

ADDITIONAL SUBMISSION
To
IMPACTS OF NATIVE VEGETATION AND BIODIVERSITY
REGULATIONS

If costs are reduced in existing native vegetation and biodiversity regulatory regimes and benefits increased, the landholder must be consulted, particularly those who have purchased the land as freehold title. Wider community opinion/demands should not have any influence over freehold title.

For leasehold land the 'rolling lease' system provides for a landholder to abide by regulations in place so that the land is improved/looked after, the improvements determining the length of the lease, thus the lease is performance based. The flexibility allowed here was that if the leases were kept in tack and looked after, the conservation areas would remain as is. The advice through government officers was that it was the land the government was concerned about, not instructing the lessee what to do regarding fences etc. The rights and obligations of the lessee are to respond to pest problems, look after the trees and riverbanks etc.

In latter years the *man on the land* has become more environmentally aware and practices have been implemented with the assistance of government departments so that the use of the land is acceptable to the environmental lobbyists as well as the wider community, and there is no doubt that this will continue on in the future. Laws are in place and the *man on the land* does not want to see his property degraded or devalued.

Your inquiry appears to be based on large scale properties and no consideration has been given to smaller properties.

It is of concern that private freehold land is included in the government's direction to strengthen legislation controlling clearing of native vegetation. Why then do we have freehold title? This is an erosion of rights for those occupants/owners of freehold land.

We note that Australia has an International obligation and is a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity; constituents in the Electorate of Kennedy have expressed their concerns regarding the signing of such treaties with overseas countries. It is only at this time that one becomes aware of such obligations. One such obligation that has affected the Electorate of Kennedy was the listing of North Queensland's Tropical Rainforests on the World Heritage List.

It is hoped that the permits/approvals required by landholders to clear native vegetation is not a long drawn out process stretched across several departments and tiers of government and furthermore not costly. Aquaculture farms in the Electorate of Kennedy were so bogged down in 'red tape' with the various permits/approvals required, that it is little wonder that prospective investors would be of the opinion that governments don't want them to set up a business. It appears from your inquiry that the different levels of government that come under separate Legislation is the cause of this concern. Our opinion is that this needs to be streamlined so that industries can go ahead without delay.

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If the landholder needs the area of land covered by native vegetation, has consideration been given to the landholder planting this native vegetation on another section of his land as a replacement of the original native vegetation? Public education has resulted in small voluntary organisations now in place planting trees in the Electorate of Kennedy and it is quite common that if a tree has to be removed on an ordinary residential block of land, another one will be planted in its place. Reafforestation was in place long before the World Heritage Listing of North Queensland's Rainforests and has continued on since the listing.

Operation of the regimes

The dot points under this heading are exactly what constituents have to contend with and the frustration experienced often leads to abandoning the project they set out to do.

The inquiry's comment on restrictions on thinning or clearing of woodland "thickening" may promote soil erosion and biodiversity loss is taken on board, however, has any consideration been given to the cyclone threats to the eastern coastline of North Queensland? It is a common sight to see our Local Authorities tree lopping at this particular time of the year in the event of a cyclone.

Small groups of farmers with the assistance of government departmental officers are already undertaking new irrigation methods in the Electorate of Kennedy. Enviro scans and tensiometers are already in place. The enviro scans indicate how the moisture moves through the soil and the depth. The tensiometer is a piece of equipment that the farmer can afford to purchase at \$200 each and with these two pieces of equipment they are able to monitor the amount of water going through the soil and the depth of the root system of the plant. Centre pivots and lateral movers are irrigation systems already in use for crops. All this evidence is available in the Electorate of Kennedy. Water is our most valuable resource and with the extremely low levels we are experiencing in our rivers and dams, the methods indicated above is proof that landholders are prepared to look after this much needed resource. One month ago the Tinaroo Dam on the Atherton Tablelands was at 24% capacity and today (21.1.04) it is 25%. This dam is a vital water resource for the farmers in this section of the Kennedy Electorate.

It is extremely important that governments listen to local knowledge of areas before making decisions.

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Incentives for landholders – In latter years landholders have been encouraged to grow trees on their properties and this had taken place in the Electorate of Kennedy. The view is for future generations. Naturally there is a fear that these trees will always have to remain standing and have no financial returns to the land holder. For those plantations on freehold property, it should be the landholder's decision as to what he does with the trees in the future; after all he gave up a section of his land to grow them, rather than growing crops. We are already importing species of timber for use in Australia now, when we could be using our own resource. Therefore, the landholder has to be given an assurance that he can use and benefit from the decision he makes to plant trees on his property. In the case of native vegetation, if extractive material is underneath this vegetation, the landholder, particularly freehold tenure, should be allowed to extract this material with a view to replanting the vegetation on his/her property. It is noted that this is usually allowed subject to industry-specific Legislation. We cannot have all land stagnated because of environmental concerns. There has to be a balance and an undertaking from the landholder that he returns the section of land he uses to its natural state.

Avoidance and evasion of regulations can only be overcome by education through television and mail-out information to landholders and a more amicable approach by government departmental staff.

Impacts on landholders – Farmers are looking for alternatives, simply because they are being forced off the land through low sugar prices and the threat of imports so your dot point of *Prevention expansion of agricultural activities* is not a correct impact. Tree planting is one such alternative farmers are looking at.

Regarding your dot point of *Preventing changes in land use (eg from grazing to cropping)*, it is more likely to be the other way around – cropping to grazing for the reasons above.

The new technologies for irrigation are already taking place in the Electorate of Kennedy.

Control of regrowth and woodland thickening is most likely to be accepted by the landholder provided there is a balance and the environment doesn't win hands down. Control burning is done each year on the largest National Park in the world – Hinchinbrook Island. This control burning is undertaken to consume leaf load to protect the vegetation. Fuel load, if not thinned, causes an environmental hazard in certain areas.

Times are changing with agricultural industries and we note your comment that impacts will be less in some States of Australia because there is a less demand for clearing for agricultural purposes. Farmers are exiting industries because their production costs are higher than their returns, some are bankrupt, and some are diversifying so we do not think this assessment is correct in this area of impact on landholders. The sugar industry is struggling because of low returns to growers caused by mills having to sell raw sugar at the corrupted world price. In this present climate the remaining cleared land will not be degraded by over-intensive farming

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because farmers are not going to expand for no returns. Getting bigger won't help their situation when the price is not there.

If farmers aren't receiving the returns for their crops, how can they financially afford new technology? In latter years they have made a move in this direction.

Net farm returns has already had an impact in the Electorate of Kennedy. Farmers who want to exit the industry can't because no one wants to buy their farms. They consider their land alone is worth more than the government is offering them to exit the industry and this does not include all their equipment.

The native vegetation regulations will just be *a further nail in the coffin* for landholders regarding access to finance. They have already borrowed heavily to survive and this "no touch zone" will deplete their ability to be viable, sell, or access further finance to survive.

Government measures mitigating impacts – Governments are continually phasing in measures that result in the closer of industries or industries remaining with a reduced number of operators but are slow to come forth with compensation. Usually the criteria to "exit" or be compensated is to such an extreme that very few qualify.

Impacts on regions and other industries - One shire in the Electorate of Kennedy has approximately two-thirds of unrateable land. Some of this land was State Forest where activities such as horse riding, walking tracks, trapping of wild pigs was permitted, however, it has now been changed to National Parks with restrictions on activities. Native vegetation regulations will be an added burden on shires, and it will not be the metropolitan shires affected but the rural shires.

Improve existing regulatory regimes – Box 3 Towards regulatory 'best practice' – Agree.

Geographic Information Systems GIS is in place in Ingham, Mareeba and Atherton. In Ingham this is supported by the CSIRO, Queensland Department of Natural Resources, CSR Sugar Mill, the Productivity Board and the Hinchinbrook Shire Council. Types of crops, flood levels, owners of the land, trouble spots on cane bin lines; rat and cane grub damage can all be identified. Growers have received enormous assistance from this information technology so should Satellite Imagery (remote sensing) be an additional form of assistance to these growers and the community as a whole, there is little doubt that it will be accepted favourably.

Box 4 is indicative of what farmers are doing now and there is similar evidence in the Electorate of Kennedy. The implementation of environmental practices is available on several farms in the Electorate of Kennedy.

Box 5 Constraints

Our office can relate to the dot points listed here.

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Environmental externalities and public goods

We agree that native vegetation conserved for biodiversity purposes will reduce the landholder's income if the landholder is unable to use the land as he or she wishes to and we wonder whether governments are implementing these measures to appease environmental lobbyists to stay in power and question their genuine concern for the *man on the land*. Evidence of this is the article in the *Cairns Post 19.1.04* titled *Tree-clearing ban pledge* whereby Queensland Premier Beattie is allegedly courting Greens preferences by pledging a re-elected Labor government would ban broad scale tree-clearing within three years. While environmental groups feel comfortable with this announcement, landholders await further restrictions and wonder whether they are going to have to rely on Centrelink payments for the rest of their lives as there is very little confidence in relying on compensation from the government.

Clarify landholder and community responsibilities

Sharing responsibility to protect the environment has become more evident in these latter years. We see this evidence in the younger members of our community through our education system. Most recently the general public have become involved in reducing the number of plastic bags used in our every day shopping activities. This has been supported by local councils and chamber of commerce's along with Planet Ark. Landholders have become involved in Land Care groups, provided owl boxes in trees on their rural properties to encourage owls in crop areas so that they will reduce the rodents rather than placing rat baits on their land. Wetlands have become a reality on rural properties with sugar mills recycling their waste water to wetland areas adjacent to their operations.

It is without doubt that landholders and the community are sharing the responsibility of protecting the environment.

Box 6 – Cost sharing

Everyone should share the cost of protecting the environment. This could be done by a small levy on rates through our local councils. We feel it is reasonable to say that this would be accepted by the public. In some overseas countries with the agenda of reducing plastic shopping bags, a charge is placed on the plastic shopping bag if you fail to bring your alternate bag. Another instance is a \$2 levy on an entrance fee into a wildlife park to protect a certain species from extinction.

Chapter 6

Although there are a range of restrictions that have significantly reduced the returns of many affected landholders, these landholders have been amicable and have been prepared to change their farming practices for the better of the environment. Bearing this in mind they are still labelled with blame by conservationists for ruining the Great Barrier Reef with *run-off* from their farms and little consideration has been given to the good environmental work they have undertaken.

If one area is closed to their income earning potential, they have tried other avenues such as tree planting and bailing hay for drought affected areas of the State.

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Landholders have already borrowed heavily to this point so these new regulations will be a further burden in their capacity to obtain finance. In some cases the wives have played a role in searching for solutions in the downturn of industries. This has assisted with the personal stress placed on families.

Chapter 7

Is a fair assessment of the current regimes.

Chapter 8

Rates relief would be an option for landholders who are unable to use their land because of native vegetation; however, a previous point has been made about one particular shire in the Electorate of Kennedy that has two-thirds unrateable land. While giving the landholder this relief, it is a further burden on the shire. This would also refer to the purchase by government of the land earmarked for native vegetation as once again you are going from rateable land to unrateable land.

General comments

People living in the local communities/regions should be the ones consulted when implementing further environmental restraints, not people belonging to environmental groups from other parts of Australia. These people have no idea of the economic and social effect on communities they do not belong to.

While the emphasis is always on the need to improve efficiency, increase productivity – buy out smaller farms thus reducing the number of people in the industry, our inability to compete on the world market has resulted in the closure of the tobacco industry in Kennedy. This has led to the illegal trading of ‘chop chop’ out of pure frustration.

De-regulation of industries reduces the number of farmers in their particular industry, displaces families from small rural townships thus having the flow-on effect to the local economy. Staff members in schools are cut because enrolment figures are down. The open competition policy results in produce coming from interstate and the quality of the product is questionable. A good example of this is the de-regulation of the egg industry whereby the eggs on the supermarket shelves are not under refrigeration and the customer is unaware of their age. These large supermarket chains are buying in these products in bulk at much cheaper prices while our farm fresh eggs from our local area are left because they are unable to compete price wise.

30 years ago young farmers wanted to take over the farms from their fathers, however, today most are opting for different careers well away from primary production. These regulations will only be a further deterrent to young people.

City dwellers often drive the decision making of political representatives because of their population base and have no idea of the returns to farmers at the farm gate nor are they aware of the long hours and tough conditions farmers work under to produce the food for their tables.

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Summary

This submission has been put together from reading your Overview and commenting on its contents with the knowledge of *grassroots* constituent concerns. The Kennedy Electorate is rural and remote with industries that have been de-regulated and facing hard economic times. The *man on the land* feels he is being forced off his land through government regulations and we need to gain back the confidence of these hard working people. We can't do this by further eroding "property rights". Are native vegetation and biodiversity regulatory regimes a further step in closing down the farming sector? Are we going to import all of our food into Australia? These are the concerns of constituents and we relay this to you in our *down to earth* comments and we hope that you will give them some consideration in your final deliberations. It is hoped that these further restrictions on clearing land is not all about politics rather than the overall economic welfare of the community and those landholders on leasehold and freehold land who contribute so much to Australia as a whole.

**Office of Hon Bob KATTER MP
Federal Member for Kennedy**

21 January 2004