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Email:

30 July 2003

Presiding Commissioner  
Native Vegetation Inquiry  
Productivity Commission  
LB2 Collins Street East  
MELBOURNE VIC 8003

Attn: Dr Neil Byron

Dear Sir,

**Re: Submission to Native Vegetation Inquiry from a Best Practice farmer**

I am writing as a former 'best practice' farmer. My wife, Kylie and I owned and operated a 3,336 hectare sheep and wheat property in Central Western New South Wales (100km south west of Dubbo) from 1984 to 2001. The property was developed according to the best available NRM advice available at the time.

Our property management was guided by land use capability. The more robust and fertile soils were continuously cropped using minimum tillage technology and an 8,000DSE self-replacing fine/medium wool merino enterprise was based on improved native pastures.

Around 12% of the property was fenced as native remnant woodland and managed for its conservation value. Around 30% of the property supported a largely intact native grass and forb pasture. The remainder of the property was improved with lucerne and clover based pastures. No green timber was removed from the property in developing it towards higher production. Dead standing and fallen timber was also retained for habitat. A fauna survey conducted by Charles Sturt University (CSU) Bathurst in 1993 identified 86% of the vertebrate species found on our 1: 100,000 map sheet: a remarkable total according to Dr David Goldney of CSU given the level of agricultural production being achieved on the property.

The formation of the Genaren Hill Landcare Group in 1992 led to greater opportunities for community understanding of all the NRM issues associated with agriculture and the need to maintain or improve landscape function.

In 1992 we decided to permanently protect a 390 hectare patch of remnant vegetation. This paddock contained around 100 hectares of grassland (never cultivated) and 294 hectares of sub humid woodland with a diverse and healthy understorey of shrubs. There

was some interest from NPWS at the time to see this high value grazing land managed for its biodiversity value.

We signed a conservation covenant called a Voluntary Conservation Agreement (VCA) in NSW over the subject land in 1993 with co-signatories being the NSW Minister for the Environment and the Director General of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The Genaren Hill Landcare Project saw \$40,000 of funding from the Save the Bush Program over two years and \$28,000 from the NSW Environmental Trusts. These funds were forthcoming because the VCA would see this land (supposedly) protected in perpetuity for its scientific, conservation and education values. Dozens of international volunteers, landcare group members and the property owners constructed an 8.4km long fox/cat proof fence around the Sanctuary.

To add more value to the Sanctuary and in accordance with the Plan of Management for the VCA the landcare group attracted further sponsorship (mostly private) to re-introduce Brush-tailed Bettongs and Bridled Nailtail Wallabies back to within their original range at the Sanctuary

Considerable research was undertaken by research institutions and indeed a PhD thesis – *Creating Cultural Landscapes – An Ethnographic Evaluation of Nature Conservation in the Sheap Wheat Belt of New South Wales* was written by Dr Chris Willianis (University of Melbourne). This thesis focused on the values farmers in the district place on native vegetation and fauna and how these people interfaced with government agencies.

The crux of my submission relates to the fact that despite our considerable commitment to conserving native vegetation over and above legislative requirements on our property NPWS have reneged on their role in the VCA.

We decided to sell our property in October 2001 (Attachment 1). The VCA over 12% of the property was a real deterrent to some prospective buyers. The one potential buyer who expressed an interest in what we were doing with the Genaren Hill Sanctuary purchased the property before auction. In calculating the real value of the property, a 394 hectare area which prohibited grazing and other development had to be written down as “worthless”. This financial cost we have had to bear because we do not have a system in place that rewards land managers who set aside land for the public good.

What we have found most distressing since selling the property is the fact that our conservation partners (NPWS) have shown only neglect for the ten year investment we made in the VCA. It took several phone calls and more than twelve months to elapse before NPWS could find the time to provide any extension or consultation with the new owners of the property. NPWS seems disinterested in providing help to new owners of covenants to make them aware of the obligations for stewardship of the protected area. Indeed, the Sanctuary (representing the covenanted area) has also been grazed despite being prohibited in the Plan of Management. Nobody from NPWS has been inside the Sanctuary to assess the status of the Bridled Nailtail Wallaby population. This is a highly Endangered species and surely the responsibility of NPWS staff to monitor through the Recovery Plan.

If this is how Government Agencies treat the signatory of one of the first and largest VCAs in New South Wales, what does it say about their level of commitment to conservation outside the reserve system and through regulations as well? Our commitment to the VCA and the Landcare movement meant that many of our

neighbours became active managers of remnant vegetation on their farms too and without any regulatory pressure being applied to achieve this effort. In fact, when the Native Vegetation Conservation Act came into force in 1997 I would argue that our VCA and project made many 'm our Landcare Group less afraid of the new regulatory regime despite many misgivings about new biodiversity laws. They had been, if you like, converted to the idea of protecting habitat already. NPWS' lack of interest in its own covenanting program makes a mockery of this effort by my former neighbours.

I have written to the NSW Minister for the Environment highlighting my concerns (Attachment 2) and got worthless assurance back in reply (Attachment 3). I justify my criticism by informing the Commissioner that NPWS still have not followed up my request to investigate the status of the Genaren Hill Sanctuary - that is, my requests that they inform me as to whether it is being managed for its conservation values or simply neglected.

Yours faithfully

Michael Donald Sutherland,  
Director, Genaren Pastoral Company

Attachment 1: Sale Brochure for Genaren

Attachment 2: Letter to NSW Minister for Environment

Attachment 3: Letter reply from Minister for the Environment