

ANTHONY WAIT'S ADDRESS TO THE
PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSIONS INQUIRY
INTO IMPACTS OF NATIVE VEGETATION AND BIODIVERSITY
REGULATIONS

Firstly I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address you on the impact of Native vegetation and biodiversity regulations on farming and rural living in general.

My name is Anthony Wait. I live at Powers Creek, north of Casterton and south of Edenhope in Western Victoria.

I am a third generation farmer and have no other form of outside income, and I am proud of my attitude toward the farm that we run as a family.

As I was growing up I was taught to work hard, develop our country, increase our production of export goods and along with our country we would prosper.

Sadly this has proven to be wrong. Since 1988 farmer's terms of trade have been negative and since 1990, we have been inflicted with a series of regulations that have simply added to our woes.

There seems to be an attitude that has developed that we as farmers are not capable of running our farms, and that what is imposed on us is simply done to save us from ourselves. I would argue that those of us who have large amounts of capital invested are in a better position to look after it. After all it is our livelihood, so why would we want to destroy it. Any farms that have been run down in this district have eventually been sold. The next owners have picked up the pieces and started again and have these properties back to their former productive capabilities. This is the free enterprise system.

There is also a perception based on untruths promoted by the city based media e.g. The ABC and The Age in particular are pushing this myth that we as farmers are destroying our environment at a rapid rate. This is resulting in salinity, loss of bird life, wreckage of rivers, loss of trees. Thieving of neighbor's rainwater (before it hits the ground) Loss of frogs and the decimation of snakes. (If you read The Age long enough you wonder if snakes aren't replacing cats as cute cuddly family pets.)

It is difficult in this short period of time to speak broadly, but I would like to relate to you several problems that these laws are causing:-

Firstly the most common problem we have is fencing. Under S16 legislation fencing is exempt from native vegetation controls. However it is illegal to prune or cut limbs off a tree. Some zealot in the DSE has got this confused. Farmers are unsure. Planning officers are brought in. Bird Lovers get in on the Act, and it all gets bogged down, so farmers who are basically honest have nowhere to go.

It is our responsibility to keep our stock on our properties, yet against the law to make a reasonable, and I say a reasonable stock proof fence. In articles published lately it has been suggested that we run our fences up to a chain inside the original fence line. This is simply a de fact donation with no tax breaks. If it were suggested to city engineering works to fence out a couple of lathes and a milling machine, all hell would break loose, yet there is a similarity.

Still on the subject of fences, we are also in trouble if a survey line goes through a swamp. The trendy new word for this is wetland. Because some student did some sort of thesis, it is now illegal to disturb the bottom of swamps. Of course we could drain swamps, but this also illegal. These swamps usually go dry about November, leaving quite a large area of unproductive land, unable to be sown with clovers and perennials. It has also been suggested to fence this out, and again I say it is had enough to pay for the inside the paddock, let alone the outside. I doubt our friends in Fitzroy, Carlton or Camberwell would be so flexible with their boundary lines.

Another target item on the list is Superphosphate. There is a misconception that this product is being thrown around will nilly and is generally causing mass pollution. Believe me at \$250 per tonne we are extremely careful; with it. It receives most of the blame for outbreaks of blue green algae, yet in cases where scientists have set traps to analyze water into swamps, no phosphates are found in the water making us wonder what is the real agenda. Superphosphate management strategies are finding their way into the backs of Catchment Management Authorities plans. It seems to be an ongoing attack. We have developed quite an efficient system of super delivery to the farm. Firstly it is carted, unloaded on the property to a pile, tarped down, and spread in March/April when the danger of trucks lighting fires has decreased, and hopefully before the opening rains. It appears this practice is also coming under scrutiny. Any change to this practice e.g. Building a super storage shed (it would never pass the EPA regulations – they would make sure of that) or paying downtime to a semi trailer while it waited for hours so the spreaders could spread directly from it. Already a lot of farmers are unable to afford this product, and it is essential to keep up productivity.

Another problem we face is the declaration of some grasses or weeds as critically endangered. These restrictions come in overnight with little or no consultation. It is not a requirement of Environment Australia to widely advertise for submissions, yet we have an obligation to find out about them, usually in some obscure corner of a website. Not that it would make much difference the Bureaucrats seem unable to see a point of view that differs from theirs, and our elected representatives lack all forms of willingness to even nearly assist. It is virtually a sealed and done deal as a matter of course.

So how do we deal with our properties if we do have these important flora colonies or rare soil types? With country that we can triple the production by simply rolling the stones, not pushing out trees or draining wetlands, we are told NO. There is no law to stop us but the Indigenous population may have sacred sites. To find out about the sacred sites we have to pay for a survey. Environment Australia says it may be the last

formation left in the world, and we as owners are stuck dumb with fear, and leave it because of the dire consequences we may face.

Another subject that seems to attract people's attention is Salinity. Now if we are to believe the line trotted out by all and sundry, by about the year 2050 the whole country will be covered in salt, and there will be no food left. This maybe so, but let me tell of my observations. - Firstly I can't show you any land that has become salty in my life. A couple of areas of saline do exist but have been so for the last eighty years, and have not enlarged, and there is grass growing in both areas so it would seem to have minimal affect.

So how does Salinity affect us?

Firstly the criteria used to determine Saline areas were the reading of 25-year-old Black & White aerial photos. Any areas that showed up slightly whiter than white were deemed to be salt affected. No actual person out on the ground looking, because naturally they would have got it right with the photo. So along comes the Government with money from the sale of Telstra to fix this problem. Fence out these areas, plant trees and drive the salt back. Through Land care and other similar organizations this proceeded at a steady pace until the late 90's, when we were hit by a surge in Agro Forestry in the form of Blue Gums.

Millions and Millions of deep-rooted Eucalypts were planted in an area of SW Victoria and the SE of SA. Approximately 70,000 Ha were planted. The first cry we hear is from the SA Government stating that they are going to lower the water table. So as an answer to this they are going to put a Tax on the Blue Gum Forests for using too much water. It's actually the first Government in the World to directly tax rainwater.

So what may you say do the Salinity Police think of this. The silence is deafening. Here we have a perfect opportunity to attack salinity in a commercial manner, but no, we still have to lock up wetlands, block drains and reduce production to satisfy their ideological needs.

The current business thinking is to deregulate, keep becoming more efficient or you will sink into oblivion. This is the line that the Government trots out to us when we seem to be on hard times. So the Government encourages us to lead from the front in our Agricultural production, whilst coming in from the rear with a series of restriction and the hurdles are getting higher, at a rapidly increasing rate.

Mr. Chairman, unless this situation is remedied quickly, then I see the future of Agriculture grinding to a halt. I think it is time you started listening and consulting with actual commercial farmers, and I mean those whose sole livelihood depends on farming. They are the ones out in the paddocks getting their hands dirty, and observing the environment from close range. I don't mean those that have chosen to retire on a 10-acre block or those Agricultural Businessmen who run their holdings from their city desks, and are answerable to their shareholders.

