

From Leon Ashby - secretary of the Aramac Landcare Group inc.

To the committee looking into the cost of on farm conservation

I would like to address the conservation issues in various ways.

- (1) management
- (2) decision making processes
- (3) responsibilities
- (4) costs
- (5) historical perspective

As a landholder that is keen to see governments and landholders working together towards a good process I believe everyone should have the **big picture thrown at them** so that the enormity of the issue is not underestimated, **before money is spent** so that it will not be as effective as "piddling in the ocean".

**Historically**, conservation is a new thing and to be honest I'd say we humans are not that successful at it. We try to conserve one endangered species after another but unless the endangered species has media clout (Koala's or Whales) the time, money and resources needed to do it, is going to become more and more burdensome in the future.

Another aspect to the big picture is that the worlds population is going to double in the next 40 -50 years and if we think pressures on species are great now, then the issue is going to need some visionary thinking just to keep pressures where they are. As every person on the earth strives to make a living, and the ultimate basis for any civilisation is it's food and primary products for industries. Then like never before I believe we need to **encourage new techniques for sustainability and efficiency** across all sectors of the community.

However there are a couple of factors that most will probably ignore which are

- **Managing the environment is managing a living organism - It is not able to be organised into a filing cabinet of neat and tidy processes** and
- **We humans make decisions in mostly single fashion** e.g. we decide what we want and pursue that, and then we focus on the next thing, which means **we are lousy at managing multi - effected situations**

I bet that while you are reading this you are not focussing on any more than a few of the hundreds of effects that you are having on the environment at this very moment (breathing , sweating, Microbes in your gut, trees processed for the paper you will use next month, energy generated for your computer, fuel being processed for your car next week, food produced for your consumption, how your wastes are disposed of, viruses you are passing around, bacteria on your clothes,etc etc etc.) . But if we want to make decisions about the environment, then we have to make decisions with myriads of effects simultaneously because every little organism can and often will effect something else in the

environment. Our present understanding does not know the possible combinations or permutations of every organisms effects on other organisms (and I doubt if we ever will.)

On top of this, the Historical evidence points to constant extinctionism of species no matter if the management was "left to nature" or if a "Human effect" is in there as well.

So the environmental world is a constantly changing thing with constant human interference coming on top of that and now **some people want to conserve the environment as though it can be isolated from humanity and it will not change by itself anyway.** I believe the public`s expectations about conservation are unreal. Both governments and landholders are not going to be able to deliver absolute conservation no matter what.

However I do see some sort conservation as possible and I will explain it later.

In answer some of the inquiry`s questions, I would like to make several points

- **anything which takes up landholders time, money or limits his land development options are all imposts that should be paid for by the people who want those things done** e.g taxpayers or consumers.
- If there is to be a thrust of conservation and sustainability it will run out of steam if it is not woven into commercial realities - in other words it needs to have market forces and prices to help pay for the work to be done. Landcare Grants and 65 billion dollar plans will be wasted money if commercial realities don`t ultimately take over the issue.
- There are inequalities which are starting to emerge, which may blow up in some governments face one day and these are

- (a) National Parks management
- (b) Aboriginal Land management
- (c) Council Land management

The ways that each of these lands differ in the accountability of their management when compared with freehold and leasehold is starting to get up people`s noses, so **if the issues of sustainability and conservation are paramount, they have to be addressed equally across all tenures**

- If any government wants to say that **landholders will have to "carry the can" for conservation**, then we will have **yet another situation where the bush will feel alienated** and will ultimately rebel one way or another.
- If the **greenhouse gas issue** were to be dealt with fairly, then the use of carbon credits could help landholders establish or keep more trees on their

properties however there are several things that make us landholders sceptical which are

- (a) native forests in existence prior to 1990 are ineligible , therefore landholders in some parts of Queensland have to pull their trees and replant other trees to be eligible
  - (b) regrowth is uncertain for being eligible
  - (c) Nick Minchin has refused funding to research for the greenhouse office work to establish carbon values in our soils and the forests in our area of Queensland (Desert Uplands)
  - (d) Agreement across most countries of the world needs to be sorted out and agreed upon before carbon trading can be a realistic option.
  - (e) the size of forests required to make a commercial difference is unknown and a concern to landholders.
  - (f ) Once land has reached it`s potential for stored carbon in trees and vegetation then carbon credit payments will cease and other commercial realities need to take over that will support storing carbon or that system will fail
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### Now to **My suggestion for a process that can deliver some conservation and some sustainable development**

I`ve tried to encompass several issues in this one plan. They are

- (1) **Sound Tree clearing practices**
- (2) The Federal Govt`s discussion purple paper on **Future Sustainability - Landcare / NHT direction**
- (3) Landholders have continually been asked to do things better but **never getting any financial benefits** when they do it better.
- (4) I would like to see **the usual process changed**. You know the one! Generally an issue is tackled by Govt`s a bit, a few dollars thrown at it, that usually doesn`t work so if it will get some votes a few more \$ are thrown around, that works a little, so it either it has to get a lot of publicity and looked at properly, otherwise it gets ignored and put in the "too hard" basket.

I have a suggestion to split the vegetation / landcare management into 3 categories

- (1) **conservation** of either endangered ecosystems or endangered species
- (2) **sustainable production of grazing land &**
- (3) **sustainable production of farming land**

hopefully this would make policies / principles of management less confusing

**Lets look at the conservation issue first**

**I believe it is the responsibility of all of society to share the cost of conservation.**

Supposing regional groups were given the primary responsibility of maintaining the "endangered" species (I prefer just the conservation of species to the conservation of ecosystems because it's easier, less complex and less costly) An ecosystem is more than trees on a soil type, it is every organism that is in a defined area

- Remember that locking up land in a brittle (low humidity) environment causes some grasses to die out - This is due to several factors (roots of grasses not being stimulated and the nutrients not cycling properly) We have photos and an explanation on our web site of a plot of land locked up for 7 years in the longreach district which demonstrates this. the site is [www.geocities.com/barcoorah/](http://www.geocities.com/barcoorah/) <<http://www.geocities.com/barcoorah/>> the page is called "grazing management".

Suppose they come up with an arrangement of fencing out all "endangered" (& maybe even "of concern" species as well) and these areas were agreed to be monitored and managed just for the conservation of whichever species were designated. If other species are conserved as well - that's great.

The costs of this would be

- (a) management (monitoring and organising fire, grazing, & rest etc)
- (b) fencing
- (c) production losses to the landholder (who would then have to be either paid for the land or paid compensation annually for lost production, based on a formula like the average profit per hectare of developed country minus the development costs per hectare spread over the likely time the development would be effective)

### **Now lets look at sustainable production of grazing land.**

The reason we want sustainable production is to maintain or improve production without degradation so that we have resources for ages to come. **The landholder's responsibility should be the management costs, but it is important to society to know that the resources are being maintained. So society should pay for the costs associated with gaining that knowledge. (monitoring)**

My suggestion is a performance based incentive scheme where all land (aboriginal, Govt, council, and private is monitored for several indicators of good management.

My suggestions are some or all of these.

- (1) water table levels ( indicator of a potential salinity problem)
- (2) Grass check (number of species and numbers of total plants / area)
- (3) microorganisms in the soil (000`s / cubic cm of soil)
- (4) erosion check
- (5) tree check or biomass check (amount of timber or carbon / hectare)
- (6) native and feral animal check

Properties could get a report card each year and if every indicator shows there has been no deterioration in the ecosystem ( indicators 1,2,3,4,&6) the property

can get a green (landcare) accreditation stamp to put on it's produce to hopefully gain a market advantage. I expect it will take several years for the market advantage to be realised, but once it does this will become the driving force for sustainable production, - not government grants.

Indicator 5 could be used for carbon credits or put in with the green stamp as well.

The costs should be split whereby the landholder pays for the management that is required to maintain the health of the ecosystem, while society pays wages for people to do the monitoring.

Naturally the monitoring costs will be quite high with one person only able to monitor about 2 to 5 properties / week, but **if society is so concerned about the environment, then I believe it has to put it's money where it's mouth is and do the job properly or not at all.**

Many have just suggested establishing best management practices (BMP's) rather than monitoring.

In my opinion that does not allow for pioneering new methods, or differences in soils, ecosystems, climate, management styles and other subtleties that BMP's cannot address. One of our paddocks has 3 hugely different ecosystems that weave in and out each other in it, and each responds differently to fire, rest, waterspreading, and overgrazing. I'd like to see someones BMP for that paddock. I expect it would be to fence each ecosystem and manage them then. On our property that would mean the weirdest sized and shaped paddocks, which would cost up to 3 times the value of the land. **By monitoring that paddock a truer picture about what is happening environmentally can be gauged before management strategies begin.**

### **Now to look at Farming for sustainable production**

I believe this could be done very similar to grazing land except that the grass check and tree check are not included. But a water quality runoff indicator could be included instead. This is because soil particles with nutrients attached, pesticides and weedicides are far more likely to come off farmed land than grazing areas and then they could get into water supplies.

Apart from these types of arrangements, the main other issue that regional groups could work on are **timber harvesting** regimes, **retention rates** and **which species are to be conserved**. Generally the regional groups can decide if, and to what level of landcare management level they want to work towards, and how to use the green landcare accreditation stamp to improve producers prices for their area.

### **Conclusion**

Both State and Federal Govt's are coming under pressure to be seen to be Green

We are all just starting to realise how complex and difficult managing the environment is. We can either let the process bumble along or encourage it in the

right direction. Can we devise an idea which will **achieve results year after year**. Perhaps a phasing in of annual monitoring checks over 5 years might be the way to go . Would the seasonal variations throw the monitoring results into chaos? Would a work for the dole scheme be able to be implemented as part of the monitoring work? Lets get grass roots people to inspire it and governments smoothing the process so that conservation and sustainable production get market forces supporting the reality across all of Australia.

Leon Ashby

(secretary of the Aramac Landcare Group and primary organiser of the Winton protest against treeclearing legislation in Qld on 17th March )