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Mildura

Submission to the Native Vegetation Act & Regulations Review 2012

With particular reference to Property Vegetation Plans

Author's background: Graduated as a forester in 1966, worked in forest management for the Forestry Commission of NSW from 1966 – 88, then in forest management in private enterprise from 1989 – 2009. I was a member of the original working group preparing the Private Native Forestry Codes of Practice and advise the subsequent committee on river red gum silviculture.

Property Vegetation Plans: Part 4 of the Act and Parts 3 & 5 of the Regulations.

For some time lessees in the Western Division of NSW have been endeavouring to have the management of River Red Gum forests on their leases brought up to a suitable standard. Through the negotiations it has become apparent there is a real need to include an additional “Part” in the Regulations.

Proposal for a new Part in the Regulations for “Leasehold Property Vegetation Plans”.

Currently Forests NSW are responsible for the Crown-forest asset on leasehold lands. However they are constrained by various issues. In recent years their role has been to harvest within constraints imposed by NPWS on their selective logging based on silvicultural principles. The selective logging where allowed has only removed currently merchantable trees excluding those deemed capable of improved growth through to a future harvest.

Thorough silviculture has only been practiced in a few small patches of forest when contract money was available to pay for the treatment. The revenue recovered by the salvage of firewood from the silvicultural treatment has never been regarded as available to offset the cost of additional treatment.

A sample of treatment I carried out on private property during severe drought conditions about 10 years ago, yielded enough small logs to pay for the treatment, and enough firewood to have paid for the treatment four times over. This was subsequently inspected by senior personnel of the Private Native Forestry Section of DECCW and accepted as complying with the Code of Practice for River Red Gum that came into force some years after the treatment.

This private property treatment was done at a time when trees were dying in their thousands in un-thinned forests. Despite no rain or flooding, the trees retained in this treated forest were displaying healthier crowns due to the reduced competition. The forest now has an improved understory of young trees, considerably more plant diversity, as well as improved cattle grazing.

The lessees' share of royalties from Forests NSW harvesting and firewood salvage are no incentive for a lessee to regard the forested sections of a lease as little more than an impediment. Forests NSW come in remove the merchantable trees and retain numerous trees with no future merchantable potential or genuine habitat value. The forests are so overstocked that Forests NSW have estimated their future growth rate at 0.045cubic metres/hectare/annum. In their State Forests they expect about 1.0cubic metres/hectare/annum some twenty two times better and even there the silvicultural treatment is well below a desired optimum.

The purpose of a Leasehold Property Vegetation Plan is to allow and encourage lessees to undertake the silvicultural treatment that FNSW has not done, and is not doing, to improve the health and vigour of forests on leasehold land.

My proposal is that a lessee would go to Forests NSW to obtain the Leasehold PVP much the same as a private landholder goes to the PNF Division of the EPA today. The PVP would be granted on the same understanding that any forestry activity would comply with the relevant Private Native Forestry Code of Practice.

The forest treatment under the Leasehold PVP would be supervised by FNSW rather than the EPA's PNF personnel. The reason for this being, that FNSW have the responsibility for administering, or at least overseeing, the sale of forest products recovered from the treatment. The royalty sharing arrangements would be satisfactory to ensure that the lessee would see the arrangement as a profitable exercise.

The intended outcome:

1. Any treatment would comply with the "Code of Practice" and thus comply with the "maintain or improve" expectation of the Native Vegetation Act.
2. These forests could be maintained in a healthier and more biodiverse condition than they are being subjected to at present.
3. Lessees would have the incentive to develop a more proprietary interest in the well-being of the forested sections of their leases.
4. Forests NSW and the NSW Treasury would ultimately benefit from the improved growth rates yielding better volumes of better quality timber from future harvests.
5. The lessees would also benefit from grazing as the forests generally would be more open encouraging improved pasture growth on the forest floor.
6. Lessees would not be subjected to the loss of grazing during the interim between when FNSW harvest logs leaving tree heads and logging residues cluttering valuable grazing land and rendering noxious weed control impossible and mustering/stock management extremely difficult.
7. It would also overcome the current stupid situation whereby the lessee can dispose of logging residues by burning but cannot sell any product without a forestry license.
8. Silviculture could be practiced on Leasehold land under a far more practical set of circumstances by complying with the PNF Codes of Practice than FNSW is subjected to otherwise!

I most strongly urge you to take this proposal seriously, and act on it.

Yours faithfully

Victor. I.P. Eddy

22nd August 2012