

Reply to the  
Native Vegetation & Biodiversity Regulations..

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Sixty Seven years a farmer started in uncleared abandoned Mallee country growing grain and cattle having achieved the highest Victorian award twice for Farm Management and Improvement in Victoria, advisory member of the SCA Vic for seven years among other jobs.

While it is desirable to protect native vegetation, there seems little point in spending time, effort and money on it if the nation continues to devastate large arms of forest and farm land with fire as a result of sheer stupidity of regulations. The fact that vegetation arm are closed to firewood gatherers, post cutters, chippers etc which reduces the forest fuel and gain an intimate knowledge of the terrain through their experiences, needs to be considered and acted on to reduce the fuel load in the forest whether it be scrub or forest. People who work in the forests know the perils of neglect and abuse of the forest, they are not criminals.

No one departmentally desires to accept responsibility for vegetation management and fire control, fire scenes are usually total chaos with the volunteer brigades sitting on roads not allowed to enter park land, they might run over a species never before seen, it is better to let the species ( if they exist ) perish in a fire storm. Landholders are forbidden to clear breaks along fences in park land and have a firebreak to start with, such as a back bum to either stop the fire or prevent a fire storm, and be part of a fire access track.

The nation has made some terrible blunders in clearing magnificent forest for farm land to satisfy the greed of those in possession of large tracts of farm land, eg the Otways, Gippsland, and mountain valleys.

Those people who have tracts of uncleared land under freehold title, should not be interfered with by regulation as they have paid for the land and title including rates taxes, controlled weeds and vermin often for a lifetime.

Where are peoples rights when title is agreed to and granted, then taken away by a the whim of a bureaucrat do the people have any rights ?

Full compensation must be paid for freehold land on a lifetime investment basis for land resumed by the crown

Some of these farmers have been granted title on the express condition that all the land is developed for agriculture, with no time frame applied. Large sums of money and effort often has been spent in acquiring capital; plant and equipment to develop the land, why should they not be compensated ?.

Some of these farmers are keeping tracts of vegetation for a variety of reasons The case where a farmer kept strips of trees to reduce wind erosion, shelter and shade for livestock is faced with the situation that for every hectare of trees kept another two hectares is lost to pasture and crops due to surface root feeding, this applies oven in higher rainfall arms, and not allowed to harvest the vegetation, even if regeneration is in place.

When a farmer has native vegetation and has cared for it, at present regulations say they may not harvest it unless it is inspected and approved, fenced off and pay for a license, I refer to brush cutters, most don't bother and just bum it. Such restrictions lead people to be anti social, We have enough terrorist loose now starting fires and other behavior creating huge cost and lost production.

The classic was the stupid attitude of the South Australian government that they were going to stop all land clearing, resulting in land being cleared which would have never ever been cleared normally

The recent case in Victoria involving a farmer being stopped from lopping branches from roadside trees to stop them failing on a projected new replacement fence is inviting trouble. Reasonable reliable people are not likely to do the wrong thing, but there are others who would just wait for a suitable hot day and drop a match in the road reserve and destroy most of the trees on the road, even if the landholder is fined it doesn't bring back the trees. Another case in the fire areas is where a farmer wants to, rebuild a fence burnt by recent fires and is not allowed to clear or cut trees which have grown up in the line of the fence let alone clear the fence line. Yet as farmers move from growing sheep and wool to cattle due to poor prices and stupidity of free trade marketing, the volunteer reforestation is rapidly reclaiming large tracts of land from pasture. Many of those administering these regulations look on land holders as criminals.

There seems to be an insatiable need to claim more land for trees and plant trees on land used for agriculture, for what long term gain? Agriculture is constantly forced to produce for less or go out of business. Which means agriculture is expanding in farm size and mechanization using large capitalization in equipment, with the ever increasing use of chemicals and unproven methods long term. We are not far away from seeing towns which originally servicing 180 farmers, reduced to just 2 or 3 farmers in many areas. Extending this who will man the emergency needs. Such farms will only have one employee. Costs are driving farmers into remote control and automation rapidly, in an effort to survive. Bottled milk is cheaper than bottled water. Already there is volunteer automated milking being used, man is only used to see that a cow is not cut in half by a machine, the next step is a chemical factory to make milk.

Will fire be free to devastate half the State ?

The time is not far away when there is only one person every 50km across rural Australia, already women are called on to man the fire trucks, who next? How long before we stand back and let it burn?

The myth of carbon credits has yet to be reality if ever, disappearing like mists in the morning or was it an academic furphy, like the world is starving in the 1970's creating surplus production which we were unable to market, destroying farms.

Man has adapted through skill and experience how to live in large numbers in low temperature areas at a high cost of energy use, made possible by the large amount of water available, resulting in major pollution problems. In our near waterless desert why should Australian farmers pay the price for others indulgence.

Consideration must be given of the fact that we live on a desert island plagued with drought extracting agricultural product where other nations would not attempt to grow food, otherwise the land would have been occupied by millions of people long before our forefathers found it. To date farmers have not done too badly in spite of some short sighted government policies, but we are facing the greed of the corporates who have little regard for anything except profit or how they get it.

Care must be taken with the fragile areas in regard to land ownership, it is desirable that the land be no in the hands of corporates.

Admittedly mistakes are made usually as a result of consultants who take no responsibility for their advice.

Going back in the dreamtime this island was under water fresh or saline seas, wind erosion forming ridges with no or little vegetation, in the form of a vast desert, the Mallee we do well to be able to use the land efficiently to produce food.

The toll of the drought has yet to register in suburbia hundreds of farmers will be lost to industry as a result of this drought, others so permanently damaged that they will never reach their potential in their lifetime. No two droughts behave the same, an example I have not seen soil blown from the north side of hills and deposited on the south side before, it has always been the reverse (from south to north). In other droughts we have been short of water but never before just right out of water, in an entire region. Perhaps this has little to do with native vegetation and retention them of, but is part of the reality of the land. There is no significant data to show trees influence rainfall. We need to research plants that either store more water or have a stronger root system to gather water and stop recharge water, than waste our time planting trees which reduce our acreage under crops when we receive no monetary benefit for the farmers or the nation. There is no argument that the look of the land is more aesthetic with more trees, but looks don't feed people, unless genetic manipulation is used to put the koala genes into man to live in the trees and eat gum leaves, it would be interesting to see how many volunteers come forward.

True some farmers find the regulations offensive and doubt their wisdom long term. It would be more productive to assess the potential for research to enable wiser farm practices overcoming acid soils, water logging, rainfall generation, better plant water use, salting, drainage and salt disposal. Today it is not recognized that the land was clear felled principally to get rid of the rabbits, in order to have a crop survive. Most farmers are starting to plant trees on farms, now that rabbits are very few, at their own expense which is much greater than most expect with cost of seedlings, fencing, watering etc.

Grain crops are desert plants grown mostly on low rainfall desert areas which farmers do very well nationally. It is difficult to understand lam clearing restrictions in the Mallee areas, especially when some of the areas have over 40% already locked up in reserves and often burnt, with no firebreaks and no roads for fire fighting.

These Mallee areas require roads and fire breaks with controlled burning to control wild fires. but for what gain commercially they are unproductive except for the odd apiarist even they are under threat. To date it has been considered dead money to stop the fires so what is it all about? In any case the permanent fire fighters only work an eight hour day unfortunately the fires have no regular hours. It is left to the volunteer farmer fire fighters to work around the clock to save their farms.

Experience of the 1943 to 45 drought in the Mallee established that persuasion and social pressure created an effective result in land management previously ignored by authority. There was a change of focus departmentally so all those with knowledge of this success were made redundant, with a new crew who had to learn it all again by trial and error. Compulsion and regulations are not productive, it only adds to the challenge of defying the regulations, it is negative to apply regulation to all land management situations considerable gain is made with enthusiastic departmental people and credit to locals doing a good job of care, it takes special skill.

Land Care is an occupation for public servants, with farmers doing the work at farmers expense, while urbanites have a day out in the fresh air, it keeps loads of bureaucrats making a fuss and in a job. I wonder about the productive value for dollar

spent, could the money be better used. Perhaps it is worthwhile in the urban hobby farmer scene being a full education situation. No matter how good the farmers intentions of good management are, there are always times when nature has it's way regardless of every one.

Much of the damage done to the environment has been not by farmers but by introduced species getting out of control. Rabbits top the list yet it took fifty yew for a full national approach of biological control to become reality, when myxomatosis had been recognized as early as 1918. Today the authorities are loathe to destroy all the rabbits, they wouldn't have a job. No one will ever know for sure how many species have been obliterated by rabbits, foxes and cats, yet the research and eradication is very slow and under funded. Aerial baiting is still not acceptable, it is better to cost many times the aerial cost working on the ground as there will be always a job available in the future. Yet other states use the method extensively with excellent results and a low cost unit.

Answering the complete questionnaire is beyond the ability of many farmers in not having access to much of the information, so much of it appears academic. The time available for farmers to answer such enquiries is very limited, as I am retired from full time farm work at 85years and relegated to research and enquiry while my son and his wife work the farm. They have not had a day off for three months working up to 14 hours a day seven days a week due to drought and insufficient funds, preparing and sowing crops and feeding livestock, other farmers face the same problems. Spare a thought for the deregulated dairy farmers no water, no feed., no hay, no grain, no price, no money and no hope.

Flogging agriculture to a standstill is not the answer.

Jack Vallance