

ACT RURAL LESSEES' ASSOCIATION (Est. 1927)

PO Box 55
RED HILL ACT 2603
Phone/Fax: (02) 6292 1452

SUBMISSION 8

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AND EXTERNAL TERRITORIES

Inquiry into Pierces Creek Settlement

Submission by ACT Rural Lessees Association

Our Association welcomes the invitation to appear before the Committee in its inquiry into the redevelopment of the Pierces Creek Settlement in the ACT. In this regard we are aware that this proposal by the ACT Government is but one of three proposals for establishing rural villages in the western hinterland of the ACT.

By way of background, this Association was formed in 1927 to represent the interests of ACT landholders and farmers in the development of the ACT and Canberra as the National Capital. Accordingly our Association worked closely with Commonwealth authorities vested with the development of the National Capital in the years prior to self-government in 1989. Since then we have provided input into the National Capital Plan during its formation, and to a range of inquiries and studies undertaken by the ACT Government in the development of the Territory Plan and, more recently, the Spatial Plan and the Canberra Plan.

The rural lands of the ACT comprise approximately 21% of the ACT land area. In this regard we are mindful of the overarching policy contained in the National Capital Plan which states that farmland in the ACT should be retained as broadacre farms. As pointed out by Professor George Seddon as long ago as 1977, the leasehold system, unique to the ACT, prevents rural land from being subdivided and capitalised as occurs in NSW, the great advantage of the system being the preservation of sharp distinctions between urban, bushland and farmland. This contrasts with the peripheral development of the nation's other capital cities. Rural holdings in the ACT vary from a few hundred acres to properties of over 10,000 acres, the value of primary production being approximately \$11 million per annum.

The Pierces Creek village proposal is one of three proposals currently being developed by the ACT Government. The other two being Uriarra (100 houses) and Mount Stromlo (40).

The concept of rural villages in the western hinterland of the ACT we consider to run counter to the National Capital Plan. These proposals arose out of the need to rehouse the tenants of these settlements who were burnt out as a result of the 2003 bushfires. We have no objection to this course of action but consider the proposals to expand these settlements into rural villages to be misguided and potentially damaging to the integrity of the ACT. That these settlements became part of the ACT's public housing stock was of course an accident of history.

We consider that the social economic and environmental issues which flow from these proposals are questionable. Furthermore the rural village concept has little support from concerned community groups such as the Planning and Land Authority and the Planning and Land Council. In the case of the Conservation Council which represents the interests of some 35 community and conservation organisations, it has consistently advocated a more compact city for economic, social and environmental reasons. Furthermore, they have made the point, with which our Association agrees, that rural villages and rural residential developments such as hobby farms are prime examples of urban sprawl which impacts adversely on greenhouse and biodiversity outcomes. Furthermore, the Government's own "Spatial Plan" emphasises the need to contain urban sprawl.

Also relevant to these considerations is the fact that the Aboriginal community has not been consulted on this new vision for the ACT. We find this surprising as the Chief Minister and senior officials of the ACT, when addressing public meetings, emphasise and recognise the Ngunnawal people as being the original occupiers of the land.

Against this background we note that the Government intends to rebuild the Pierces Creek settlement as a rural village containing 50 houses, including 13 government-funded houses for public housing. The cost of these houses we understand will be of the order of \$300,000 each to be met by the sale of land to the private sector. We consider this to be a waste of public money when a three-bedroom project (factory-built) house can be delivered on site and erected for \$92,000.

Of the 13 original tenants at Pierces Creek it is not known how many actually wish to return to Pierces Creek and whether they have been offered alternative accommodation in Canberra itself or in the proposed village at Stromlo. (The proposed Stromlo village which adjoins the suburb of Duffy is in effect another suburb of Canberra and there is no reason why Pierces Creek and Uriarra residents cannot be relocated to this site which is so much closer to employment and educational opportunities. Our Association has no objection to the further development of the Stromlo site provided adequate services and firefighting resources are incorporated.)

Turning to Pierces Creek itself, we understand that the ACT Government's proposal is to expand this settlement of 13 houses to a village of 50 houses. Expanded rural villages like Pierces Creek will also bring problems for farmers. Marauding dogs, as we have seen only this week, can inflict untold damage and suffering to sheep flocks with losses running into thousands of dollars. Cats are lethal to bird life. Trail bikes are another source of damage to the environment and to livestock. A further consideration is the major increase in traffic on rural roads which will follow if this village is built. This will give rise to an increase in wildlife (kangaroo and wombat) kills. Fifty houses will add 100 cars and further traffic, much of it at night, on the road servicing this area. In this regard the kangaroo problem will not go away as no culling takes place on government land – national parks, nature reserves and forests (altogether 65% of the ACT). To agree to this proposal would not be in the interests of the Pierces Creek community or the citizens of Canberra. Furthermore the site lies outside the 15 kilometre consolidation zone set out in the Spatial Plan and is in a particularly fire-prone area. This alone should rule out the proposal, apart from the fact that it flies in the face of urban consolidation policies. One has to ask the question, how can a village like Pierces Creek be adequately policed.

We believe that if the Pierces Creek and Uriarra proposals go ahead this will open the door for further rural villages to be established within the ACT along with rural residential (hobby farm) developments which were proposed in the first Non-Urban Study. In the case of hobby farms an extensive consultancy was conducted by the previous ACT administration to support its

proposals for rural residential developments in the ACT. Both the major parties in the ACT are very much "pro-development" so that there will be constant pressure on the NCA to accommodate a range of proposals for closer settlement such as rural villages.

Having regard to the extensive developments occurring in the adjoining areas of NSW, the value of the broadacre, bushland, forestry and farmland areas of the ACT, most of it in pristine condition, principally in the foothills of the Brindabellas, becomes more and more valuable and increasingly so in the context of the setting of the National Capital.

13 August 2004

