

Initial submission to the public inquiry on Impacts of Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Regulations

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The following letter of mine was published in *The Advocate* newspaper on Saturday, 28 June 2003:

Greg Hall (Politically Speaking, Adv., Jun. 10) speaks for farmers when he says they need compensation for conservation on private land. The community is benefiting from farmer restraint, and the community should pay.

Leaving aside the question of whether farmers see themselves as part of this community or not, let's take a closer look at the broader costs to the community of farming on the North-West Coast.

To start with, thousands of tonnes of topsoil are washed from cropland along the Coast every year. This loss of soil is a massive community cost, and it will take hundreds of human generations to be repaid.

Running water may once have been a community resource, but it's mainly a private one now. A majority of streams on the North-West Coast have been dammed. Streams flowing through farms are refuse drains for dairy effluent, fertilisers and poisons. Streamside clearing and paddock run-off ensure that channels erode rapidly and that turbidity levels remain high.

We now hear calls from farmers who want to take even more water from publicly owned rivers, especially in dry seasons when river levels are low.

In the eyes of these irrigation farmers, running water is no benefit to the community at all. If it isn't used on a farm it's wasted.

Smoke from forestry burn-offs creates discomfort for some Coastal residents each autumn, but far more people suffer from grass-pollen allergy all through the spring and summer. The sufferers pay a large cost in medication, and the farmer-polluters pay them no compensation whatsoever.

Apart from the Gunns Plains area and some smaller patches like it, the best agricultural lands on the North-West Coast were entirely covered in tall native forest less than 150 years ago. Farmers leveled and burned that forest, methodically removing every native plant and animal and replacing them with exotics. On many of the non-forested flats, natural wetland communities were drained out of existence.

On a much smaller scale, foresters now cut and replace remnants of native forest, and are constantly attacked for threatening natural assets seen as belonging to the wider community. It would be nice to think that farmers have stopped their clear-and-don't-replace practices on private land, but they haven't, and they won't till tough land-clearing laws are passed and enforced.

When that happens no doubt Mr Hall will be asking the community, on behalf of farmers, to compensate would-be land clearers for lost income. On behalf of the community, can I ask Mr Hall when farmers will be compensating the rest of us for 150 years of lost topsoil, lost water and air quality, and lost biodiversity and natural landscapes?

Reaction to that letter has been interesting. No one who have spoken to me about it has questioned my account of the environmental costs of agriculture. It would be hard to do so; the facts are clear and the community has been reminded of them in numerous government and government-sponsored reports. A CSIRO staffer recently summarised the agriculture/environment trade-off for the country as a whole:

Australian agriculture has been very successful for over 200 years, and has produced substantial wealth to support development of the nation. However, this wealth has been

generated at a significant environmental cost, and evidence of depletion and degradation of our natural resources is now widespread.

Margaret Bryant, quoted in:
 Mary E. White
Earth Alive! From Microbes to Living Planet
 Sydney: Rosenberg (2003); p. 101

What has surprised some people is that I raised the trade-off issue in the context of what is widely seen as a legal matter. Greg Hall, a Tasmanian parliamentarian, spoke of 'basic property rights' in the *Advocate* opinion column I referred to in my letter, and it has long been a community perception that landowners should be allowed to do what they like on their own property. If not, in what sense is it 'their' land?

However, it was Mr Hall's stand on costs, not rights, that inspired my letter. He wrote: '*...I believe that is unreasonable to expect private landowners to fund all costs needed to protect items highly valued by the public by themselves.*'

The costs to which Mr Hall refers, which are largely opportunity costs (foregone income), cannot be seen in isolation from all other community costs associated with agriculture. There is a broader balance sheet to be considered here, and I am not convinced that the community as a whole owes the farming sector anything. What is unreasonable is to expect the community to ignore community costs incurred by private landowners.

One farmer I know has argued with me on this point. He asks, '*Where does your food come from? Where does your clothing come from?*' His point is that if I want these things, I have to accept a certain level of environmental degradation.

There are two serious flaws in this argument. The first is that the level of degradation I see is the one attributable to my demand for food and clothing. It isn't. Only a small proportion of Tasmanian (and Australian) agricultural production is directed to domestic consumption. The great bulk of agricultural production is exported. Correspondingly, the great bulk of land and water degradation is attributable to agricultural production for export. I may demand locally sourced food and fibre, but I don't demand that production surplus to domestic needs be exported, at a huge cost to my local environment.

The second flaw is the implication that the community cost of farming is simply the loss of soil, water quality, etc. Again, it isn't. The community *pays* for the food and fibre produced by farmers. Farm goods aren't free, they come with price tags in the shops. The community also pays in numerous ways towards the support of domestic agricultural production. Whether these payments are called price support or drought relief or industry restructuring grants or subsidies is irrelevant. The payments are massive and they sit on the debit side of the farmer/community balance sheet.

Agriculture costs the community in three ways: environmental degradation, publicly funded support programs for farmers and market prices for agricultural goods. I already pay heavily so that farmers can farm. It is outrageous to be asked to pay so that farmers *don't* farm.