



Subject: Senate Inquiry into National Parks, Conservation Reserves and Marine Areas

March 2006

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AgForce is the peak rural lobby group in Queensland representing over 7,000 producers of cattle, grain, sheep and wool. These broad-acre industries use 80% of the Queensland landmass for production and most regional and rural economies are dependent on these industries directly and indirectly for their livelihood.

The Senate is conducting a formal inquiry into the management of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas. AgForce realises that in Queensland, there are some serious issues regarding the management of these areas.

In addressing this inquiry, AgForce has undertaken a survey of all members adjoining National Parks, Conservation Reserves and Marine Areas. Hence, this submission represents only a summary of the issues that were identified in the survey responses.

Remote Management of National Parks

The Queensland National Parks & Wildlife Service (administered through EPA) has recently bought in a new policy regarding the remote management of National Parks. This regional policy effectively removes permanent staff who live within the park and replace them with 'roving teams' that will periodically visit the parks concerned.

AgForce believes that the vast size of National Parks in Queensland makes this policy impractical and unworkable. The strategy raises serious concerns that there will be a more relaxed approach to the management of feral animals, weeds, fire and general monitoring of National Park visitors.

Queensland currently has a serious wild dog problem and withdrawing fulltime staff from National Parks will make it extremely difficult for QPWS to ensure they are fulfilling their legal obligations under the *Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Act 2002*. In addition to wild dogs, National Parks have the potential to harbour feral pigs, feral cats and feral goats. There is a substantial risk that in parks that are remotely managed; these populations could quickly get out of control, adversely impacting on surrounding landholders.

Withdrawing fulltime staff is in contradiction with the 'Good Neighbour' policy that was implemented to ensure that National Parks are integrated with the local community and adjoining neighbours. Landholders not have difficulty locating the relevant person in charge of their adjoining Park when trying to undertake management actions. This causes concerns for emergency situations such as bushfires, where immediate action is required.

Due to the isolated nature of national parks in the northern region, after considerable amounts of rain, there is the potential for a park to becoming inaccessible for a number of days and possible weeks. Removal of permanent staff would render these areas unmanned. Without permanent staff to monitor visitors to the parks there are increased risks for all stakeholders. Visitors are at risk from dangers within the park and pose risks to surrounding landholders.

In introducing the remote management policy, there was no consultation with the local communities and neighbouring landholders.

Bushfires

Bushfire is an integral part of the Australian land. Any landholder knows that the scale of a bushfire is a result climatic conditions and managing fuel loads through reduction burning. This management requires significant funding and dedication and is not currently being performed in Queensland National Parks.

There is much concern amongst Queensland landholders that the department does not have the resourcing capacity to conduct fuel reduction, and that as a result, fire reduction was not a high priority. There is a failure to capitalise on fuel reduction opportunities in low-risk fire years, with a tendency for seasonal fire-fighter numbers to be reduced in these years instead of being employed in fuel reduction activities.

The Queensland Government have created many National Parks from State forest. Fuel loads in the State Forests were minimised through routine hazard reduction burning, timber harvesting operations and in some cases post-harvest burning, which also encourages new regeneration. The transition of Forestry to National Parks has not incorporated these management actions, and as a result, adjoining landholders are at risk.

Fencing

Freehold landowners adjoining National Parks are generally not adverse to EPA leaseholders grazing tenure, save only to the extent where stocking rates are permitted and or undertaken which apply undue pressure on common boundary fencing with no contribution by the leaseholder as to the resultant damage.

In most cases the form of these common boundary fences are at best a dilapidated 3-barb construction or in some cases a composite construction incorporating plain wire. Usually, they have been ravaged by the elements, fire, storms, and damaged by life. No galvanizing exists on the wire which can be severely rusted to a point where it breaks with work. These fences are simply dangerous. Simultaneously posts are broken and ants have demolished the strainers whilst sections have rotted and sunk to a point where cattle can easily step across due to the height.

There are also problems in the interpretation of the *Dividing Fences Act 1953* and the requirements upon EPA leaseholders to maintain and replace fences under lease extensions.

Lack of Funding v inappropriate use of Funds

With 69% of the State's regional ecosystems represented in Queensland National Parks, Queensland is also the most biodiverse state in Australia. It is highly unlikely that the current pressures to expand these areas will decrease. Therefore, the question should be asked 'what is the capacity of the Government to manage and acquire these areas.'

A study performed by the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and released in 2000 attempted to gauge appropriate operational funding for National Parks (LGAQ National Parks Inquiry, 2000). They estimated that funding was required at two to three times the current level to realistically move towards desirable levels of management and provide the services required. LGAQ recommended that:

- There is a significant unmet maintenance need requiring a substantial immediate short term funding supported by an increase in base funding.
- All new capital investments (including investments on land) must be accompanied by an additional contribution to the recurrent budget of QPWS.
- There are increasing community expectations in relation to standards and safety that will continue to add pressure for enhanced funding for parks.

Lack of Involvement with surrounding landholders

From internal surveying, AgForce has identified that QPWS has little involvement with surrounding landholders. While some landholders have stated they have attended meetings, they generally feel that their suggestions at these forums have not been taken up. It has been stressed in surveys that there needs to be greater contact between landholders and park rangers, especially where the Parks are being remotely managed.

More National Parks – No Increase in Funding

Under the Regional Forest Agreements, Queensland has seen a significant increase in National Parks and total area under protection. Unfortunately, while the land area has increased, the funding available to manage these areas has not. This has been felt through reduced on-ground maintenance costs and also in understaffing of Parks.

It is a common misunderstanding that once an area becomes National Park, then it will be 'protected', with environmental values restored or conserved. In reality, Queensland ecosystems require ongoing management due to the introduction of environmental weeds, feral animals and diseases. Therefore, an area that is turned into National Park, but does not receive active management, can quite quickly lose its environmental values and become a breeding ground for these ecological threats.

The Government needs to determine the value of its Parks and balance these against maintenance costs to truly protect these areas.

Weeds

With an estimated 1,165 introduced weed species in Queensland, the targeting of pests and weeds is a paramount goal to protect the biodiversity of these areas. To tackle this problem, research AND extension needs to be established and performed.

Management Plans

A large proportion of National Parks lack management plans to give direction towards the operation and maintenance of the areas. Such plans are considered essential in identifying the priorities and goals to be implemented within the Parks and best manage these areas.