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450 Kobyboyn Road  
Seymour VIC 3660

Productivity Commission  
Native Vegetation Inquiry  
LB2 Collins Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000

I have been interested in native vegetation management for 25 years, since I first became aware that big old trees were disappearing from our local landscape. As a foundation member of the Seymour and District Environment Group, I organised and participated in the survey our roadsides to establish their conservation values, in the view of formulating a working roadside management plan. Twenty-five years later, the countryside has changed, with large properties now in the minority, and rural blocks from 2-50HA more the norm. This has led to fragmentation of the valuable native road reserves, the planting of agapanthus, the clearing of understorey.

Despite a failure at a local government level to manage the road reserves for their conservation values, the landscape as a whole has seen a huge increase in the amount of regeneration. Old time residents say that 70 years ago it was a big event to see a koala or even a kangaroo. Now it could be said that they were in plague proportions in some areas.

It is generally perceived that the advent of "blockies" has been a major contributing factor to this increase in native vegetation. Other factors also are significant. Members of the Seymour Environment Group went on to found the Whitehead's Creek Landcare Group, which has been active in working as a community to establish trees on bald hills, establish wildlife corridors and the like. Salinity, erosion and pest plants and animals were always a major focus of activity. These programmes, when they included restoration of vegetation, had biodiversity benefits. However some programmes such as the Rabbit Buster programme saw the removal of all the bracken in places where it was the last vestige of habitat for small birds. Also the weeds programmes had unforeseen impact on biodiversity in that blackberries and gorse in some areas were in fact protecting small native animals from introduced predators. Removal of these weeds without prior restoration of suitable native habitat meant local extinctions. (See Tim Low's book "The new Nature" for examples.)

The Landcare movement has expanded across the Nation, and conservation issues have been mainstreamed. Most levels of government have active environmental programmes, environmental officers, and a variety of regulations and incentives aimed at improving environmental management.

In spite of all this the degradation continues, and Dr Denis Saunders (CSIRO) has estimated that many of our small bird species will be extinct in 50 years,

and the remainder will be declining. This is a sorry legacy for our grandchildren. Many family farmers understand instinctively the essence of intergenerational equity without the big name. They have an historic commitment to the land and want to pass it on to their sons and daughters as a going concern. Others have got away with bad practices thus far, and are stubbornly resistant to change. There is a perceptible level of distrust of government initiatives. Large corporations can play their part in achieving environmental successes, eg Banrock Station wines. AMP has recently come out saying it will no longer be clearing in its Qld properties.

It is a fact that if left to their own devices, most people will act in their own immediate self-interest. This may not always equate with the best long-term outcomes for the environment we all depend on. The tyranny of these thousands of small decisions is what has got us to where we are today.

It seems we must go forward, for to go backwards now would be unthinkable. In 20 years huge changes have been wrought in the way people think about their environment. However not enough is actually being done to reverse the degradation of our land and waterways. Biodiversity issues are too often given the back seat, or expected to piggy back on other programmes, eg salinity or erosion mitigation. However this has led to a situation where in the local press today, irrigators are equating a "healthy" river as one with a low salt count, not one with a natural healthy ecosystem intact.

The Australian Conservation Foundation and the NFF have shown the way by suggesting an environmental levy to raise the necessary money to really address the problems. This is a sensible approach, likely to be approved of by the community.

As the manager, with my husband, of a small block (90acres) and a member of the Landcare community, I know that one of the major impediments to restoration or retention of native vegetation is the cost of fencing. While this is subsidised, it is still a large cost to those who wish to do it over a large area. Of course in Queensland or NSW the areas are much bigger, and so the cost is proportionately much higher. In Victoria where properties are smaller, assistance with fencing and property tax rebates (10% in our Shire of Mitchell) are likely to be enough to get some change of behaviour. Fencing out of remnants is not happening enough or on bigger enough area, though these remnants provide only small amounts of forage for farm animals.

While awareness of the need to preserve and restore native vegetation is considerably wider in the community than in the past, there is a rising tide of opposition from those who do not fully understand the issues, who are worried about fire or pest animals, or who are merely suspicious of governments in general. There is a need for constant education and information on a wider scale than at present, more extension officers and coordinators if we are to see the kind of landscape scale improvements that are necessary.

I would now like to comment on a few of the issues you raise in your paper.

2.1 (i) While this inquiry purports to be concerned with positive as well as negative impacts on landowners and communities, there seem to be an underlying assumption that the impacts are largely negative. Yet in my immediate neighbourhood I know of several people who are making a very good living collecting local seed, growing native plants and selling them to private people and public departments for broad scale revegetation works. Others are employed by them and are also employed in the actual planting.

Also I have anecdotal evidence that properties with areas of native vegetation, old trees or plantation areas are more valuable in terms of their real estate value. (Verbal communication, Barry O'Sullivan, land owner and developer) and also See Land for Wildlife News, (4) 2, p12.

Land clearing to the South of Broadford has seen major conflict between neighbours. Neighbours object to seeing their landscape degraded by the removal of native vegetation on adjoining properties. People buy up bush blocks without knowing they are likely to be restricted in clearing the vegetation for what they might see as a legitimate use. People new to the country do not value the native vegetation, may wish to replace it with introduced species such as pines or crops such as grapes. Local government and indeed government departments may wish to chose winners and losers, to say what constitutes a legitimate use of rural land. However they are not likely to be successful in this endeavour.

In times of declining rainfall, as witnessed over the past 25 years and of climate change it may be impossible to pre- determine what the rural industries of the future might be. (Desert areas such as the Sahara were once covered in forest as recently as 2,000 years ago. I doubt that anyone 25 years ago would have predicted that Broome would become a major tourism and retirement centre.)

Therefore governments should recognise the basic principles on the reasons for preservation of native vegetation and act to advance those principles, but should not try to influence winners and losers in rural enterprise evolution.

Negative impacts on landowners. These are mainly financial as the bigger the area protected, the larger the cost of fencing.

Restrictions to clearing. Growing up in Mt Isa I travelled back and forward to Brisbane by plane to attend school. Recently flying over the same route I was horrified to look out of the window and see nothing but wind rowed trees from horizon to horizon. In the future the community will no doubt be asked to pick up the cost of the remedial action that will required to reverse the damage being done- done in full light of knowledge about the impacts in the wheatbelt of western Australia and in the Southern States. It is clear that some form of regulation is necessary to prevent this kind of abuse of the ecosystem.

In some cases the land was not cleared previously because it was marginal at best. The community should not be expected to prop up marginal operations. In other cases there has been massive regeneration of “woody weeds” probably due to over grazing, and this is creating another set of problems, wind erosion springs to mind. This needs to be assessed on a case by case basis, and the needs to be adequate staffing to make such assessment feasible.

Positive impacts. The positive impacts are an improved ecosystem, increase in property values, landscape values, retention of small birds for beauty, insect eating etc. Farmers are not insensitive to aesthetic and ethical values, in spite of what some who claim to represent them, may think. Yet, native vegetation retention for biodiversity reasons is perhaps not stressed enough. I have spoken to local farmers who have been delighted by the return of small birds to their properties following plantations for soil conservation and woodlot purposes.

Impact on property values. I have already mentioned the fact that property values increase where there is native vegetation retained. Sparse bare paddocks are much harder to sell than treed blocks.

Administrative costs. In general landowners find the maze of regulations and changing faces in government departments hard to negotiate. There needs to be a wider campaign to motivate people so that it is not always the “converted” that are making all the necessary changes to management. Problems associated with excessive land clearing in the past and currently must be addressed.

Government assistance. Assistance is available to fence out corridors, creeks etc, Local Government (Mitchell Shire) gives a 10% rate rebate for environmental works including retention of native vegetation. On larger properties the incentives may not be enough to achieve the kind of changes necessary.

Impacts on regional communities. In the past banks have encouraged landowners to borrow massively to clear the land, especially in Queensland. This has led to well documented hardship, as well as over clearing.

On a positive note, planting of revegetation areas has led to many new job opportunities in seed collection, growing of tube stock and then the planting and maintenance that follows.

Efficiency and effectiveness of environmental regimes. I will not attempt to go over all the real environmental benefits that the regulatory regimes seek to promote. Suffice is to say I endorse that these benefits are needed. Indeed, much more needs to be accomplished if we are not to pass on an impoverished world to our grandchildren. I do not believe that we have the right to do this, regardless of any perceived impacts on present land managers. In a previous study you have mentioned a “Duty of Care”, and I do not believe that that concept has gained wide enough currency.

Landowners have to take responsibility for their own actions. Issues such as vermin control and bush fire danger are sometimes cited as reasons not to retain native vegetation. These are not valid. It has not been suggested that management should cease once an area is protected. Native vegetation clearing controls in Victoria are patchily enforced at best. Generally environmental outcomes are not monitored and a set of indicators needs to be publicised so that land owners can evaluate the success or failure of their environmental works. This would vary as to the purpose of the revegetation work. Usually there is not enough money to do the required amount of work. Monitoring drops off the end of the equation. There is some monitoring by the local Council (Mitchell) and by DPI staff. This probably varies from region to region.

The Regulation regime is essential as otherwise recalcitrant farmers and landowners can cause their neighbours a lot of grief, as well as setting the whole community back in its desire to see good environmental outcomes for the future.

Potential social and economic impacts. In these days of triple bottom line accounting, the need to balance social and economic values is well understood at the Catchment Management Authority level. However how to weight these three areas in any decision needs to be better defined. Again authorities should not attempt to pick winners and losers, but act to preserve the health of the ecosystem. In the end, the ecosystem has to be sustainable so that choices can be made in the future on the basis of sound environmental capital.

Sustainable farming. Sustainable farming does not mean you can go on mining the land and water forever. It means that the farming is based on an ecologically sustainable management of the natural environment. These principles were ironed out during the ESD consultation process ten years ago.

How could the regimes be improved. More money would help with education, at schools, Landcare groups, local councils and in the media. Enforcement and monitoring needs to be improved, and more research is needed into the possible impacts of failing to act, here and now. People need to be motivated to get them to act, and not just the dedicated few.

Landowners have a duty of care for the environment they depend on. They have a duty to pass the land on in as good or better condition than they received it. While this is well understood by some, others have for too long allowed expediency to colour their actions. In some cases, economic necessity has meant that they have been unable to accomplish what they would like in the area of conservation of native vegetation. The bigger the area preserved, the greater should be the incentive at a government level. Priority areas need to be worked out, but all remaining native vegetation is of value. More publicity as to the economic benefits of preserving native vegetation needs to be disseminated in the community. I do not favour transferable clearing rights. Australia could be said to be over cleared

already. The cost effectiveness of what has been done to date needs to be examined.

Yours sincerely,

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