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**THE OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENT & HERITAGE
SYDNEY SOUTH NSW**

Review of the Native Vegetation Regulation

Firstly I wish to thank Royce, John and Linda for giving their time to grant environmentalists an opportunity to discuss the Native Vegetation Regulation Review in a more comfortable atmosphere than the intimidatory forums offered to the general community. While this separate meeting still involved some quite aggressive opinions and questions, I believe they were generated solely by concern for the health and future of the Australian environment. Also the CMA staff surely could not fail to recognise the depth and quality of understanding of our natural environment, as well as total lack of any NIMBY agendas by the participants on the day.

I believe the Minister should now weigh this genuine concern against the inflexible, arrogant failure by the majority of prior forum participants to understand the concept of temporary stewardship of land, which they cannot truly own, any more than they can own the sky, the oceans or the air we breathe. Also the way in which these landowners intend to use the land during their temporary occupancy, the likely outcomes of this and how their activities might affect neighbours and catchment residents must be carefully considered. I believe a fair analogy is that a man might own a dog, but laws give the dog some protection from being beaten to death, we don't merely trust the owner not to do it. The same protective prescriptions must apply to land and the full biomass that keeps our ecosystems healthy and functioning, often with proven financial benefits to landholders who apply careful management practices. In this case the current native vegetation protective legislation should be strengthened, not weakened in response to threats and abusive behaviour as is now proposed

In this response I do not intend to address piecemeal the various and numerous ways in which the regulation is proposed to be slackened. Instead I simply remind the Minister that the Native Vegetation Act was first developed in response to global concerns raised at Kyoto as to why Australian forests were being cleared at an unsustainable rate. Despite the Act, however, our State of Environment reports have regularly demonstrated a continued decline in health and diversity of our natural environment through unchecked human activities.

It will be incomprehensible, therefore, if the Minister now approves this watered down version of the Native Vegetation Regulation, and so encourages continued environmental degradation instead of slowing and reversing the trend, which is the expectation of the majority of New South Wales Australians

I also wish to make the following points –

- If the proposed weakening of the Native Vegetation Regulation is approved, this will automatically raise problems of tax benefits for clearing the land, so taking us straight back to the problematic 1950-60s in which massive areas of forest were cleared with government assistance to the landholder. If this happens again, as will almost definitely be the case, we will see another major increase in land clearing
- In areas where to clear an area of natural vegetation has not previously been seen as financially worthwhile, if that vegetation is now proposed to be cleared the landowner should present a detailed budget and assessment to show exactly how that clearing will generate income, even to the removal of a single old-growth tree in an otherwise cleared paddock.
- Further unchecked clearing in many cases will not be in line with the Koala Recovery Plan, will add to the current serious decline in koala numbers, and will impact other threatened species, alter waterways and impact other residents within a catchment. Such negative impacts will be far more serious if any clearing approved and undertaken fails to generate the anticipated increased income to the landholder.
- If this watered down version of the Regulation is adopted, then any landowner who undertakes further clearing to make money from his or her property should be deemed to be perfectly capable of correctly managing that property as a business. As a business person, the landholder will manage his or her property with a view to future extreme weather events and acts of nature, fires, floods and droughts, which are normal in the Australian environment. In this regard landowners clearing for profit should waive all future claims for financial compensation and government assistance when such adverse events occur.

I can only underline my disappointment that such a drastic weakening of the very important native vegetation regulation should even be considered at this point in time, when the values of retaining and improving natural habitats and diversity are considerably clearer and understood by more people globally than ever before in human times.

I hope these comments are useful in helping towards a constructive decision

Yours sincerely

Patricia Edwards

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