

Friday, 18th July 2003

VIC

Att: Native Vegetation & Conservation Biodiversity Inquiry
Re: Submission to the Inquiry
From: Thomas Phelan – Dairy Farmer

To whom it may concern,

I would like to register my strongest disapproval of any further restrictions being placed upon landowners in the name of conservation and biodiversity without access to fair and equitable compensation.

Whilst I fully support the retention of as much native vegetation as possible; and indeed increasing the replanting of areas; I feel that scant regard has been paid to the full implications of blanket bans. One example of this is the re-growth vegetation along the flood plains along the Tupal Creek in NSW. It has already been recognized by water authorities that this re-growth will lead to significant catastrophe with the next flood of the Murray, as it is choking the flood plain.

The burden and cost of retaining native vegetation and biodiversity cannot be thrust upon farmers and landowners whilst government remain immune from such requirements and indeed negligent in the upkeep of state forests and National Parks and the protection of such public assets. One obvious example of this is the recent bushfires in North East / East Victoria and Southern NSW. These fires destroyed more Native Vegetation, Flora and Fauna than the total for the whole of the Eastern States in the last ten years – 1.2 million hectares and in many areas up to 80% of native wildlife.

The cause of the fires and the reason they became almost unstoppable was outright negligence on behalf of the National Parks Service in their failure to clear the forest floor of years of debris through controlled burns. Mr. Croff's suggestions on 16th July, 2003 in his preliminary findings for the review is scurrilous to say the least when he suggests that neighboring landholders contributed to these fires when their source was the National Parks. It is nothing short of hypocrisy for governments to suggest that landholders are falling short in light of such negligence.

Some of the state legislation in Victoria at least had already gone too far in the costs placed upon landholders. Local government has already placed their own interpretation on the legislation and regulations. For example, one landowner has been forced to plant new trees for each overhanging branch he cuts and removes from his fence line. Others are forced to leave dead trees in the midst of a paddock being developed, to the detriment of efficient irrigation, simply because a hollow may house a possum at some time. I have no objection to the retention of native habitat if it is in fact firmly established that they are actually using it and are not able to find alternative habitat nearby.

These impositions upon landholders place a significant financial burden on them in the detrimental effect they often have on production. Many have already made a substantial contribution to the environment in the planting of segments of their properties to Native Vegetation and the fencing and protection of sensitive areas such as creeks, springs and gullies. Some of this has been done under the auspices of Landcare, but landholders have made significant personal contributions also, particularly when funding criteria have not been met by the particular circumstances of the property. For example, assistance with fencing of plantations is only available provided the plantation is of at least 3 acres – a requirement difficult to achieve on a fully producing smaller holding.

Unfortunately I do not have time to expand on this submission, as I have only just discovered the deadline is today.

Yours Sincerely,

Thomas Phelan.