

ISSUES FOR THE INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC GOOD CONSERVATION

What is meant by public good conservation?

For the purpose of its inquiry, the committee will take the term, 'public good conservation' to mean conservation activities undertaken by private land users which bring environmental benefits to the community at large. In some cases, such activities are carried out to the detriment to the landholder, as in the case of legislated prohibition on clearing land that the landholder wishes to cultivate or stock. Alternatively, conservation activities may be good for the landholder as well as for the wider community; retaining native vegetation as a wind break would be an example here. In this case, elements of private and public good result from the single activity.

The committee will focus on the impact on landholders and farmers in Australia of public good conservation measure imposed by either state or Commonwealth governments.

Among the conservation measures at which the committee will be looking are land clearing restrictions; retaining and expanding remnant vegetation; maintaining environmental flows in rivers; care of wetlands; planting to ameliorate, and limit the spread of, dryland salinity; and possible measures to limit the impact of land based activities on the Great Barrier Reef.

Impacts of conservation measures and their costs

The committee would like to receive information about the costs that landholders have incurred when carrying out conservation measures, whether these measures were imposed or undertaken voluntarily. It would like also to learn about the benefits these measures brought to the landholder and the community.

In addition to measurable economic costs and benefits, the committee acknowledges that there are other that are not amenable to quantification, such as loss of certainty, a more pleasing landscape or a less polluted river that is good for swimming and weekend fishing. It also recognises that the benefits of conservation activities may be felt far from the communities in which they are carried out, for example, further down the catchment and even beyond that in coastal waters.

Financial assistance for conservation by landholders

In addition to information about costs and benefits, the committee would like to hear of any financial assistance, for example, incentives or compensation, provided to landholders to defray some of their costs and the adequacy of this assistance. It would also like to receive suggestions for improving or replacing

existing schemes that support landholder conservation, including any information about successful overseas approaches.

In connection with the last point, the committee suggests that any submissions to the inquiry should concentrate on Commonwealth government programs and ways in which the Commonwealth could assist states and territories to manage their own programs more effectively. The committee reminds readers that, as it is a committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, it has limited power over state and territory conservation programs.

Sharing costs

If the cost of conservation measures is to be shared by all Australians, it will be necessary to distinguish between the private and public benefits that result from landholders' conservation efforts and to attribute the costs accordingly. The committee would like to know whether there are ways of adequately making these calculations, given that some of the benefits may occur far away from where the conservation activities are undertaken, and not all the benefits can be costed. What value, for example, does one attach to retaining the genetic diversity of the native flora and fauna for future generations?

Effective, equitable schemes to support conservation in an appropriate manner may be developed more easily if good data and methods exist for use in assessing and modelling their costs, benefits and impacts on different sections of the Australian community. The knowledge derived from these analyses should help to improve Australia's public good conservation effort.

The committee will make recommendations to the Commonwealth government

The committee will consider the suggestions made to it during the inquiry, and make recommendations to the Commonwealth government. These recommendations will cover, among other matters, possible constitutional approaches and legislation to establish an equitable system for sharing public good conservation costs among all Australians.