

Submission to the Inquiry into Native Vegetation Laws, Greenhouse Gas Abatement & Climate Change Measures.

Attached also

“Attachment 1. King Island in the Historical context of the Regional Forest Agreement and the Permanent Forest Estate Policy (2007) and Attachment 2. Fire events in the context of King Island.”

The Attachments 1 & 2 were prepared by myself as a part of my appeal against a decision by the Tasmanian Forest Practices Authority concerning some planned conversion of native vegetation on my property. This appeal was held in April 2009. I subsequently won that appeal and also won my costs.

Attachment 1 covers in detail the “dog’s breakfast” that has developed on King Island, in relation to the Native Vegetation laws as they have affected King Island land holders, and soon to be felt by other Tasmanian farmers, but for the same and different reasons.

At the outset it is important to understand that all of the land subject to these native veg laws was purchased ultimately from the Crown, and it was sold by the Crown on the understanding that it would in fact be converted into agricultural production, in time.

It is not my intention to suggest that this land should be converted. However it is my intention to suggest that if this land is needed for the protection of Australia's biodiversity, then it needs to be funded by all Australians, and not just those farmers who happen to be in ownership of it when the rules changed. The benefit is for all. It’s a bit like musical chairs in reverse. The last one standing gets the booby prize.

In fact this land, left in its natural state it is often to the detriment of the individual farmers that own it, as it will often harbour vertebrate pests that will impact on theirs and their neighbours properties and income.

The actions of the Crown, State and Commonwealth, is one step off theft. This land which cannot now be converted often does not fit the guidelines of the many incentive programs said to be available for targeting this problem.

The Governments are buying back water that was over allocated. They purchase land for infrastructure (through compulsory acquisition). Why is there no equivalent for this problem.

When I raise this question with the bureaucrats and the politicians, the response, always off the record, is that it will cost too much. So the reality is that, as it is deemed too costly for an equitable outcome, then the solution deemed acceptable to governments is to just steal it back.

There are solutions to this problem but because the number of farmers affected is not great, governments seem happy to take the easy and unjust way out.

Specifically

(1) The impact of native vegetation laws and legislated greenhouse gas abatement measures on landholders, including:

(a) any diminution of land asset value and productivity as a result of such laws;

On King Island where I farm, land that has native veg on it is basically valueless ((\$370/ha in a productivity sense), as farmers can not generate any income from it, with no likelihood of the situation improving into the long term. If that land was able to be converted but still with its native veg cover it is worth in the order of \$3700/ha. So simply the government has reduced the value of my land in the order of \$3300/ha (200ha has cost me \$660000). Converted it has a value of around \$5000/ha. This is outlined in detail in Attachment 1.

Besides the loss in value suffered by farmers directly, farmers and communities suffer significantly indirectly. The islands macropod population (namely Bennetts Wallabies) use the bush as protective habitat and feed extensively on the improved pastures, which leads to significant productivity losses to farmers. This combined with the recent changes in legislation as to how land managers are able to deal with vertebrate pest has meant that as well as significant losses in productivity, the native vegetation that is supposed to be preserved for posterity is being

crucified but the huge numbers of macropods. On King island with a total area of 110000 ha, and a pastured area of 70000ha, we now have a macropod population of around 500000 (ie half a million) on just the pasture alone. This burden is being carried by the farmers and the community. Unfortunately that is not the end of it. That population is continuing to grow at an almost maximum possible growth rate as the wallabies here have no natural predators. The bureaucrats eyes glaze over when you try to explain the implications of all this.

(b) compensation arrangements to landholders resulting from the imposition of such laws;

The idiosyncratic, contradictory and adhoc nature of the State and Federal legislation concerning the native veg has resulted in me not being able to access any compensation. This may well be the same across the Australian landscape. Wht this is so is outlined in detail in the Attachment 1.

(c) the appropriateness of the method of calculation of asset value in the determination of compensation arrangements; and

Given that there is no compensation in our case makes the above nonsensical.

(d) any other related matter.

I have approached numerous government agencies, bureaucrats and Ministers, and no one is prepared to contemplate a solution, all stating, off the record, that it will be too expensive to compensate farmers for their loss in productivity or asset value.

If the Commonwealth Government reintroduced the GST onto food and called it a Good Environment Tax, and those funds where redirected back to the farmers using the BAS process, the problem would be solved long term. Farmers would be able to access these funds for projects specifically targeted towards protecting and restoring biodiversity across the landscape using an accredited Environmental Management Plan (EMS). These funds would also be used to implement and support meaningful management agreements with landholder's that have been caught up in these native vegetation issues. At this time, I will not bore you with the details, other than to say that it would bring Australian farmers to the forefront on the planet for sustainable development and conservation.

Donald Graham (an affected farmer)