a pool or trust, or on a similar basis, larger Australian based companies should be allowed to buy back the remnants to obtain a tax rebate.

Suitable land abutting commercial use or cropping land needs to be fenced before it is put into the pool, and the cost of the fencing included in the land valuation. The original deed hold farmer would ultimately be responsible for looking after the fence and its maintenance on a tax deduction and GST free basis. The returned land would be managed by the normal environmental state apparatus. However, such land must be placed into a conservation trust whereby neither State or Commonwealth authorities can later access the land for development purposes.

Land for this purpose would obviously need to be valued by a government approved valuer, but the valuation needs to take into account the true restoration value of the land. That is, what would it really cost to restore such land to its original condition if it were totally cleared!

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