

In the late 90's I was nominated to represent NSW Farmers Association on the Narcoona Regional Vegetation Committee covering Narrabri Coonabarabran and Coolah Shires. One of many throughout the state, set up under the then Native Vegetation Conservation Act.

At about the same time the NSW Government was conducting the Western Regional Assessment. This area was known as the Brigalow Belt South Bioregion (BBSB) and was done in two stages it was to assess native vegetation biodiversity aboriginal cultural heritage mining forestry etc.

The Resource and Conservation Assessment Council (RACAC) was to collect information and make recommendations to government. I was asked to represent NSW Farmers Association on the Community Stakeholders Advisory Group. Not long after being appointed to this committee I received a call from the NSW Farmers Association representative from the north coast informing me of the Regional Forest Agreement process that was designed to destroy the native timber industry by taking the best of the timber into the National Park estate.

The BBSB covers an area of 52,400 square kilometers, which is 6.2% of the state, located in the central north of NSW. It includes the towns of Wyallda Narrabri Moree Coonabarabran Dubbo Merriwa Coolah Mendooran Gilgandra Baradine Gwabegar and a number of others. 85% of the bioregion is either freehold land or Crown leasehold, used primarily for agriculture. 11% was State Forest and 2.6% was National Parks. This area contained a number of forests from the Goonoo in the south near Dubbo up through the Pilliga and Terry Hie Hie forests to a number of forests on the Queensland Border.

The timber industry is what use to help drought proof this area.

A number of State forests within the bioregion were leased out to farmers for grazing. They originally had long term lease agreements ranging from 50, 25, 10 years and had been rolled over in the past by farming families. During the assessment once the lease came up for renewal they became annual leases and when the decision on the BBSB was announced the owners of some of these leases were advised that their lease would not be renewed. In some cases this made the lease holder unviable and they had no option but to sell their freehold land with National Parks in most cases being the purchaser.

In some of these cases the land owners' freehold land was divided by a grazing leases. In one case the land owner had land divided in two by one of these grazing leases which then meant he had to fence the lease off, could not take stock or machinery across it which he had done in the past for many years. This made him unviable and he sold the two parcels of freehold land one to a neighbour the other I believe to National Parks. In another case there was a funny shaped lease that ended up in a long narrow finger into the freehold land. The farmer's water supply for that part of his property was just through the fence on the lease. The farmer was not allowed to take machinery or stock across this narrow section. We tried to negotiate and do a trade off of land but because the land had been gazetted as part of the BBSB decision this was not possible. In the end we did negotiate that the farmer could take some vehicles and machinery across this section. There was a mountain that could not be negotiated by vehicles or machinery so he was given permission to cross in a certain place. To go around the mountain was not an option as he would have to have permission from several neighbours, it was also a considerable distance for him to have to travel to the rest of his property. If a survey of these leases that were to go to National Park control had been done before gazettal it would have solved a lot of problems and they would have realized that

some of the areas were not suitable to go to National Park one had been farmed for many years one had two homes built on it.

Solicitors in the past had advised their clients not to convert lease hold country to freehold as it was cheap rent. The leases were as good as freehold and banks lent money on them. In our case the family solicitor had told my grandfather and father they were stupid to convert. My father thought the solicitor understood they wanted the portion converted. Some time later when notification had not come through he went back to see the solicitor, he informed my father that he had not applied for conversion as it was cheap rent and not to be stupid. My father told him to apply for conversion but it was too late as in the mean time forestry had placed a forest dedication on that particular portion of our property known as Baby State Forest. We have approximately 625 acres of forest country as part of our freehold land. Baby State Forest is surrounded by freehold land. After the Brigalow decision this is now known as a Community Conservation Area. This lease was a lease in perpetuity but is now referred to as a conditional lease.

The state government under Bob Carr conducted a comprehensive public consultation process administered by RACAC. As a result I spent a considerable amount of time mustering support around the north west of the state to fight the issue.

I was made aware by a contact that the Colong Foundation had implemented a wilderness nomination on a series of properties adjoining the Kaputar National Park at Narrabri.

It was after a meeting called by NSW Farmers in Narrabri that I met Mark and Cate Stewart. The Stewarts had a property and had not long purchased the property next door. The second property was perpetual lease land that they wanted to convert to freehold. The conversion had been part of the purchase agreement. They had been assured they could convert and went ahead and purchased the property. It was after applying for the conversion that the trouble started. These properties shared boundaries with Kaputar National Park.

The property consisted of areas of cultivation country interspersed by open non arable grazing country, as well as substantial stands of ironbark forest. The Stewarts were commercially harvesting and milling ironbark. The imposition of the wilderness nomination bought the Stewart's timber milling process to a halt. The property also displayed several species of interest such as rock wallabies and evergreen vine thicket. There were a number of aboriginal sites such as sharpening grooves in a creek bed and carved trees.

A group of property owners affected by wilderness nomination came together and by a series of meetings and media coverage highlighted the ridiculous and inequitable process of wilderness nomination.

The issue of lease land and the need for a sensible system of conversion to freehold also came to the fore. That very same issue is again being badly handled at the moment by bureaucracy and politicians at NSW State level where conversions are having covenants placed on them restricting the use of the land.

By a combined effort by a number of sympathetic stakeholders in the consultation process NSW Farmers and members of Parliament, National Parks were eventually shamed into purchasing the Stewart's property allowing the family to be able to move to Queensland to make a fresh start.

was only one of a number of affected families and were an example of 100's of citizens affected by a corrupt, costly and unnecessary process fortunately they were able to get out some weren't as fortunate.

That public consultation process showed up a number of inequities in State vegetation and land planning laws at the time Legislation has only got worse since, and the outcomes for rural communities have been devastating. Sawmills closed, 100's of people out of work, economic and social issues of the small local towns drastically affected.

The waste of taxpayer money on the consultation process was extravagant and absolutely uncalled for.

The local communities banded together and fought for their rights. They won the battle but lost the war, because Bob Carr, State Premier at the time, went ahead and did what he intended to do anyway, in a complete reversal to what the rural communities had asked for, and worked so hard for.

These communities were promised that Tourism would replace the loss of the timber industry that generated in excess of \$38 million to the region annually. The increase in tourism has never happened.

In the mid 90's NSW State Forests contributed to State treasury some \$90 million annually it is now running at a loss and the budget for NPWS is about \$400 million annually and growing as the estate grows. I viewed an ABC 7:30 Report that stated we are now importing more timber than we export. I think the figure quoted was a \$3 billion deficit. Some of this imported timber would be coming from countries where there is no concern for the environment just the dollars

The closure of more than 100,000 hectares of red gum forests from logging and their gazettal as National Park will cost as many as 1200 timber industry jobs in the Riverina. This is a repeat of what we went through in the BBSB only on a bigger scale. There is no need for this action as the red gum forests have been well managed for many decades.

The irrigation industry is facing a similar fate. The proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan along with Sustainable Diversion Limits all aimed at environmental out comes, instead of triple bottom line will be a depopulation disaster in irrigation valleys e.g. Griffith Deniliquin Colleambally Wee Wae etc etc, if common sense does not prevail.

Rural communities are dependent on the long term sustainable use of their natural resources. Government both State and Federal are hell bent on removing that usage, and locking the resources away to be either, wasted, mismanaged, overgrown or burnt! But if there is coal under it they will clear it bare to get the coal while a farmer may not be allowed to remove vegetation to improve his management.

Economic, social and environmental values need to be managed in a balanced and sustainable manner if our rural communities in NSW and Australia are to survive.

Rod Young