

Impacts of Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Regulations

KM Blake

Submission

To the 2003 Productivity Commission Inquiry

- *We bought a farm to farm!*
- *We did not buy a 'national park'*

And

- *we really and truly do not farm for the public good.*

- Federal
- State
- Catchment
- Local

A legislative minefield

And

Ignorance of the law is NO DEFENCE

In the interests of productivity into the future

Those of us who have native vegetation and biodiversity

Must have a greater say

- Use Us or Lose Us

Impacts of Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Regulations

KW Blake

submission

to the 2003 Productivity Commission Inquiry

Farmers have never willingly abused or degraded the land. Farmers have always had to look toward the coming year and the next generation, but generational change within individual properties, and farming communities, has enabled new approaches in farming practices to be undertaken. Movements in commodity prices caused shifts in stocking and cropping techniques, the revolution in equipment size, availability and affordability also influenced primary industry and production

- Vermin, weeds such as Patterson's' curse, Bathurst Burr and the common old scotch thistle, erosion, water palatability and availability are all issues that have plagued Australian agriculture and seem to prosper at the urban interface fringe.
- Recognition of the threat of salinity, erosion, soil damage and resultant land degradation across the country also prompted primary producers as well as Stakeholders including Local, State and Federal Governments to sit up and take notice.
- The 1983 dust storm that swept across Victoria blacking out Melbourne raised awareness that all was not well in the "Bush" in urban Australia.
- Problems of the wool & beef industries prompted growers to change track moving into alternative commodities especially in the regions, which could be cropped. Raised bed cropping appeared and areas, which had never been considered overnight, became prime cropping ground.
- Intensive, high profit margin farming practices such as free-range pigs enterprises are being established where once sheep and cattle grazed on larger broad acre properties.

Urban Australians have had little need to think about the countryside that makes up the bulk of this island until the dust blows and the water is short and food prices start to rise and indeed their comfort is disturbed except dream as to how they believe the land should be managed. The Australian myth either sees people on the land as eternal battlers or filthy rich. The reality for most who earn their living from the land is a balancing act being required to comply with environmental regulations designed to benefit the entire community at significant cost to individual farms whilst playing on a level economic playing field internationally.

Dashwood. The shots from now on relate to progression from a barely viable property to what we hope will remain an environmentally and economically sustainable enterprise in 2003.

In 1978 we purchased "Dashwood" a 1200-acre farm with the aim to farm it. We did not envisage the growth in environmental laws and regulations, which now dictate every farm planning decision we make.

Dashwood just happens to sit on the Western Plains Grasslands and prior to our purchase had been conservatively managed by a soldier settler. Through our own efforts and with minimal assistance we have developed wetlands, protected grasslands, planted some 40,000 trees and woodlots, been the custodians of brolgas, dunnarts, dolma impa, agrosti adamsoni as well as hunting the rabbits, hares and foxes. Foxes and cats have a huge impact on our native wild life and an even greater impact on productivity through sheep and lamb losses. Our Brolga babies Just don't stand a chance.

We purchased Dashwood to earn a living for our family. We did not buy a "national park" and we really and truly do not farm for the public good, but by default in our environmentally sustainable management planning, we invoke the public good process on a daily basis. We have and continue to farm our land, now some 3000 acres in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner. We bought a farm to farm!

We won the 1993 Landcare award, primary production, Victorian section and since then have hosted many groups from local to international Landcare, worked with universities, the Melbourne zoo, the CSIRO and more.

These days we just farm.

We have recognized the most significant areas and have made a conscious effort to maintain and enhance them where ever it remains viable but at an equally significant \$cost. The dramatic fall in wool prices in the M2 sale last week together with the dry conditions seen the sale of some 600 wethers with the consequence that a much higher ratio of the property will be cropped next year than ever before. Today we would not be able to achieve many of the highlights of Dashwood because of restrictions through legislation and regulation The wetland would not be able to be created and it would still be a salty marsh rather than a nutrient sink, home to agrosti adamsoni, Japanese snipe, ducks of many varieties, swans the little black bush hens, copper head snakes and our beautiful broilgas.

If we were being true to the principals of biodiversity we would not be planting any trees on the grasslands it would still be the pleurisy plains we found in 78 and the impact on our livelihood would be immense.

We would not have been able to clear the rock from the paddocks and would therefore be prevented from cropping the fertile soil. We have learnt to identify the significant areas where the dunnarts and the legless lizards live and have strategically left those areas alone and concentrated on the areas where the soils are unsuitable for their habitat, to clear and make for productive in dollar terms.

We would now probably be unable to clear the tracks that we have to give us some ability to fight grass fires in the more inaccessible paddocks and to make the movement of stock and equipment efficient and with ease of access.

Today: -

Primary producers are in the business of producing food and fibre and that means making those essential dollars to remain viable. As my mate Robert says “We could do without them, bureaucrats – most of them would be doin’ better an’ more good if they were out there doin’ somthin’ rather than thinkin’ bout doin’ somethin’ you know rabbitin’ or fencing’ or actually put’in a tree in the earth”.

The uptake of biodiversity management through landcare in the “**hobby farm sector**” and urban areas has brought with it many issues of lack of understanding between the real world of farming for profit and managing the land for pleasure and lifestyle. “**Not for profit**” land managers have brought an expectation that all farmers are able to achieve equally and at the same pace.

Those not reliant on the land for survival frequently are making **unrealistic** demands on genuine farmers. It is easy to preach biodiversity with a full belly and money in your pocket.

Those who have native vegetation and biodiversity must have a greater say in the legislative process; currently it is minimal and not listened to.

Decisions need to be made farm by farm, because of the diversity of issues, ecosystems and regions. At "Dashwood" we set priorities setting aside some 200 acres back in the 80's. A significant ecosystem with poas [silver tussuck, wallaby, and kangaroo grasses and home to numerous fauna species including dunnarts and dolmas. We made the decision to keep the best, we could not keep it all.

On the purchase of our second property we have identified a significant paddock rich in native flora and because we view it as something very special it has also been set aside. BUT we will manage the land and not be dictated to by bureaucrats on a very healthy salary.

WE believe that Native vegetation management needs to be set at the farm gate and issue such as property size must be taken into account.

What are we going to do –

Send people broke?

Making the decisions at the farm gate will give people confidence that they have certainty of tenure. Some of the current State Government proposals includes thoughts that all remnants of significance on private property would be owned and managed by the crown.

Certainly a recipe to send people broke and not palatable to people such as ourselves who watch as crown lands deteriorate at an unprecedented rate. Imagine in our case two or maybe three pieces of land within a farm being fenced out and unable to be managed by the owner. And then they think they are going to swap us land down the road.

What a nightmare. In our region significant roadsides and crown land such as the Rokewood Common have been let go. The State Government cannot even make a decision to manage their own responsibilities. The principles of Net Gain are absolutely ridiculous. How in our situation when we have done our work going to be able to institute net gain.

Our country needs to have application of super phosphate and has done so for generations. Some argue that this is detrimental - to whom ? the farmer needs to maintain productivity.

In Australia the only reason many urbanites know there is a drought is the dust, water restrictions and higher food prices. The gulf between whole of farm income families and the rest of the population is immense. There is little understanding of that fine line between success and despair and the difficulties we have in handling the key elements the weather, commodity markets and prices, politics and taxes.

Exceptional circumstances funding only is available when one has nothing left, the paddocks are bare and the sheds empty and the long lasting damage has been done.

There is a growing talk about stewardship but absolutely no proper ongoing funding to assist the stewards only a pittance for a bit of fencing to allow set aside and thus further reduce landholder income.

There is little appreciation of the "one man band operation" and the incredible demands being made of people who often manage very large areas single handedly due in part to the low returns for agricultural commodities

The issues

Water

Environmental management systems.

Public good Conservation

Subsidies, stewardship and rebate schemes, voluntary agreements more.

Funding, meeting targets, meeting criteria, and completing the paperwork.

A brief look at some of the issues

- **Environmental Management Systems**

Recently dreamt up and sold as a pathway to environmental sustainability and eventually to world markets. A best management practice system entailing processes of auditing leading to accreditation raising questions as yet unanswered.

Who determines best practice?

What in fact is best practice? - when we are dealing with all manner of disassociated land and industry types.

Who is actually qualified to audit the EMS process?

- **The Public Good principle** keeps abounding into all literature I ask - "would you willingly forgo in excess of \$50,000 in income a year by protecting native flora and fauna in the public good." without assistance?

And in fact what is Public Good - does it entail not burning strategic fire breaks and protecting native grassland vs. providing strategic fire breaks and protecting life and property.

Subsidies, Stewardship & Rebates

- **Rebates** - some sell the opportunities that local government rate rebates may offer to environment protection. As a LG Councillor in a small rural municipality I know that it is very difficult to adequately recompense people for their public good conservation particularly when it comes to the broad acre farms. This is compounded when the municipality has many properties with similar issues/ assets/ liabilities and a low rate base to provide rate relief whilst maintaining essential infrastructure such as roads.
- **Stewardship and "voluntary agreements** - bare in mind that Dashwood, our property is host to a nationally listed species, a number of rare and endangered and a host of threatened species that we protect. This has created a real problem for the future viability of this property as a working farm as there are now so many "experts" wishing to tell us how to manage but not offering the \$'s to make stewardship viable.
- **Subsidies** - Current World Trade issues are frequently used to counter any argument mounted by those of us who discuss any form of long term, on going assistance for those who are the custodians of the nations heritage. Politicians of all creeds run the minute mile should anyone ever suggest that real, and meaningful assistance be provided to those who protect and foster the preservation of significant endangered ecosystems. Token programs such as the Bush Tender Program in Victoria are being trailed but unfortunately these attract only a certain section of the potentially eligible landowners and managers. What is needed is a serious look at the Environmentally Sensitive Area schemes in the UK. Australian politicians and bureaucrats seem to think that the corporate dollar will fund solutions.

No cents or even common sense

They who "know" are very willing to tell we ignoramuses how to, why and when but they are not so willing to provide the where with all, that is \$'s, to actually **Do**

- In grass roots land people want to be able to set their own targets, to implement programs that will yield real results in a manner that best suits them as individuals, groups or catchments, within achievable timeframes, which are not necessarily tied to election dates.

As the conservation programs established has gathered momentum so has **the bureaucracy** around it blossomed.

We have seen recognition of Salinity, waterway management, land management forestry in a plethora of documents, strategies and plans.

- **The R & D Myth** - repeatedly we are presented with the proposal that reinvents yet another wheel and told by way of explanation "the research has not been done"
- a great deal of research particularly relating to salinity has been done and lies gathering dust because the researchers move on **and never return to quantify the results 20 years on.**
- Eg between 1980 and 1996 Kevin, my husband, and I planted in excess of 1000 salt tolerant clones in a trial with the CSIRO and NRE. In the mid 90's most died and the boffins were happy and wrote up the papers But there is one providence of the trial that is still happily growing and some could almost be said to be prospering and yet no one has returned to find out why and if indeed this one providence may be valuable to the salinity fight.

Politics

Much of the problem is election dates, politicians and bureaucrats. No one ever wants to take the time to look back admit the failures, document the progress and truly get hold of the big picture either at a local, state or national scale. Too much is tied to budgets, short term contracts and even shorter-term vision. Election dates mean that targets and results are aimed at winning the next term in office.

Politicians are so fickle, frequently, to take the short-term gain rather than look at the long term.

Biodiversity issues such as native flora and fauna management become blurred with emotion and politics which confuses rational decision-making.

2003 is the time that we really need to take stock of what has been achieved and what needs to happen from here.

Currently much is **crisis management** - reactive rather than pro active. Eg Drought, fire and flood management, salinity control, timber production and urban planning. Government removed the most effective way to control vermin. Seven years on in Victoria, a fox bounty was reintroduced.

The problem for the owners is that every "body" wants a say over what we owns Federal, State, Catchment and Local governments are all have a chop at us. In the past few years I have prepared so many submissions and made comment to so many bits of legislation or regulation, I simply have lost count.

The problem for land owners is that, we make a wrong move, and Ignorance of the law is no defense. A legal minefield is being developed without those most affected being given any real say. Some bureaucrats would be well advised to listen to our friend Robert who says, "Bloody surprising what you can learn after you thought you knew everything"

Finally

We believe

That those of us who have Native vegetation and need to at the same time remain productive and profitable must have a greater say.

Use us or lose us.