

ICM AGRICULTURE

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Dr Neil Byron
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Native Vegetation Inquiry
Productivity Commission
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Submission to The Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Impacts Of Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Regulations.

ICM Agribusiness incorporates a number of rural enterprises in NSW and Victoria, including a large irrigation and dryland grazing property near Hillston in south central NSW. The present raft of regulations covering how we are able to operate our business in relation to development and land management have impacted negatively in a number of ways and may, in fact, not be achieving the outcomes the government desires.

In 1998 we applied for a permit to develop an area of country which at that time was covered in hop bush and dead timber and was a harbour for feral animals as well as noxious weeds such as galvanised burr. We went through an exhaustive 12 month process and were finally given permission to proceed, subject to meeting conditions such as leaving most of the mature trees and some clumps of undisturbed timber. The conditions imposed were very much in line with our own conservation and tree preservation ideas and the end result, albeit after a lengthy process, was a reasonable outcome.

In 2000, we sought approval to clean up another area of degraded native pasture and scrub, only to meet with the unofficial view that 'we had already had a fair go' and any additional approvals were unlikely. Believing this was a grossly unscientific method of determining if a landowner should be permitted to make changes to an area of their land, we progressed with the application. After an inspection by DLWC staff, we were informed that the area was a known habitat for the Plains Wanderer and any application would need to be accompanied by a Targeted Fauna Survey. This survey was carried out at our expense at a cost of over \$5,000, and although no Plains Wanderers were found, the survey found that the scrub was potentially a feeding area for passing parrots and as such it was deemed vital that the Boree scrub be maintained. When we offered to clean up the other areas but leave the bulk of the Boree, it was pointed out that the survey had also identified a rare plant species and as such a Species Impact Statement was required before approval could be granted. The suggested cost of this study was \$45,000 and it was at this stage that we decided to put the clean up program on hold.

If in fact there is a rare plant species on our property we would be pleased if it is accurately identified and conservation measures put in place to ensure its protection. If the wider community believes, as we do, that the preservation and protection of our rare fauna and flora is a worthy cause then it is clear the current regulations are failing. The identification of these rare plants and animals is left to the landholder, or those landholders who choose to fund the requested studies. Once identified, it is the responsibility of the landholder to ensure the protection of these plants and animals. The area of proposed development is left as an unofficial national park, unable to be cleaned up, and yet no offer is made to assist with the ongoing protection of the identified fauna or flora and no mention is made of compensation for the gradual reduction in productivity that will ultimately result. The Department can actually claim that a permit to disturb native vegetation was not withheld, simply the farmer in this case chose not to proceed.

I am aware of instances in the district where farmers ploughed country just to ensure that there was not more than a ten year period between ploughings, knowing that leaving country for 11 years would result in any future ploughing requiring a 12 month approval process. This happened even during the recent drought and certainly added to the massive loss of topsoil from the area. Policies that result in people doing costly and damaging things to their farms cannot be claimed to be working.

If the true goal is to identify and preserve areas of native vegetation that are believed will provide long term benefits in terms of bio-diversity and the sustainability of our communities, then the protection of these areas must be done in such a way that the costs are shared more widely across the community. If individual farmers continue to be made to bear the full cost of the identification and preservation of these areas of privately held native vegetation, then it is likely that the amount and quality of these natural areas will be much less than society may have hoped for. If the present culture of blaming farmers for the actions of their forebears is not changed then landowners will continue to be reluctant to identify unique areas with preservation value and the present rate of loss of unique habitat will continue.

The payment to farmers of an annual stipend to look after areas of their farms identified as having preservation value is not a new idea. The provision of payments or subsidies to farmers in return for them locking up areas of their farms is also not novel. Both of these options, used successfully in Europe and the USA, recognise that as the benefits of biodiversity will be shared amongst the whole community, and future generations, then so to must the costs be shared if the goals are to be achieved.

I would be pleased to provide further information if required and I thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Yours faithfully,

Alan Hoppe
Regional Director