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November 29, 2004

Green Energy the Good Oil for Rural Australia

Rural Australia can reap the rewards of environmental innovation, but governments need to get behind new industries that help to protect our natural heritage and give Australians a future on the land.

This is the conclusion of a report – *Fuelling Landscape Repair* – recently commissioned by the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Joint Venture Agroforestry Program. The report looks at the role a bioenergy industry could play in putting the brakes on land degradation and climate change - two of the biggest environmental challenges facing rural communities.

Speaking at the Bioenergy Australia 2004 Conference in Adelaide, ACF's rural programs coordinator Corey Watts said, "The good news is that green energy could be an excellent job generator in rural areas, and – if done properly – it could also help farmers repair the land."

The report concludes that farming native mallee eucalypts in southern Australia is currently the most attractive option – for farmers' bottom line and the natural environment.

Mallee farming can be integrated into wheat and sheep production, and the cost of electricity produced from the tree biomass is on par with conventional power when mixed with other products like oil and charcoals, as well as new environmental markets, like carbon sinks.

When grown in the right spots and on the right scale, mallees can keep the watertable in check, making the difference between a salty future and the survival of our precious wetlands, creeks and wildlife.

Tree processing facilities, based around regional centres, can raise the prospects for rural communities - attracting new people to the region, and reducing the risks and costs of relying on a centralised power supply.

Mr Watts said that bioenergy in Australia was currently a mixed bag of the good, the bad and the ugly, including burning native forests for power.

"Governments – especially the Federal Government – need to make sure the rules of the game favour those players who can really prove their worth in clean and green terms," said Mr Watts.

"Each tree-processing facility generates enough power for around a thousand homes, permanently employs scores of people, and offers farmers another income source – not to mention that tackling environmental problems early saves us all an expensive repair bill down the track.

"But it's not easy for new green industries to hit the ground running on an uneven playing field and government subsidies to coal, gas and oil make it hard to compete.

"Until Australia ratifies the Kyoto Protocol, the oil mallee industry can't plug into emerging global green markets, and the Federal Government's target for mandatory use of renewable power by energy retailers is far too low to give sustainable bioenergy the boost it needs."

Further information and comment:

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A copy of the report, *Fuelling Landscape Repair*, can be downloaded via www.acfonline.org.au