

19 May, 2000

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

Private Submission in relation to the inquiry into public good conservation.

- **Impact of conservation measures imposed on landholders.**

This inquiry should be looking at the plethora of “environmental regulations” which are being introduced in rural districts, rather than “conservation measures”. Conservation is about preservation and therefore, in producers mind, does not relate to productive land utilised for economic purposes. As defined in the dictionary, conservation is “official maintenance, as of natural resources; preserving, guarding; keeping in an entire state.” A National Park is preserved, maybe a corner of the property with a rare plant is preserved, but the prime purpose of a production farm is to earn an income. The Victorian Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act has provision to duly compensate a private landholder should a corner of a property be so valuable as to require a conservation order. Therefore conservation measures are understood and are not the concern of rural producers. There are landholders who place “conservation covenants” on their land to prevent change and keep the land as a heritage area. This concept works fine on small areas, but is not a solution for rural producers or for sustainable rural communities.

Environmental regulations are the real concern and are having a negative impact on rural producers. Ninety people attended a local meeting recently to discuss new environmental rules proposed for our district. The usual turn-up for a meeting in our little town is a dozen. The planning officer’s explanation of the regulations was greeted with scepticism and mistrust. We all know that when a regulation is introduced in this district for the “public good” that we are not part of the public to benefit, but it will cost us.

The most frustration I have with environmental regulations is that they keep changing. We make long-term plans but they are being governed by short-term rules. So many bodies are involved in formulating environmental policy that the regulations have become overwhelming. As the environment is the world in which we live, government environmental regulations control every aspect of the world in which we live. It is the manipulation of public-good measures in the name of the environment, by those with agendas far removed from the environment that I fear most.

The current environmental regulations recognise the role of large industry and corporations and allow for industrial zone areas. They also recognise that areas need to be conserved as part of our heritage and so parklands have been created. The role of rural producers, small family farmers and rural communities, and how they fit into the picture, has not been fully considered by the decision makers. The current direction of environmental regulations is to turn productive land into non-productive land and is replacing long-term rural producers with city-based investors.

The challenge is to find ways rural producers can produce profitably using systems that improve the environment over a long-term timeframe. Every problem has a solution - rural producers are looking to our academics and government for inspiration and innovation, viable and sustainable farming systems, specifically tailored for each of our unique environments. The farmer still on the land in Australia in the year 2000 is one who has adapted to change and is seeking long-term solutions, positive answers and a secure future for their families and their community.

The environment must be kept healthy for the community to be viable and the community must be kept viable for the environment to be healthy. This is well understood by those living on the land.

- **Policy measures adopted internationally**

I personally admire the Canadian ecoforestry system as the preferred model and a direction to aim, for the smaller landholder in our wooded district. In British Columbia, they are recognising that “local ownership” is important. They are even allowing communities instead of public servants manage areas of state-owned forests, thus empowering whole communities, while saving tax-payer dollars. Analogue forestry and small-scale woodlot management are options being eliminated in Australia by prescriptive environmental regulations and yet may prove to be the most sustainable systems for small landholders in forested areas.

In the Western Victorian RFA, only two types of forest were acknowledged and three industries. The forest was divided into parkland and industrial zone, with the parkland for the conservation and tourism industry and the industrial zone classified for the timber industry. Why could not a small corner of the state forest be classified “ecoforest” to be managed by the local community? The locals and their niche products were ignored, irrelevant in the grand picture, even though they are the local community. Canada appears to be well ahead of Australia in recognising the interdependence of people and their environment and the importance of community - of the need to integrate social, economic and environmental factors in decision-making.

In Australia, we have propagation/breeding systems recognised and wild-harvesting systems recognised but “cultivation” of what we already have is not deemed acceptable because it does not fit neatly into paperwork and current classifications.

Programs that are working in Australia

Streetlife.

This program is an initiative funded 50-50 between the Victorian state government and the local council. The workshop was great. Its about communities writing their own community action plan, ensuring we keep what is good about our district while embracing change and an exciting future. The ideas which emerged were fresh and achievable. The people with all different interests and goals, some new to town from the city and some third generation farmers, began to interact and see ways to form a synergy and strengthen our districts economic, social and environmental health. The bottom-up approach works as it gives ownership of the concept to those on the ground who are responsible for action and consequences.

Farming of Natives

Discouragement of the farming of natives with over-regulation has had the most detrimental environmental impact on the Australian environment. Why does a country in the southern hemisphere encourage the farming of exotic species while deterring the farming of natives? More Australian plants are grown commercially overseas than in Australia. Only an ideology that places all natives into the parkland side of the picture with exotics in the industrial zone could conceive that this is good for Australia. It is time to encourage the farming of native species in Australia. Innovators such as Professor Nigel Forteach with his seahorse farm and the abalone farmers of Tasmania are leading the way of future Australian farming enterprises. Unique, niche industries strengthen and enrich rural Australia without adversely affecting traditional established products.

- **Appropriate mechanisms to establish private and public-good components of conservation measures.**

If methods can be designed which allow rural producers to produce profitably while improving the environment over a long-term timeframe, then there is no need for “conservation measures”. If the government is going to take the easy short-term option of locking up rural Australia for the “public good”, then the only fair system is for the public to fully compensate for any loss of income resulting from the measure imposed. The social cost of dislocating rural communities and replacing them with city investors in “the name of the environment” should be included in any calculations.

- **Recommendations**

I hope that this committee will choose the option of empowering communities to find solutions for their own unique environments and look to Canada for inspiration.

<http://www.ecoforestry.ca/intro.htm>

<http://oberon.ark.com/~ecofor/Crown.htm>

<http://www.naturalcapitalism.org/sitepages/pid5.asp>

http://vcn.bc.ca/wcel/forestry/11655/11655_2b.html