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May 16, 2000

The Secretary  
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and  
Heritage  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: [Environment.Reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:Environment.Reps@aph.gov.au)

Dear Sir/Madam

I am making this submission as an individual, and as the inaugural Chairman of the Native Food Growers Group Inc. (3 years) and present vice-president of that group.

The Native Food Growers Group is a community body attempting to establish a new horticulture industry in Central Western NSW.

Many of our members were, or are still members of Landcare groups – the project is always mindful of the environmental outcomes of our new industry.

We are aware of the contributions our industry can make in the future to water efficiency (our plots are irrigated, but many of the species we are trialling are desert plants), biodiversity, regeneration, revegetation, and improvement of our soils.

The Native Food Growers Group Inc. received NHT funding for a trial and demonstration project of native food species in Central Western NSW – commencing October 1997.

## **Water**

Because of the conservation controls established on water during the last few years we have been subjected to the following difficulties:

We were told by the DLWC that we were illegally watering our plants. We were told that to dip a bucket in our dams, to water our trial plots was illegal (and furthermore, they would like information about anyone we knew who was doing that!).

Water licence applications put in by some members of our group as early as July 1998 (10 hectares or less) have still not been processed. The only way we even receive communication about them is to ask DLWC – they have never once communicated with us on the progress of our applications (apart from the initial inspection carried out on our property).

Some group members have been 'saved' by the farm dam's policy which was later released (again, no communication forthcoming!) but other members of our group are still illegally watering their trial plots.

I have written to our local State Member, NHT, received communications from Richard Amery, and put various submissions to government (this is not the first) to clarify our problem. As yet nothing has occurred. We have **never** even received permission from **anyone** to water our trial plants.

As chairman, and now vice-chairman of our group and project manager for the NHT project I have been placed in the position of:  
**Either A. Water the plants illegally, and end up in court because of this**  
**OR B. Misuse government funds, and perhaps end up in court for fraudulently or negligently using public funds.**

As a law abiding citizen I take great exception to the options provided to me by governments who are trying to be 'environmentally correct'. This has caused our family (and members of our group) great stress and much time (putting submissions, phoning whoever I can to find who will 'bite the bullet' to allow us to continue etc).

.... in the mean time I have other government bodies and regional development organisations encouraging our industry to continue – as we need regional industries!!! Do we??? Who is serious about this???

The establishment of regional industries is being put back (and in some cases totally abandoned) because of the red tape, pain etc required in trying to do this.

We have recently received further funding from DEWRSB (through the CWACC) for a strategy plan/business plan for our group. At the end of this period it is hoped that our members will then make decisions on commercial cropping quantities. We are still waiting on water advice – I expect we could still be waiting then!!!

So far this industry has cost our group, the government etc probably in excess of \$ 400,000 – the project is hoped to be worth millions to our local community – and this is how we have been treated.

Stress like this puts most people out of the race. There is no guarantee this industry will materialise – it would be nice to receive help in regard to water rulings, instead of the prospect of a large fine, government investigation or worse.

Volunteers in our local community only have so much time and resources to put to emerging industries. I think our group has 'hit the wall' about 6 times so far in the 4 years we have been in existence.

For example, our family, who initiated this project have a 5000 acre full time superfine wool growing property run by my 55 year old husband and his 70 something mother. I established the native food group to bring some further income to our farm (as we mostly do not make a profit). I was hoping this would be a 3-5 year plan. It is now 4 years old and no progress to commercial cropping stage has been made. Our family has now had to start another full-time business to earn an income to support the family while the native food industry establishes. ... and still participate at all levels to establish the industry. We have a 9 year old son and community work we participate in. You can only do so much!!!

The stresses in the country are real. The financial results of living and working on the land are negligible in most cases. We have assets and no income. Most of our neighbours have very little left of either. This, coupled with the boom/bust market prices we receive for our product, prohibits leveraging our way out of farming by investing in rental property etc. Many people have gone broke borrowing to invest off-farm because of market volatility.

About 7 of the 10 farms in the Native Food Growers Group have no way to water their plants in the future – so cannot establish commercial orchards. How many years are we to wait for permission to use water? I suggest our industry and group has a life span of about 9 more months. After over 4 years the enthusiasm for establishing a new industry is lost, we just don't want to give up yet.

### **Other**

.... And that's just the water issues!!!! There are many aspects of the Native Vegetation Act I don't like either. E.g. woody weeds are now protected if they are Australian natives! Why doesn't the

Native Vegetation Act apply to cities, and government forests etc?  
The farmers obviously have been picked out to take the environmental brunt. What a joke!

With farmers leaving the land, to be replaced by off-farm financed 'new farmers' this country is losing billions of dollars worth of assets in knowledge, farming expertise, machinery knowledge, experience. I know new farmers who can't even put a strainer in!

If a country puts no economic value on 200 years of farming experience carried from one generation to the next (which has happened until now), and billions of dollars worth of Australian owned industry, and food and clothing for a nation (and others) then the **country** deserves to go broke – not the farmers!

Environmental issues are costing regional Australia dearly. The *deliberation* over environmental issues is costing us more. How many public servants, how many man-years, how much of tax payers money, how many industries lost??? Tens of millions, billions I expect .... And no wins to show for it!!! Environmental issues need to become economically sustainable too.

My local Catchment Management Committee told me in 1997 not to bother applying for NHT funding for our trial and demonstration project – I expect because it was 'industry'. They hadn't even read the NHT guidelines, and they have the authority to prioritise local applications!!

If an industry is to be 'taken out' or disadvantaged compensation should be paid of course.

But compensation is not enough – it is a band-aid on a gaping wound. If in 10 years' time the folly of the decisions made now is exposed there will be no knowledge base left to reconstruct rural industries. The heart will no longer be there. It will be far too late.

Blind Freddy could see this coming 30 years ago – and we're still deliberating about it. In the mean time farmers have got older and older – there is a very small window of opportunity left. We need action – and positive, expansive, economically driven action. Farmers should be retained on their properties.

The real economists know that looking at CPI indexes and inflation rates is a waste of time without looking at the vulnerability of the country's economy. Australia's balance of trade problem, coupled with the 'free-trade' policy, and the present policy to sell off anything to overseas investors to make the figures look better is a

recipe for disaster. Even on the basis of our contribution to the balance of payments farmers are very valuable. ...but no-one talks about that any more it's a no-talk-zone! Our balance of payments is hideous – so it's discussion is avoided at all costs.

The environment and economics can meet (e.g. in the native food industry). Farmers are doing their best to grapple with environmental issues, are the environmentalists doing their bit to grapple with farmer's issues? Not from my perspective.

Will all be lost being politically and environmentally correct?

Yours faithfully

Elizabeth Shannon B. Ec. (Syd)