

May 15, 2000

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Environment
and Heritage
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Inquiry into public good conservation – Impact of environmental measures imposed on landholders

The members of the Fiveways Landcare Group welcome the opportunity to lodge a submission to this inquiry into the impact of environmental measures on landholders.

The issue that we consider most relevant to our situation deals with the impact on landholders and farmers of conservation measures imposed by State and Commonwealth governments.

The Fiveways Landcare Group is situated in the Fiveways area of the Bogan/Lachlan Shires, midway between Nyngan and Tottenham in the Central West of New South Wales. All members are farmers and graziers, with a long association in the district.

During the course of this submission the main points that are tendered for your consideration are:

- the contention by the government that all trees are good trees, and that all native vegetation will be retained;
- devaluing of property;
- loss of annual production returns;
- regrowth;
- compensation;
- costs of **rectifying** conservation measures;
- clearing for farming purposes.

The endeavours of our landcare group are being undermined by the Department of Land and Water Conservation's continued refusal to allow for the clearing of dense cypress pine and areas of large bumble box with a dense understorey of woody weeds. This issue

is covered comprehensively in a letter that we submitted to The Land Newspaper, printed in the April 20, 2000 edition. This letter is marked as Annexure A.

The continued insistence of conservation groups that “all trees are good trees” is leading to a potential environmental crisis in our location. There are principally red sandy and red gravelly loams present, and these soil types cannot support a stand of any dense timber and maintain adequate ground covers to prevent water/soil erosion from occurring. With an annual rainfall of only 350-375mm the competition for moisture is too great. If these tree numbers were allowed to be limited it would ensure a healthy environment for all fauna and flora that could be supported in a true balanced environment, not the mono environment that exists now.

There is already evidence of water erosion in dense tree populations, however where fencelines have been cleared and the area allowed develop a grass cover, the erosion is controlled and is being rehabilitated.

The cost of rectifying the problems that “conservation measures” will cause in our area alone will be quite substantial – the assumption that conservation always creates public good is grossly flawed.

All timber in this area has already been part of land management practices since the time of white settlement, with substantial ringbarking programmes being undertaken. The management of modified tree populations should best be left to the individual assessment of farmers, in consultation with Department staff, and a well balanced program implemented.

When considering the actual costs of conservation measures imposed on landholders there are several issues that are considered as having a major impact.

The devaluing of the capital value of landholdings is one of the hidden costs associated with these measures. For example, a property of 3107.59ha was purchased in 1994 for \$105,000 for development purposes. From 1911, when the settlement lease was taken up, until 1994 an area of 120ha had been cleared, leaving 2980ha of modified timber and vegetation. From 1994 to 1999 a further 280ha were cleared, to a total of 400ha, leaving 2700ha. Under the current plans for maintaining remnant vegetation, no substantial clearing will be allowed, so the 2700ha now has a limited capacity to produce a return on investment to the landholder. It was the intention of the landholder to develop the property to a level of 2000ha cleared, leaving 1100ha in its current state (modified timber, regrowth and vegetation). If this additional development occurred the commercial value of this property would be increased to \$456000. This one landholder is forgoing \$351,000 in capital improvement on his land investment.

Another impact of the conservation measures is the loss of annual production income by the landholder. Using the above property to illustrate this, a brief timeline showing the effects of development follows:

- 1980 120ha cleared for cropping; 2980ha unimproved.
- 40ha is cropped (ratio of 2 years cropping/4 years spelled). The 80ha balance of the cropping area supports a stocking rate of 100DSE(rate of 1.25head/ha), the 2980ha unimproved area supports a stocking rate of 1849DSE(.64head/ha). This level of production would yield an estimated 50t grain, 58 bales of wool.
- 1994 160ha cleared for cropping; 2940ha unimproved.
- 54ha cropped. The 106ha balance supports 132DSE(1.25head/ha), the 2940ha unimproved supports 1649DSE(.56head/ha). Production estimated at 65t grain, 54 bales of wool.
- 2000 400ha cleared for cropping; 2700ha unimproved.
- 133ha cropped. The 267ha balance supports 320DSE(1.25head/ha), the 2700ha unimproved supports 1296DSE(.48head/ha). Production estimated at 160t grain, 48 bales of wool.
- 2005 2000ha cleared for cropping; 1100ha unimproved.
- 666ha cropped. The 1334ha balance supports 1667DSE(1.25head/ha), the 1100ha unimproved supports 528DSE(.48head/ha). Production estimated at 800t grain, 66 bales of wool.

Using the same property, but production only from grazing would result in the following production data:

- 1980 120ha cleared supports 150DSE(1.25head/ha), 2980ha unimproved supports 1907DSE(.64head/ha). Production estimated at 62 bales of wool.
- 1994 160ha cleared supports 200DSE(1.25head/ha), 2940ha unimproved supports 1649DSE(.56head/ha). Production estimated at 55 bales of wool.
- 2000 400ha cleared supports 500DSE(1.25head/ha), 2700ha unimproved supports 1296DSE(.48head/ha). Production estimated at 54 bales of wool.

Again using the same property, but in an unimproved state the following production would result:

1980	3100ha unimproved supports 1964DSE(.64head/ha), estimated production of 59 bales of wool.
1994	3100ha unimproved supports 1736DSE(.56head/ha), estimated production of 52 bales of wool.
2000	3100ha unimproved supports 1488DSE(.48head/ha), estimated production of 45 bales of wool.

In this last case, the effects of regrowth on the ability of this property to support a reasonable level of stock is significant and clearly illustrates the effects of a 'lockup' practice in this area. Even the unimproved areas that are maintained throughout the development of this property are suffering from the effects of increased regrowth populations – the stocking rates have diminished from .64 head/ha down to .48 head/ha over a period of only 20 years. At this rate even the native fauna would be struggling to survive in only a matter of years.

*The specific details of this property will be made available upon request.

Under the Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997 No 133 the following exemption exists:

“regrowth. The removal of native vegetation, whether seedling or regrowth, of less than 10 years of age if the land has been previously cleared for cultivation, pastures or forestry plantation purposes. This exemption allows removing of regrowth under the following conditions:

- *the regrowth is less than 10 years of age; and*
- *the land has been previously cleared for the purpose of: cultivation, pastures or forestry plantation.*

Comment

Regrowth is defined as the ‘repetition’ of ‘the act, process, or manner of growing, stage of development, or something that was grown or developed by or as by a natural process’(Macquarie Dictionary 1991). In terms of native vegetation, regrowth includes all native vegetation including trees, shrubs, understorey plants and specified native grasslands.”

Regrowth of eucalypts, wilgas, wattles, and other species is so vigorous in the red soils of the central western plains that we are now compelled to remove them all within ten years. There is no opportunity as we have done in the past, of letting some areas grow with the view to selectively clearing 15, 20 or 30 years later. The risk of having a clearing application refused has caused the aggressive removal of all regrowth younger than 10 years. This is the antithesis of the aim of the government policy!

With the controlling of bush fires, the natural culling of regrowth no longer occurs. The Government's contention that only trees less than 10 years old are deemed to be regrowth is a simplistic approach to the matter. There is anecdotal evidence from longtime residents of this area that much of the country that is now timbered was open grassland that could be ridden over with a bicycle – not even a horse was required! In its present state it is accessible by foot. The regeneration of regrowth on farmed and pastured land is a significant problem in this area.

All conservation issues must be balanced – should the public-good considerations be more heavily weighted than the requirements for sustainable land management and the financial responsibilities of the landholders? A balance must be maintained to preserve the viability of farmers, and in turn ensure the health and prosperity of our natural resources.

The actions of the Department of Land and Water Conservation staff are certainly reaffirming the impression that landholders have gained - all vegetation will be retained for conservation, whether the area identified will suffer from this lockup or not. There is evidence that clearing applications are determined principally from aerial maps in an office, and that supporting documentation to justify this outcome is procured by them, that when questioned on how the determinations were made – “valid scientific reasons” existed.

It is quite obvious in dealings with the Department that only the public good is important, and that for some reason they will not declare, clearing for farming purposes is a development that is met with negativity and refusal to grant applications.

As well as the financial and land management aspects, the mental stress caused to landholders who have carefully managed their resources for decades is enormous. It is almost impossible to know whether a particular management program is covered by the exemptions within the law or not. There is no rest until the two years have elapsed that is the period within which the regulators must act.

There is a very definite trend toward locking up any remaining vegetation (especially regrowth) as a counterbalance to the overclearing that has taken place in other locations – there has been little attempt by any government department to order replanting of trees in sensitive areas, just this singleminded determination to keep all existing trees. This simply shifts the weight of responsibility from the landholder that has cleared extensively to the landholder who has taken a more moderate approach to developing his holding over a longer period of time. Many landholders have either preserved areas on farms and/or have only progressively cleared small amounts each year. There is no recognition of this approach. In fact they may be penalised for it as they may now have some of the last patches of remnant vegetation or may be surrounded by what others believe is excessively cleared country. To disallow further development without significant forms of compensation is a huge impost on the very landholders who have been the most conservation-minded farmers of the past at the expense of their more aggressive neighbours.

I have recently had the opportunity to study the National Framework for the Management and Monitoring of Australia's Native Vegetation – Commonwealth's Interim Workplan, released by ANZECC, and feel that there are issues of relevance to this inquiry contained in this document. (The increasing demands for all landholders to be aware of information regarding issues that directly affect them also adds an additional burden – there is so much information to read and investigate that there are infringements made on working and family time).

The focus of the Framework is quite clear in its intentions for the management of native vegetation. *“The overarching national native vegetation goal is to reverse the long-term decline in the quality and extent of Australia's native vegetation by June 2001”*. Again we see a single minded approach that all trees are good trees, that all regions can be treated in the same manner, that all habitats will respond in the same way to universally applied management strategies. This same phrase is also evident in literature issued by every state body that has any dealings with farmers on conservation and clearing issues.

ANZECC have included in their key challenges, funding: *defining the respective roles and responsibilities of Governments and landholders for vegetation management – recognising that landholders have a responsibility to meet the ongoing costs associated with sustainable land management (ie a 'duty of care'), - and that Governments have a role to act in the public interest when conservation actions are required that extend beyond the landholders duty*. It would appear that the national framework is preempting your committees' findings before the inquiry is complete!

In the introduction to the National Framework for the Management and Monitoring of Australia's Native Vegetation this statement is made *“Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments have committed themselves, through the Natural Heritage Trust, to reverse the long-term decline in the quality and extent of Australia's native vegetation cover by June 2001”*.

“Social benefits include

- *providing places of scenic beauty;*
- *providing sites for tourism and recreation;*
- *providing places for research, education and scientific purposes;*
- *maintaining the distinctive Australian landscapes.*

Native vegetation contributes to the natural values, resources and processes of biodiversity, soil and water resources, hydrology, land productivity, sustainable land use, and climate change. It also contributes to natural and cultural heritage, and indigenous people's interests.

The inclusion of these issues in the national framework actually undermines the practices of all funding for conservation related issues by all governments – there is great consideration placed on the social benefits of conservation measures, but a determined refusal to pay for this consideration. Words such as *providing* and *maintaining* all imply

that some maintenance of these sites will be required, some ongoing commitment by the **landholder** to preserve this native vegetation. Funds are freely available for research into the retention of native vegetation and all manner of conservation issues that will support the Government's position on conservation; education of urban dwellers to the benefits and scenic attributes of this wonderful vegetation – it would seem that the need for the maintenance aspect of our 'unique Australian landscape' will be borne by the individual landholders!

2 Use of the National Framework

2.2 Implementation Arrangements

“The Framework will be used as a guide to the strategic allocation of Commonwealth funding towards native vegetation management and monitoring activities in the States and Territories. Evaluations of progress towards best practice management and monitoring arrangements, and desired native vegetation outcomes, will be used to inform decisions on allocating Commonwealth funding. It is the Commonwealth view that levels of funding will be contingent on the continuing and timely achievement of best practice management arrangements and desired native vegetation outcomes.”

Again we see here the continued use of funding by the Commonwealth to achieve the required outcomes of the Framework, and again we see that the funds are directed everywhere but at the ground level!

3 Desired Native Vegetation Outcomes

3.1 Vision

“Native vegetation buffers the impact of harsh and extremely variable climates, binds and nourishes soils, and filters streams and wetlands. Native birds, invertebrates and other animals depend upon the condition and extent of native vegetation communities.”

The consistent theme of every defining protocol of this framework is that every tree must be saved. There is no allowance for the controlled management of native vegetation, even the remote possibility that clearing works can actually sustain and promote the survival of native fauna and flora by eliminating some of the predators and negative pressures on their habitat. The singlemindedness of all government management plans are creating potential environmental disasters on a local and regional basis - the expertise and historical associations of landholders must be given due respect and credibility.

“The ‘wider public interest’ would be understood in reference to robust, regionally specific articulations of the ‘duty of care’ of land users not to degrade natural resources. ‘Duty of care’ would be widely accepted and understood as setting out the responsibilities which are inseparable from the privilege of managing land, regardless of its tenure. ‘Duty of care’ would be defined in regulation where appropriate, but would be more commonly used in industry codes of practice, industry-based environmental management systems, and voluntary incentives programs. Land uses generating insufficient returns to enable land users to fulfil their duty of care would by definition be unsustainable, and hence unsuitable, uses of land.”

The assumption in this protocol that there is some privilege associated with the management of land indicates how far from the practicalities of maintaining a farming enterprise in the year 2000 the Government has drifted. Every landholder has an obligation to manage their holding in the most equitable and well-balanced manner possible, and most address any problems that arise willingly and with great care. All of these works and considerations are at the expense of the landholder, this represents an obligation – not a privilege! Any government that endeavours to legislate it's farming community out of business by making it impossible to create sufficient returns to meet financial and imposed conservation obligations and then use this result as the vehicle for stopping that land use, need to reassess just how much public-good can be achieved by this.

4 Best Practice Native Vegetation Management and Monitoring Mechanisms ***Duty of Care, Cost Sharing Arrangements and Prioritisation of Resource Allocation***

“Financial assistance should generally not be paid to landholders to meet their duty of care for sustainable land management”

All governments place a low priority on compensating or reimbursing farmers for their conservation measures – these activities are demanded by Governments that would not take this action against any other group or entity in the country. The position that responsible farmers and agriculturists have in our community is consistently being undermined by Commonwealth and State Governments who continually release details and anecdotal evidence to show farmers as the worst type of conservationists, when in actual fact the opposite is the case. For too long the extremes in all sections of our community have had too great an influence on decisions that are made that affect our entire social and economic fabric – it is time that commonsense and moderation are introduced into the discussions and policies that are being made.

4.1.4 Commonwealth Government Role

“Through its taxation role the Commonwealth has the potential to influence native vegetation management, either positively or negatively due to the incentives and disincentives that taxation mechanisms can create.”

“The Commonwealth has a responsibility and an interest in implementing programs under the Natural Heritage Trust in accordance with the Natural Heritage Trust of Australia Act 1997 and the Partnership Agreements entered into with the State and Territories.”

The matter of taxation incentives for conservation practices is another example of the Government choosing to achieve their conservation outcomes by exerting financial pressures on already overburdened landholders. Providing tax incentives for ‘philanthropic’ support of conservation is still further examples of the diversion of government funding from the ground-level managers of the land. The Australian

economy is not in a sound enough financial position to be able to afford massive investment in conservation measures without the introduction of tax incentives – isn't this some indication that the goals of the government are being set too high and at an unsustainable level?

A possible solution to the funding of conservation and management of native vegetation issues, would be to introduce a 'conservation levy' (similar to the Medicare levy) and apply this to all taxpayers in Australia – corporate and individual. This surely would allow for the collection of sufficient funds, and spread the cost of these measures over the entire nation. The level of acceptance of this proposal by the public would indicate the preparedness of the community to pay for its conservation targets.

4.5 Incentives

Uses of incentives

Cost-sharing: size/magnitude of incentives

Formal Cost-sharing Frameworks: Costs of vegetation management are distributed on the basis of distinguishing between the public and private benefits associated with on-ground works. Non-market values are quantified and included within an applied cost-benefit framework. The costs are distributed on the basis of clearly defined allocation principles, eg beneficiary pays or polluter pays. Cost-sharing frameworks for native vegetation management tend to yield incentive payments that are higher than those generally available within Australia. They do, however, provide the most equitable way of calculating the size of incentive payments.

To require a landholder to change his management to maintain bio-diversity or a particular ecosystem for the wider benefit of the whole community without some economic incentive or compensation is grossly inequitable. In all land management practices there is some element of public and private benefit, so all conservation and land management issues need to be addressed in this context, not just the activities over and above the duty of care of the landholder. Equity in all considerations is essential to maintain the goodwill of all participants in this area.

Compensation:

Allocation of Property Rights:

Features of cost-sharing and the size or magnitude of incentives include the following

- * *Smaller, catalytic incentives will be most appropriately used to encourage voluntary participation incentive programs.*
- * *Formal cost-sharing frameworks may be most effective in regions where there are complex natural resource management issues with strong off-site/external impacts that require coordinated regional responses by a large number of landholders, eg in the management of salinity. Formal cost-sharing frameworks should always be linked to formal management agreements/covenants that secure public investment. Stewardship payments could cover the cost of on-going management beyond a landholder's duty of care where the public benefit is high.*
- * *Compensation payments should only be associated with involuntary acquisition of property rights.*

- * *Greater consideration should be given to the use of tradeable rights in creating markets for native vegetation.*

Contained in all the protocols dealing with compensation, cost sharing, and any access to funds is an underlying intent to limit the access of landholders to these funds, but to make them freely available to ‘sympathetic’ investors, philanthropists, government and state bodies, conservation groups, and any other association that chooses to join the native vegetation bandwagon. The level of disappointment that this is generating in the farming communities is reaching record heights – not just on funding issues but on regulations that are introduced without proper consultation, research papers that are tabled that are so obviously a result of a particular line the government is taking, the continual undermining of the integrity of our farming community by government and state agencies – agricultural pursuits only cause detrimental effects on the environment, farmers are making huge profits from this activity, they enjoy an enviable lifestyle living in remote areas, that they are basically living on ‘easy street’!. The true state of affairs for anyone involved in farming is so far removed from these perceptions that all farmers are losing heart, and beginning to doubt their capacity to turn this attitude around. Limited funds, time and access to resources to bring a balance into these discussions are further undermining the confidence and enthusiasm of our farming communities.

On the issue of tradeable rights in markets for native vegetation, if a productive and financially viable market can be created for native vegetation then there would be a significant incentive for farmers to become involved in this. It is only when there is an imbalance of costs/income that any business will be reluctant to participate, as shown by the present situation. This does not reflect the landholders indifference to native vegetation management, but rather a willingness to participate in sustainable enterprises.

Included in the *Mechanisms of Incentive Delivery* is the use of Revolving Funds. Surely introducing this strategy would further undermine the negotiations that would need to be undertaken when a site of ‘significant conservation’ value is identified. The opportunity exists for government or associated organisations to ‘opt-out’ of negotiations, and label a landholder as resistant. If an agreement cannot be reached as to the level of significance of the sight, what mechanisms will be put in place to resolve this issue that would give serious consideration to the landholders assertions, not written off because he is deemed to have a vested interest? Who would be the targeted market for purchasing property secured using these revolving funds? Would there be transparent and ethical strategies in place to deal with this? Could yet another government initiative find itself failing due to the implementation of an incomplete and ill-considered policy?

When all things are considered, every single person, organisation and government has a vested interest in the proper management of native vegetation, with their own agenda’s firmly in place – this accusation cannot only be directed at the landholders.

There is currently a regional vegetation management plan being prepared for the North Lachlan-Bogan area, with the committee having completed three planning sessions and

achieved some initial outcomes for our region, with further planning and development to occur. It is quite interesting to find included in the National Framework clear guidelines for the preparation of these plans, outcomes that they are expected to achieve, priorities that are identified – and all without setting foot into any region that is involved! This surely is a prime example of Commonwealth interference in a procedure that is put forward as a consultative process based on local and regional requirements by a true and fair representation of community members.

The source of committee members is set out as part of the Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997, Part 7 Administrative provisions, and all appointments are by Minister's consent (State).

Membership is as follows:

- (a) *4 representatives of rural interests, at least 2 of whom are nominated by the NSW Farmers Association;*
- (b) *2 representatives of conservation interests nominated by the Nature Conservation Council of NSW;*
- (c) *a person who is a non-government member of a Catchment Management Committee, or who is a trustee of a Catchment Management Trust, appointed under section 14(2) (a) or (b) of the Catchment Management Act 1989, being a Catchment Management Committee or Trust whose area of operation applies to the region for which the Committee is established;*
- (d) *a person who is a member of a Landcare Group whose area of operations applies to the region for which the Committee is established;*
- (e) *a person who is nominated by the local government councils whose areas apply to the region for which the Committee is established;*
- (f) *2 representatives of Aboriginal interests nominated by the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council;*
- (g) *a representative of the Department of Land and Water Conservation;*
- (h) *a representative of the Department of Agriculture;*
- (i) *a representative of the National Parks and Wildlife Service;*
- (j) *a person (nominated by the Australian Ecological Society or the National Herbarium) who has recognised scientific expertise in an area relating to native vegetation conservation and management.*

So we have a committee made up of 15 people, 7 of whom could only be recognised as government appointments likely to take the required stand to achieve the national Framework outcomes. Local representatives have no input into evaluating prospective members – they have to accept that the appointments have the specific expertise stated as a requirement in the Act. Once the committee has commenced work on the plan, and a lack of expertise is shown on region-specific vegetation, environmental and land

management issues, there is no action that can be taken by the rural representatives to correct this anomaly.

While the objective of the Management Plan to allow decisions to be made by the local committee is laudable, serious doubts exist that this will ever be honoured. Either the Minister or his department will forever stall the plans, or the make-up of the committees will be continually adjusted to ensure that objectives will never be achieved.

These points serve to show that the very people who should be wholeheartedly behind conservation hold the whole process with such misgiving and anxiety that some goals will never be achieved.

Substantial costs are already being borne by the general public in the preparation of regional vegetation management plans – meeting costs amount to \$13583, \$11286, \$11616 for the North Lachlan-Bogan committee. I believe there are 19 committees in NSW - with a combined cost of \$250,000 per meeting this is a very substantial outlay by the community for outcomes that are already predetermined!

The information referred in the Framework is reproduced below.

APPENDIX B

Best Practice Attributes of Native Vegetation Management and Monitoring Mechanisms

2.3 Regional Vegetation Management Planning

Management actions

- * *The plans should provide management actions based on an understanding of the current status of native vegetation, across land tenure in the region, and the requirements to achieve the stated vision for a future native vegetation landscape.*

- * *The actions need to be prioritised on the basis of clearly stated principles that recognise:*
 - *retention, protection and on-going management of remnants as the primary means for achieving the vegetation vision. (Management actions include: fencing and removal of grazing impacts; management of weeds using minimum disturbance methods; controlling the spread of plant pathogens; eradicating introduced animals, particularly rabbits, goats, foxes and cats; management of altered fire regimes through fire protection and where appropriate and feasible the use of prescribed burning and revegetation to enlarge remnant blocks and create buffers and linkages.)*

The following extract from the Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997 No 133 sets out the objects the Act is endeavouring to achieve:

Objects of Act

The objects of this Act are:

- (a) to provide for the conservation and management of native vegetation on a regional basis, and*
- (b) to encourage and promote native vegetation management in the social, economic and environmental interests of the State, and*
- (c) to protect native vegetation of high conservation value, and*
- (d) to improve the condition of existing native vegetation, and*
- (e) to encourage the revegetation of land, and the rehabilitation of land, with appropriate native vegetation, and*
- (f) to prevent the inappropriate clearing of vegetation, and*
- (g) to promote the significance of native vegetation,*

in accordance with the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

There is no mention of any action that will be required to redeem areas of native vegetation that have been subject to ‘protection’, ‘improvement’ and the ‘prevention of inappropriate clearing’. The continued premise that the conserving of native vegetation can only be achieved by stopping clearing, is creating a false impression in the broader community and the scientific community. There are cases in lighter soils where clearing of native vegetation can actually benefit the environment, reduce erosion and maintain a diverse population of fauna and flora. The specific requirements for each location must be the overarching requirement for the assessment of conservation measures – not the Government wanting to substantially reduce clearing. There needs to be recognition of the benefits of **active vegetation management** - simply locking up native vegetation is a careless and negligent approach.

The Commonwealth and State Governments could find themselves guilty of causing the same results they are legislating to prevent –

*“**Land degradation**” is ‘the decline in quality of natural land resources, commonly caused through inappropriate use of the land by humans, and encompasses soil degradation and the deterioration of natural landscapes and vegetation’. As examples, it can include the adverse effects of overgrazing, overclearing, erosion, sediment deposition, disposal of industrial and agricultural wastes, road, track and firebreak construction, decline of plant communities and the effects of noxious plants and feral animals (Adapted from Houghton and Charman 1986).*

*“**soil erosion** involves ‘the detachment and transport of soil and its deposition at another site by wind, water or gravitational effects. Although a component of natural erosion, it becomes the dominant component of accelerated erosion as a result of human activities, and includes the removal of chemical materials” (Houghton and Charman 1986).*

“other deleterious consequences refers to any other additional hurtful, harmful and injurious act or fact that results in the loss or degradation of native vegetation, or the ecological and physical systems that it supports and that support native vegetation.”

These definitions are contained in *Definitions and Exemptions SEPP 46 – Protection and Management of Native Vegetation, Amendment 2* (issued to concerned farmers by Department of Land and Water Conservation staff at a meeting in Tottenham 20 April 2000 as the current list of definitions and exemptions)

In the *Issues for the inquiry into public good conservation* paper that is available on your internet sight as a support to this inquiry I was quite interested to read the disclaimer included. Under *Financial assistance for conservation by landholdersthe committee reminds readers that, as it is a committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, it has limited power over state and territory conservation programs.*” It is quite obvious from all of the literature dealing with the management and conservation of native vegetation, the funding of research projects, and the dissemination of NHT funds that the Commonwealth is certainly the driving force. You do not need to have any direct influence on State/Territory programs – simply a great deal of influence on government policies and practices! Senator Hill has certainly been less than circumspect with veiled threats and implied restrictions to state and territory bodies that don’t deliver the national outcomes in a prompt and timely manner.

The final issue that I would like considered is the manner in which landholders are treated by government departments and associated organisations during the course of trying to develop their holdings to a satisfactory level. When development applications are lodged, and the terms ‘cleared for cropping’ are included those applications are generally reduced to a ridiculous level. For example, the property detailed earlier in this submission had a clearing application lodged, requesting an area of 400ha to be appropriately cleared. In the determination an area of 100ha was granted, with conditions. This same outcome can be found repeatedly – the Department will approve clearing applications, but over such a small area of land that it is uneconomical to proceed.

Some areas are being approved for clearing to allow for grazing purposes only – but again it is an uneconomical proposition.

If farmers are not allowed to produce grain, wool, sheep and beef to supply domestic and international markets, then what is the future for this country? It is ill-advised to import the majority of your food requirements, but this seems to be the only possible outcome in the long term.

Australian farmers are among the most efficient producers in the world, they have a vested interested in maintaining the land and environment in the most sustainable manner, often have the most experience in local and regional requirements, and are

prepared to actually do the work required to maintain our natural resources and vegetation.

In conclusion, this inquiry into the impact of conservation controls imposed on landholders is an extremely important opportunity for a more balanced flow of information to be received and disseminated to the public and to government, and for the true effects of these proposed conservation measures to be considered.

The whole debate about conservation in Australia is based on a biased assessment driven by the Commonwealth Government, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Land and Water Conservation and associated bodies. Reports have been funded that will deliver a directed outcome to support this biased view – these are not made available for an independent assessment of the information contained in them before it is introduced as the justification for policy implementation. Landholders have been accused of having a vested interest so that any objections that are raised can be negated. Proof offered by landholders that some of the contentions put forward by conservation researchers are flawed and blatantly untrue are completely ignored by government instrumentalities.

It is a very serious situation when Government policy can be formulated around reports that are funded with a prescribed outcome – that has not been independently validated - to support their position on vegetation management.

Sincerely

Gabrielle Holmes
Chairman