

Giuseppe (Joe) Galeano  
Qld  
Phone  
8-4-03

## **FEDERAL BIODIVERSITY ACT & QUEENSLAND VEGETATION MANAGEMENT ACT**

### ***FARMERS WANT A FAIR GO***

- A few years ago when the federal government decided Australia must severely restrict gun ownership, those owners forced to relinquish guns were compensated at market value. They were given a fair go. All Australians paid for the buy-back.
- Where Australian land (usually in densely populated areas) is resumed for airport, railway or road expansion the owners are compensated – otherwise there would be a huge voter backlash.
- The federal Biodiversity Act, and the Queensland Vegetation Management Act of 1999 created retrospective legislation. Property owners may have to relinquish freehold land or are denied use of it without the provision for fair compensation. If Australia needs to save land for its conservation value (and most farmers agree that it does) then all Australians should contribute to the cost. These two acts are unfair to farmers. Conservation is obviously a national issue. The federal government cannot really expect the state governments to take full responsibility for compensating property owners disadvantaged by environmental legislation.
- Secure property rights are regarded as a must in all western democracies. This is one of the reasons those countries became rich, as Mr Anderson stated. And property rights continue to be a “prerequisite for long term planning and investment.” [Herbert River Express – 12-3-02]
- It seems that in many policy areas (eg environment) the state governments are having to work within policy frameworks set by the federal government – and neither the federal Coalition nor the Opposition has been really listening to the concerns of country people for quite a few years.
- The federal government seems to be blaming the hole in the ozone layer almost exclusively on land clearing in Queensland. There is seldom mention of other significant pollutants like coal fired power stations.
- It has been economic reality for the past 40 years that farmers need to plan ahead and expand to remain viable. The *smart farmers* did this. During good times they bought extra land (zoned agricultural) as close as possible to the existing holding, even if they had to pay above market price and pay higher rates over the years to do so. Some of them are still paying off this investment in extra land and heavy machinery. They cleared the land, section by section when it was necessary to increase production to survive. Land clearing is expensive. They did not ‘slash and burn’ because they understood such a policy was bad for the environment in general, and for their own farms in particular. Even when the vegetation acts were mooted they refrained from ‘slash and burn’ because they trusted that governments would respect their property rights. By about 10 years ago many of them were already creating silt traps and settling ponds: sustainability is just smart farming if you want to

keep your farm in the family. And, *all* of these smart farmers were planning for a comfortable independent retirement – in other words they were planning their own superannuation. Now, some of them are expected to donate a significant proportion of their superannuation to the environment! Would politicians, bureaucrats, and other workers be happy to do that?

- Acceptable compensation for farmers in some cases would be a direct swap of cleared land for virgin country.
- It is not sensible to impose countrywide or statewide environmental legislation without allowing some flexibility for local areas. The Cardwell Shire has 60% of its land protected by Heritage Listing or National Parks. Even the sensitive coastal strip up to 1km inland is 60% protected, thus ensuring that swamp habitats for fish and other fauna remain adequate.
- One of the main concerns behind the above legislations is the protection of endangered species - a very valid concern. But who sets the priorities? Consider the fate of the cassowary in the Cardwell Shire. Rampant feral pigs pose a far greater threat to that species than land clearing on private property. Pigs eat cassowary eggs and cassowary young. However, the government spends only token money on the pig problem.
- The environmental legislations I refer to are just two of many government policies creating difficulties for rural people. Farmers are beginning to feel like society's scapegoats. About 6 years ago they were given environmental guidelines to change to 'minimum till / trash blanket' practices to burn less fuel and to avoid sending silt runoff with its minerals and nutrients out to the reef: they must stop damaging the reef. Yet, when thousands of tonnes of farming topsoil were swept out to sea with the memorable dust storms of 2002, environmental scientists exclaimed with delight that the reef would benefit from all those extra minerals and nutrients!
- And now there is the threat to farmers of greater restriction on *chemical* use because of dieback. No doubt the use of potent chemicals in the past has caused environmental damage. But I know from personal experience that dieback is a natural phenomenon. I saw dieback happening in the mangroves and swamps of this region 40 years ago when chemicals could not possibly have been a factor. And I have seen the same areas of dieback regenerate naturally despite subsequent use of chemicals in the vicinity. The 'trash blanket' policy encourages *pests* so chemicals are more important to farmers than ever. The most damaging chemicals have necessarily been banned already. Farmers are educated in 'best practice' re the use of legal chemicals, and they can't afford to buy more than the requisite minimum.
- Following the Year of the Outback it would be very appropriate for all governments across Australia to work together to devise strategies that help rural communities survive and thrive. Otherwise, Australia will need to treasure those outback myths and legends because the *reality* will be gone.

Joe Galeano  
Canegrower and Cardwell Shire Councillor

PS – A paper very similar to this letter was presented as a submission to the North Queensland Local Government Association Conference held in Cooktown in May 02,

and to the Queensland State Local Government Conference held in Bowen in November. The submission was accepted at both conferences, unanimously in Cooktown.