

1st September 2005

Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity

Committee Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology
and the Arts References Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

I have two properties within the program [Upper Southeast Dry Land Salinity and Flood Management Program].

PROPERTY 1: PRAIRIE GLEN

This is a pastoral grazing property Sec.3 Hundred of Woolumbool which is situated on the floor of the Bakers Range Watercourse, and has a proposed deep drainage alignment.

I have lived on this property since 1979 and have been running a profitable business throughout the period. It is difficult land to manage, all the landholders within close proximity see the annual flooding of the watercourse as an asset [where there is mud there is money] as it ensures you that you will have a good spring, and the salts at the surface will be flushed away.

These watercourses are relatively saline and we have developed agronomic practices to ensure that we can live in harmony within the environment we have chosen to call home.

We do not require or want a deep drain, as we manage the existing watercourse via a wide shallow surface water drain [150mm] which does not draw down the water table, but does effectively move the surface water down stream to the wetlands northwest of my property.

PROPERTY 2: PARRAKIE WETLANDS PTY LTD

Parrakie Wetlands is within the WEST AVENUE RANGE WATERCOURSE it contains 720ha of naturally occurring wetland with intact native vegetation surrounding it. This area has not been grazed in over 30 years and has never been cleared.

This property is contiguous with another 6700ha of similar wetland complex to the north, which in turn makes up the largest privately held wetland in near perfect condition in the UPPERSOUTH EAST of SA. In fact Rockys Swamp has the highest open water Biodiversity Significance Index Score in the entire SE of SA .The nationally endangered Southern Bell Frog is a permanent resident of this wetland, in fact the next closest population of this frog is 50km away.

The proposed Bald Hill Drain is to pass along our eastern boundary. This would effectively cut off all the local catchment water of this property and send the entire ecology of this area into massive decline.

Nowhere within the program has it been demonstrated that deep ground water drains would be of benefit to wetland environments in fact wherever a drain has passed by a wetland they have been in decline absolutely.

The program when asked to report to the contrary has been unable to furnish any report that would support any positive relationship between deep drains and wetland health.

Management plans for all drainage alignments do not exist nor management plans for the wetlands that are to be effected by drainage been furnished. Any management plan proposed must be based on science and not on models, which are developed based on assumptions, which have no validity whatsoever, this has been in evidence so far.

In regard to revegetation this has been hijacked by the Biodiversity Offset Scheme. This program is using \$11m to offset levies for trees and vegetation which already exist. No new work is being carried out, which is a scam and of the \$11m set aside for Biodiversity, not one new tree will be planted. I do not believe this is money being well spent.

SALT TO SUCCESS was very much a success, it put dollars directly on the ground. The land had to be fenced off, the trees sown or planted and growing, then there was an inspection and if everything was in order successfully the landholder got a subsidy to help with this establishment work – it was good work and very well received.

WETLANDS WATERLINK was a success too, but to a lesser extent as there was so little wetland area available what was conserved was of good value.

At the outset of the program 70% of landholders wanted wide shallow surface water drains to help alleviate seasonal flooding – this was hijacked and deep drains became the issue, it is now a program of dig at whatever the cost to either agricultural land or the environment. This cannot go on unchecked. There seems to be no system in place where the program has to be audited or any sort of reporting that should be in the public domain.

The program continues to dig drains when there is a wealth of scientific evidence that deep drains are not the panacea they are made out to be.

The cost benefit of continuing with this process must be questioned and the answers must not be based on assumed models. All the real data must be received and reported upon before any conclusions are drawn as to digging more drains or not.

It has been projected that the ongoing maintenance cost per kilometre per year of drains in the upper southeast scheme to be between \$600 and \$800 dollars; this is for 645km already dug and does not include any capital improvement. Where will the money come from? This \$450,000 annually will not be very welcome by the landholders, many of whom have a drain they do not want and others which have no drain at all.

Already the program is funding research into the repair needed to soils post drainage, \$200,000 for sodic soils and more will be needed for rising alkalinity. The cost benefit of much of this ongoing drainage program must be in some doubt.

Professor DAVID MITCHELL is currently Adjunct Professor School of Environment and Information Sciences at CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY. He was awarded the 2003 International Fellow of the Society for Wetland Scientists for “a lifetime of contributions to wetland science and management “

Professor Mitchell accepted our invitation to come to South Australia to look and write an independent report on his perception of the USEDSEFMP, and how it was going and with a view from well outside his usual territory. He had an extensive look over the entire area and in his time with us visited with many of the landholders and officers involved with the Marcollat and West Avenue Watercourse.

We have absolutely no idea what Professor Mitchell may write in his interim report as his approach to this issue of drainage will be one entirely free of bias, we spent many months searching for an independent person and believe that Professor Mitchell is of the calibre required to give a truly independent assessment of the program thus far. We hope to have the interim report before the Senate sits and we will forward a copy shortly.

This submission was compiled by Patrick Ross, a local landowner and Director of the Parrakie Wetlands Pty Ltd, and on behalf of Pip Rasenberg also a Director of Parrakie Wetlands Pty Ltd.

Please feel free to contact the undersigned if we can be of further assistance.

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