

Case Study: Impact of native vegetation clearing controls on a particular King Island farmer

The farm in question is a family owned and managed property of some 1000 hectares in northern King Island, producing beef cattle and sheep. Cattle are sold to the King Island abattoir and to (mostly Victorian) feedlots. Final meat product is sold into the Australian domestic market and exported, mainly to Japan and the United States. Sheep are managed to produce fat lambs for domestic sale in Australia and export to the United States, and fine wool (18 - 20 micron) for export to Europe and China.

The farmer started with a family owned property of about 250 hectares in 1988 and added to it by land purchase till the farm reached its present size in 1998. Motivation for the growth was a need to increase scale of production to a point where it would sustain a profitable business in today's competitive agricultural environment. Added land was a mixture of productive pasture, rough grazing (largely run down pasture) and uncleared land (native vegetation).

The management objective has been to take farm turnover from approximately \$200 000 pa to about \$500 000 pa. This is to be done by improving the quality and management of stock, improving the productivity of pasture on cleared land (in particular upgrading rough grazing land) and adding to area under pasture (by clearing native vegetation)

Before the farmer commenced land improvement on the 1000 hectares, some 400 ha of it was improved pasture, 300 ha was rough grazing and 300 ha still carried native vegetation. The development plan envisages a final scenario of about 800 ha improved pasture and 200 ha kept as native vegetation. Land will be maintained under native vegetation to provide habitat for native fauna (including habitat for birds which will assist with control of insect and grub populations which might otherwise be a problem), manage local salinity risk and provide shelter for stock.

To the extent that the enterprise is prevented from undertaking planned development, it will be prevented from growing, and to the extent it is prevented from growing its future viability will be jeopardised.

The farmer is currently unable to clear more than a minimum of native vegetation and improve more than a minimum of rough grazing areas on his property. This results from State regulations which were introduced in early 2002 and which strictly limit clearance of the principal native forest type on the property (a Melaleuca Scrub) whether in actual or "potential" (ie "could regenerate") form. Clarification of what the enterprise actually can do is impeded by a regulatory process which requires field inspection of sites by specialists, a relative scarcity of such specialists and the cost of arranging specialist visits to what is a relatively remote part of Tasmania. All of this adds problems and cost to a business enterprise which has to compete on international terms.

Important issues are:

- a lack of discrimination in the legislation between native vegetation in good condition and that in poor condition, with a focus on protecting the former;
- the extent of the vegetation type in question, which remains common on King Island, and the need for such tight clearance restrictions as a result;
- the fact that retained vegetation will suffer a loss of intrinsic values without active management (ie prevention of clearance will not *per se* result in effective protection of the values the regulations seek to protect).