

Hon. Ian Causley MP  
Chairperson  
House of Representatives Committee On Environment and Heritage  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

**Inquiry into Public Good Conservation -**  
Impact of Environmental Measures Imposed on Landholders

Dear Sir

Please find attached my submission with specific reference to land clearing in the Northern Agricultural Region of Western Australia.

Yours sincerely

Mark Douglas

The State Government of Western Australia has progressively tightened land-clearing regulations over the last five years. This tightening has in part been a response to the long known inter-relationship between secondary salinity development and the clearing of native vegetation particularly in the agricultural zone. Community feelings have also driven the process to the point where, in the recent past, the National Farmer's Federations' own research indicates city based sentiment about what goes on behind the farm gate is one characterised by real concerns.

Unofficially the likelihood of clearing being allowed to continue across the agricultural zone is exceedingly low. Officially a detailed, lengthy and costly exercise over-lapping across multiple departments is required to even remotely look like garnering a decision either way for the landholder

Many examples now exist where the landholder recognises that the effort required and time frame required to enter into the land-clearing approval process is virtually pointless.

Unofficially the off the record recommendation is no clearing on farms in the wheat belt. Does this tightening reflect public good? Yes it does. Does the public therefore have a wider commitment to address financial inequities associated with their environment aspirations, in relation to the retention of remnant native vegetation on farms? That is the next substantial step to balance the equation.

Without doubt there is some disillusionment and to a degree financial shock and imposition being felt and placed on farmers when they realise on-going property development plans have effectively been stopped.

A case in point is the example of a young farming family from Binu, located at the northern end of the Northern Agricultural Region of Western Australia. With about 22% of the property left as remnant vegetation and 300 hectares designed for development for agricultural purposes the Harris family commenced initial communications with the Government agencies playing a role in the Notice of Intention to Clear (N.O.I.) process.

At a very early stage of those discussions it became quite evident that their intention to clear and develop the 300 hectares would not meet land-clearing guidelines. From that point their communications with the agencies was discontinued. 300 hectares effectively locked up. Property development plan reviewed. Public good intact.

Clearly this has placed a significant financial impact on the farm business' forward plan. Over the working lifetime of the Harris family the figure would probably be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Property values at this point in time are correlated to cleared, arable hectares therefore another property value constriction is placed on this property in the name and spirit of the public good.

Additionally native fauna, particularly kangaroos, are subject to management mechanisms within this island of remnant vegetation, by necessity it would appear. Extensive crop damage on an annual basis is also placing pressure on the farm output.

There are obviously a number of issues here:

- Who, if anyone, should compensate the farm business over time for meeting the public good?
- How can a fair and equitable figure be arrived at?
- What would be the funding source, given that this farm is one of probably thousands across Australia? And, how deep will the source have to be?

There are a number of challenges here for the wider community and the politics of sustainable natural resource management to confront, debate and rectify. Currently the inequities are quite improper and patently unfair.

Personally, I have seen enough land and water resource base degradation over the last 20 years in two States and one Territory of Australia to last me a lifetime. The link between clearing and resource decline are probably more glaringly evident in the wheat belt of Western Australia than anywhere else in the developed world. However, if the wider communities aspirations include locking up potentially productive land in the name of retaining examples of native vegetation communities then the agricultural industry is going to need financial and physical help to maintain and manage those natural resource assets.

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