

NATIVE VEGETATION REGULATION REVIEW

I own and manage a beef cattle property at [REDACTED] in the Northern Tablelands. It is undulating country with a mosaic landscape, including improved pastures, uncultivated open areas, and areas of native trees, both singularly and collectively. My family has been maintaining and developing this country to maximise its potential since the 1930's and I had hoped that future generations would be able to continue this work.

Over the years there have been a range of production phases. It has, and still is, producing timber, it has been a dairy farm producing butter fat for export, potatoes were grown in the 1940's for the war effort and for domestic consumption for many years following, and currently it is producing premium cattle for the domestic and export beef markets.

Management is a continuous challenge. Maintaining a weed-free environment, a high level of ground cover, and good soil health cost me hugely in time, effort and money each year. However, like most farmers, I do this because I am motivated to improve the land and what it produces. My expenditure in these ways also contributes to employment and the local economy.



The first area of ground being cleared for cultivation in the 1930's.



Nearby site today showing the beneficial development that has taken place.

The current laws remove flexibility in management. They limit and impede further development. Regrowth over years is overrunning what was once productive country. As I am now unable to clear it, my potential income is decreasing. Weeds become much more difficult, and eventually impossible, to control on regrowth areas, but I am legally obliged by other authorities to do so.

Propagation of selected regrowth for commercial timber has always been an integral part of the overall economy of this property as a farming unit. Trees have been selectively harvested several times and younger trees propagated in their place, continuing the cycle. Management of our timber is like the third leg of a three-legged stool. It has been a prop in times of drought or market downturns, such as the cattle crash in the 1970's. I can no longer manage my timber and native pasture at my discretion. If I am now given permission to harvest, all dead timber and harvesting trash have to remain on the ground, making the area useless and unsafe for grazing, and it is tied up unable to be harvested again. My productive area, and therefore my income, would be reduced even further and I then incur even greater expense in extremely difficult endeavours keeping the area clear of noxious weeds and feral animals. Taking over the management of our timber resources and control of the land thereafter is removing the right to our asset and is a moral injustice. It becomes a liability not an asset. Private land ownership, including what grows on it, must be upheld and respected.



Showing undesirable regrowth up to 3 years old, progressively spreading over pasture and reducing grazing areas.

Farmers need to have flexibility in change of land use. No-one knows what options may become available next month or in 10 years' time. Often the "window of opportunity" is very short – sudden seasonal changes or market prices changing unexpectedly. We cannot continually wait unknown times for the "red tape".

How are we going to get the next generation to see agriculture as a rewarding and worthwhile future? After seeing my frustrations, why would my son want to be burdened with land ownership? Where can he see the certainty and security for his future? Only a small proportion of Australia's land mass is suitable for agricultural production. We keep hearing about global food security and increasing world population. Surely we should be encouraged to produce as much and as well as we can, not be thwarted and impeded at every turn.

Every farm is different and every farm is affected in some negative way by these regulations. All landholders have lost their rights. They paid for the land, then in many cases paid more to have it converted to freehold. They have lost the right to manage their timber and pastures, to change enterprise and have no certainty. Ability to make a living is restricted.

I am prevented from subdividing and selling off the areas I cannot use, but am still required to control weeds, feral animals and fire, and pay rates on land which cannot produce any income. Having had normal property rights removed has reduced the value of the overall farm considerably.

The regulations are unfair and unbalanced. If you have minimal native vegetation you have no problems. The more native vegetation you have retained the more you are compelled to retain and care for.

For the last seventeen years my farming business has been severely impacted by native vegetation laws and associated regulations. They have impacted on my productivity and my family and caused much anxiety and uncertainty for us. Some farmers have given up and left the land, others I know have serious mental health problems.

Some proposed changes to regulations were made to sound plausible at the consultation meeting I attended, but will be ineffective in the longer term and do not solve the overall problem, which is the Act.

The fact that the government is intent on keeping the Act with just some minor adjustments, has caused hostility and knee-jerk reactions from frustrated farmers, who cannot believe they are still not being listened to after seventeen years.

The current proposals make minor changes only and do not solve the problems. They are written by bureaucrats with the same intent, based on the same flawed ideology, which has led to seventeen years of bad unbalanced policy in this area.

The Act cannot be fixed by changing the regulations now in place.

The regulations were instigated by the previous government based on an ideology having no regard for practicality, rural experience or need. They pushed the perception that agricultural development throughout NSW was a disaster. In fact, contrary to this, the agricultural sector has brought immeasurable continuing economic and social benefits to the whole cross-section of the community. The majority of farmers have included care for the environment among their normal activities.

It does not take into account the social or economic benefits of any proposed development. There is an Environmental Outcomes Assessment Methodology - where are the social and economic outcome methodologies? There is no balance or harmony.

The red tape, PVPs, definition of broadscale clearing and the lengthy time delays are completely unacceptable to the farming community.

THE ACT MUST BE REPEALED and the people released from bondage.

We need a new balanced approach to land management, which includes native vegetation, but aims to achieve positive economic, social and environmental outcomes. Like all farmers in my area, I have always retained trees for shade and shelter, wildlife corridors, habitat trees and trees with aesthetic values, and have been doing so long before Landcare, Catchment Management Committees or SEPP 46.

Guidelines for local regions are needed – not legalistic regulations. The landholders must have "ownership" of the guidelines. The guidelines need to come from the "grassroots" up, not from the top down. There needs to be access to advice and support from a variety of agencies - the Department of Primary Industry, the Soil Conservation Service, Landcare, Catchment Management Authorities and Weeds County Councils.

While new guidelines are being drawn up, the current regulations need to be changed to allow farmers to conduct a range of low impact clearing activities without approvals so they are not left in limbo for an indefinite period of time. Cropping rotations in native pasture should be allowed.

The current "dobbing in" by anonymous insidious persons, leading in every instance to an investigation and threat of prosecution MUST be eliminated immediately. This is very unAustralian and it is perverse to have Government departments policing their regulations by this method. The lack of professionalism this shows is appalling.

In recent years the previous NSW government, using our taxpayer dollars, added millions more hectares to the state's conservation areas to provide for biodiversity and the protection of native species. Farmers are paying for the environment again because of these regulations. The government should concentrate their efforts on these huge areas and leave our private property alone.

THE REPEAL OF THE ACT is the first step in gaining everyone's support to set up a procedure so that regional guidelines "owned" and developed by landholders can proceed. These guidelines must address economic, social and environmental outcomes so that a balance can be achieved and development continues. Then perhaps we might be able to sleep at night and then next day, in the Minister's words, "get on with the business of producing food and fibre for NSW, Australia and overseas."



These photos are an example of what was and what is now on one farm. The economic benefits from development from all farms across NSW are immeasurable. Any further obstruction to development would be irresponsible.

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