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Mallee Planting to Drought Proof the Wheatbelt

I am writing to outline a proposal that has enormous potential to reduce the burden experienced by farmers in the Wheatbelt as a consequence of extended drought events and unpredictable weather patterns. It is well known that planting mallees has become a successful landcare strategy to ameliorate land degradation and produce widespread biodiversity benefits. There are already 1000 growers throughout the Wheatbelt who have established quite extensive estates of integrated mallee plantations as "alleys" across their cropping paddocks. Claims of reduced water table levels have been backed by recent research which explains more fully the water pumping ability of the mallees and their ability to interrupt underground water movement, thereby reducing the accumulation of water (and salt) in low lying areas.

Most of the farmers involved with mallee have planted with the expectation of a return from the harvesting of the trees for biomass to be used in electricity generation and production of biofuels. A number (24) have entered into an agreement with Kansai Electric who have leased their land for biosequestration activity.

Projections by DEC (attachment 1) and RIRDC (attachment 2) indicate that a return similar to traditional cropping is potentially achievable, particularly where there is a clear carbon price signal.

Programs to support the widespread growing of mallee have been in place in the past via a profit a pendre scheme instigated by CALM (DEC) some years ago and significant resources have been deployed to trial a modest 1MW IWP electricity generation and activated carbon plant at Narrogin. While there is no viable industry based on mallee biomass, the dynamics of the industry are well understood and appreciated.

We believe that this nascent industry has significant regional development benefits in both generating enterprise but also enhancing community well being and connection. At a suitable scale, this mallee industry is expected to become a very significant contributor to the development of sustainable industries in the Wheatbelt without impacting on the cropping programs in both good and bad years.

However experience and research has shown that mallees planted in poor years can be very successful and the summer rains are particularly beneficial. This hardy plant is a proven survivor and its remarkable coppicing ability and below ground aggregation (the bulbous tuber) enables it to be a long term contributor to on-farm income.

It with these attributes in mind that we (the OMA) have sought to bring together the need to address community and landcare issues, the potential role of farmers to contribute to their own sustainability and financial independence and the possibility of utilising available government funds in a more productive way. As a farmer myself in an area declared "exceptional circumstances" in the current drought, I am aware of the potential to move funds from "Drought Relief" or emergency support to productive outcomes.

If all EC farms in North Eastern Wheatbelt planted ten percent of their farms to this project (an area of one hundred thousand hectares) this would result in ten thousand hectares planted to Oil Mallees.

To facilitate this project the Government (State and Federal) could pay around \$2000 per hectare to the farmer to purchase and plant the trees and then contract to manage the plantings in perpetuity. The area planted to trees would be registered on the title of the property.

Once this has been achieved the farmer then has the potential to earn an income from a share of the one of a number of avenues;

- Carbon credits (below ground carbon store)
- Bio energy (Harvest for energy needs IWP plant)
- Processing eucalyptus oil.
- Activated carbon.
- Charcoal production

There is no doubt the project will improve the productivity of arable land and build on the significant commitment to mallees by a number of farmers. All farmers will benefit because the industry needs a large scale approach to enable profitable and continuous harvesting.

The proposition at this stage is that the North Eastern Wheatbelt be targeted as a pilot for other regions and for monitoring as a future strategy for speedy implementation in future cases of extended drought.

The cost of planting is based on the long experience of the Oil Mallee Company and others who have undertaken extensive reintroduction of mallee on a large scale in the region. The cost incorporates a payment to the farmer for the effort of planting which would aim to approximate the available drought relief funding.

The Oil Mallee Association of Western Australia is strongly backing this proposal. I have also spoken to Trees Midwest and to many North Eastern wheatbelt farmers from Kalannie to Yuna and I have their enthusiastic support.

I would appreciate the opportunity to present this proposal to you and seek your support for an approach to the Commonwealth to enable a coordinated response to the project.

Yours sincerely,



Mike Kerkmans
President
The Oil Mallee Association of Western Australia Inc

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