

Written Submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee regarding Native Vegetation Laws, Greenhouse Gas Abatement and Climate Change Measures

1. My Farming Situation.

My name is Alan Hartley and I own a property of about 134 hectare in the headwaters of the Clarence River, New South Wales near the Queensland border. About 20 hectare has been developed as a commercially productive avocado orchard, 3.5 hectare is virgin subtropical rainforest (which I protect as an important asset on the property) while the balance remains under wet sclerophyll type Eucalyptus forest.

I purchased the property in 1998 and immediately began development of the orchard on about 10 hectare that had been previously cleared, but which carried a mixed vegetation of regrowth wattle, lantana, other woody weed, old stumps and grass.

Subsequently I cleared a further 10 hectare using my rights at that time to clear 2.4 hectare (5 acres) a year for productive agriculture. This has proved to be the difference between having an economically effective orchard and a marginal to loss making operation.

My property at present supports my own family, a permanent married employee who lives locally and up to 8 local casual employees, most married with families. The operation also does substantial and regular business with rural produce suppliers, and maintenance, trucking and packing facilities in nearby rural centres

When the Native Vegetation Act was introduced, the 5 acre entitlement was ended and special application had to be made to the local Catchment Management Authority for approval to clear. The CMA was the authority charged with managing the Act and its regulations. I applied to the CMA to clear 3 hectare of the 110 hectare available land but the application was refused. The software used to model my land determined that there could be “deemed” threatened species present, so a permanent but unacceptable offset of 95 hectare would be needed to compensate for loss of habitat on the 3 hectare requested. Furthermore that restriction would be stapled to the title deed on the property. Neither I nor my neighbours are aware of the presence of the listed threatened species and no actual surveys have been made on the property.

Flexibility is needed in determining the overall land requirement for an orchard development. For instance, my initial planting included two sub-varieties of hass avocado, one of which produced consistently large fruit. Coles decided about two years ago that they would not handle the large fruit – they were standardising their product line. When I was told that Woolworths would probably follow suit, I realised that without these outlets (through which I had successfully marketed previously) the general market would be over-supplied. I therefore “bit the bullet” and bulldozed out about 4 hectare of “lamb hass” avocado trees and a year later replaced them with the standard variety.

There is a problem in re-planting land previously used for avocado in that there is a carry-over of soil borne pathogens and it is desirable to have a long fallow period under cover crop before replanting. I could not do this because I did not have unrestricted land available, and I now have a patchy replant blocks as a result. This will have a direct and long term economic impact

2. My Comment on the Native Vegetation Act as it Applies to My Situation

In NSW, the Government has run down services relating to primary industry through the closure of research and extension facilities and redundancy programs that have reduced staff on those remaining. There is no longer a core of staff that has local knowledge and experience. The bias in relation to vegetation management has passed to the extreme social green movement that applies the precautionary principal as a matter of convenience. It is a matter of convenience since by doing nothing else except broad-brushing a denial of rural development (but not city development) the social greens can claim to be “protecting the natural heritage”. It is a very selfish approach to ecological management, the cost of which is borne by the rural community alone.

The social whims of the predominantly urban Australian population have to be pandered to by politicians because there is a voting concentration in city and near urban electorates. The rampant social green movement has a ready audience in the cities because it provides a feel good offset to the blatant pursuit of material gain from urban development. The success of this green conscience offset has been supported by a Government happy to see a minority rural population carry the can without recognition. Politicians avow that minority bashing is not part of the Australian culture, but it is happening under their very eyes in the way that a small population of rural landowners is being forced to pay for the excesses of the selfish urban green movement.

If it is convenient for Government to directly and adversely impact on rural landowners by restricting their land use options to appease their urban voting masses, then it is also fair for Government to pay a stipend to those landowners as just compensation.

3. Carbon Sequestration and the Protection of Agricultural Land

The existing forest cover that dates from 1990 has been included in the Australian carbon audit for Kyoto. When a national census of native vegetation was taken, and its carbon storage calculated for inclusion into Australia's position for Kyoto, the status of native vegetation was expanded from simply being a complex ecological community, to being a commercial resource as well. Being an above ground resource, the commercial value of that native forest as sequestered carbon on freehold land rested with the landowner. The need by the Federal Government to preserve this audited resource I believe was the precursor of the restrictive Native Vegetation Act in NSW.

The city based population seem to believe that if they are led to think that something is good for the planet (them) then it is OK to make laws that enforce it without caring if

other Australians (but not them) have to bear the cost and suffer. They possibly do not realise that rural property rights are being sacrificed for their appeasement, and they have yet to realise that their feelings of comfort come at a cost.

We need to re-establish the law that says if you take someone's private property it is called theft and is wrong, and if you deliberately devalue someone's property you should pay compensation.

I believe there is a Global Land Use Crisis bearing down on the world, the impacts of which will dwarf fallout from the GFC. The crisis has its crucible in an expanding world population that is being projected to increase by 2500 million from the present 6.7 billion base by 2050 and which has to be fed and watered. The magnitude of the global increase dwarfs Australia's projected contribution of 13 million. The population increase is actually happening: people are out there doing it!!

The city based majority of our population do not foresee food or fibre shortages. They have never suffered hard times. They pay relatively little for very good food and are oblivious to the fact that the number of farming families is diminishing. They are unappreciative of the fact that those continuing to produce food and fibre are highly efficient and work within a framework of quality assurance that guarantees the high standards they expect.

I believe Australian national planners are blinkered in their approach to regional planning by adopting esoteric environmental standards based on "sponsored" science. The result will be an Australia with a glaringly low regional population density continuing to trumpet its richness in front of an increasing desperate world. The recent report on Northern Australian agricultural development headed up by persons of known negativity towards water storage and management is a prime example.

I believe we must protect our sources of food and fibre and water, based on the application of sound land use science and practical knowhow. We cannot afford to close our eyes to the opiate effects of abstruse modelling and emotion. We have to get off the "my extrapolation is bigger than your extrapolation" peer evaluation merry-go-round that entertains environmental science today.

I believe we must show planning authorities in Australia that the precautionary principal has been abused in favour of pseudo-science and lazy science to support environmental figureheads against long term national food, fibre and water security. The dispersion principal is conveniently ignored. The dispersion principal simply states that ecological characteristics deemed important in an ecosystem under intense study are likely to be found in similar ecosystems external to the intense study boundary. The protection of land and biological diversity can go hand in hand with food, fibre and water security - protection of the one does not have to mean crushing the other.

4. Basis of a Stipend or Compensation System

The PVP methodology based on current airphoto interpretation can provide a useful way of measuring and continuing to measure forest cover and land use patterns.

At one level, Government could use these air photos to identify forest that it would prefer not to be cleared as part of the country's overall response to emissions control. The landowner can use the same air photos to transfer an intimate knowledge of the land by identifying country that meets basic land use capability standards which can be used for agriculture/forestry.

An annual stipend can be paid for forest retained according to the Government's identification, or reduced if land that meets sound land use guidelines is identified for subsequent clearing and development. The spread between the two values could be substantial. A compensating value may be applied after clearing if the subsequent development, e.g. in the case of an orchard, can also be shown to sequester carbon.

The Federal Government has already indicated that it will contribute to an international fund associated with emissions management following the Copenhagen Conference. It seems perfectly logical that Australian rural landowners could be recipients under the terms of this assistance package.

Alan Hartley