



**To the Productivity Commission  
Submission:  
Inquiry into the Impacts of Native Vegetation & Biodiversity Regulations**

Great advances in public awareness have been made in relation to a variety of environmental issues. West Wimmera Shire Council was given the chance to provide input to the Wimmera Regional Native Vegetation Plan, and was happy to participate. Council was pleased to support the document which resulted from this consultation.

We are all aware of the importance of native vegetation and the need for its retention. However, a public need, a community gain, should be paid for by the whole community and not by a single sector. Currently, it is the farming sector which is bearing the financial burden associated with the Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Regulations.

Costs to primary producers include:

- loss of income through development restrictions
- plant back of native vegetation
- fencing native vegetation areas

West Wimmera Shire is in a unique position with regard to the Native Vegetation Regulations. While heavily reliant on primary production, the Shire has retained a great deal of its native vegetation. Many areas of Victoria, having carried out large-scale clearing in earlier times, do not have a native vegetation “problem”. Consideration should be given to the provision of equitable outcomes across the state. West Wimmera is paying a price for its past restraint. Progress which requires vegetation removal is restricted, thereby affecting the ability of our farmers to become and remain economically sustainable in a time of fluctuating commodity prices. Farmers need to be ready to take advantage of the markets – demand must influence production. West Wimmera therefore requires an increase in the areas available for broad acre and irrigation cropping - expanses of tree free farming land.

Native vegetation retention often becomes an unnecessarily contentious issue for primary producers. Permits are required, sourced from local government, a level of government which is properly sympathetic to its ratepayers. In the end, it is up to local government to make the decisions on permit applications. However, problems arise when referral bodies take on more authority than their charters warrant, when they attempt to regulate where they are entitled only to advise. Also, farmers should be able to rely on consistency in permit application outcomes - this consistency is too frequently lacking in referral authority advice and requirements.

These dilemmas are not insurmountable – there are solutions. The development of whole farm environmental plans with credit systems would enable both sustainable farming practices and an increase in native vegetation plantations. A farmer who plants native vegetation under a credit system would gain credits which could be used when he needs to remove vegetation at a later date. The native trees in our paddocks are ageing, with no plans for their replacement. The removal of these trees would increase the available range of farming practices – a farmer using the credit system would be able to remove these trees, having previously planted comparable credit native vegetation.

I request that the Inquiry take these concerns and ideas into account.

Thank you for the opportunity of making this submission.

**Councillor Ron Hawkins**  
**West Wimmera Shire Council**