

THE DISTRICT COUNCIL OF ELLISTON

**SUBMISSION REGARDING**

**INQUIRY INTO  
IMPACTS OF  
NATIVE  
VEGETATION AND  
BIODIVERSITY  
REGULATIONS**

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In making comment to the inquiry this submission is based on the perspective from a small rural local government authority. Accordingly, issues not considered relevant to the sphere of this authority have not been commented upon.

### **District Overview**

The District Council of Elliston covers an area of 665 500 hectares or 6 500 square kilometres on the Eyre Peninsula. This area is located on the western seaboard of South Australia. The District has 150 kms of rugged coastline. The District Council of Elliston borders the District Council of Lower Eyre Peninsula, the District Council of LeHunte, the District Council of Streaky Bay and the District Council of Cleve.

The two major townships in the District are Elliston and Lock and the smaller towns are Port Kenny, Venus Bay, Sheringa and Bramfield. The population of the District is approximately 1200 and contains 1030 rateable assessments.

Major industries in the District are mixed farming and fishing. The main focuses are agriculture are sheep and mixed cereal farming. Crayfish and abalone industries are thriving in the District.

Agriculture is one of the main economic drivers of the region with the main focus being sheep, high protein hard wheat, barley and other cereals. Production is carried out in arid and semi arid conditions with dry land farming techniques being successfully applied. The product output varies from year to year, as it is totally seasonally dependant. The Australian Bureau of Statistics indicated that the 10 year average from 1999 to 2000 of agricultural commodities were \$28.56 million.

## **ISSUES**

### **Impact on Property Values**

*Have the regulatory regimes under review had any significant impact on property values. What is the evidence for this, are such effects expected to increase or diminish in the future.*

This Council is rated as having approximately 60% of original native vegetation remaining within its area. Due to the energetic efforts of the more densely populated areas of the State, by removal of native vegetation for their purposes, native vegetation now has an endangered species status. This has resulted in this area being heavily targeted for the establishment of conservation reserves (68 290Ha) and Native Vegetation Heritage Agreements (in excess of 35 000Ha).

Whilst other citizens of the State may now enjoy the remaining vegetation in this area, the District has lost valuable production land and ability to raise rate revenue from this area, ie. Conservation Parks are non-rateable and land on which Native Vegetation Heritage Agreements apply are valued at zero.

On the basis of Councils rate of 0.5712 cents in the dollar this represents a loss of rateable income of \$176 500 (103 000 Ha @ \$300 Ha, capital value land x 0.5712c).

*Have governments provided any assistance to offset any negative impacts on landholders. If no what types of assistance have been offered.*

In relation to Native Vegetation Heritage Agreements the Government of SA and the Local Government Association of SA negotiated outcomes that resulted in zero capital valuation for the landholders entering Native Vegetation Agreements. The Agreement was for the land to have a diminished value over 3 years.

With a zero valuation Council rates do not apply (ie. Local Government rates are raised by setting a rate in the dollar on the assessed value of the land. This is calculated out as Council rates payable).

This outcome benefited the landholder, in relation to Council rates, however it has a significant impact on Council revenues.

*Have there been any significant effects (costs or benefits on regional communities from the regulatory regimes under review).*

There are significant costs, as previously highlighted to Local Government. The costs are manifested in the additional burden the landowners of the District have to pay in rates.

For example if the District rate revenue is \$1 million dollars and say \$176 500 is lost through land no longer being rateable then that \$176 500 gets recouped from the remaining "valued properties". This recouped amount is additional to their normal rates and is raised by Council raising its rate in the dollar on the remaining property values across the District.

There is opportunity for some benefit to the community relating to tourism values of native vegetation areas. Regretfully the Government of SA has more "conservation land" than it can effectively manage. Thus the land is unmanaged and without appropriate management plans the State Conservation areas are not promoted for and not conducive to tourism.

Another cost factor is in relation to the loss of productive land. Where land is agriculturally viable and unable to be cleared it effects local government in relation to population drift and local economic activity.

What might have been profitable farms become "marginal" get sold to the neighbour and the community loses that family as they move out of the District. Population drift effects schooling, Doctors, Police etc.

### **Efficiency and Effectiveness of Environmental regimes**

*What is the nature of the link between the targeted activities and these overarching environmental objectives.*

For example. Within the District there are large designated Conservation Parks. These Parks have a legacy of being within and adjoining large areas of native vegetation. In nearly all instances there are long corridors of native vegetation that collectively link the Conservation Parks together.

This has led to a State Government focus of preserving the "linking" native vegetation corridors by way of heritage agreements - see attachment.

It is a considered opinion that this practice has been undertaken in the overarching environmental objective of biodiversity conservation eg. provision of the vegetation corridors will enable native flora and fauna to traverse distances between the Parks and facilitate genetic biodiversity of the region.

*What other factors / practices are likely to affect achievement of these environmental objectives (for example vermin, weed control, fire management)*

Vermin, weed control and fire management are significant cost factors to the community. Outbreak of fire within native vegetation areas is a continual consumer of Council and community resources.

Particularly within this area lightning strikes instigate wildfire with the vegetated areas. Due to isolation of this District, apart from the local CFS brigades the most readily available resources to combat the fires are Council and local farmer's plant and equipment.

Recently an outbreak of fire in the Hambidge Conservation Park (adjacent the township of Lock) burnt for approximately 10 days. This fire consumed both the Park and the entire resources of the local community in combating it. Whilst government resources, via National Parks, were applied, the "off ledger" cost of local community members time and efforts, during these 10 days, was not costed.

The issue here is once again local communities are meeting the cost of maintaining and protecting State Natural resources.

*Have the new regulatory regimes affected land users incentives to manage native vegetation on their properties. In what way? Is this likely to promote or detract from achievement of the environmental objectives of the regimes under review.*

It is considered that there is little in the way of incentives for management of native vegetation. Other than reduction of Council rates, as previously mentioned, other "care factors" are related to fines or imposts for incorrectly dealing with native vegetation ie. contravention of legislative acts prohibiting clearing or stock grazing of vegetation.

It is suggested that it would be more appropriate to place a considered environmental value on the native vegetation. For example native vegetation has a biodiversity value, it has a "reduction of atmospheric carbons" value, it has a heritage value. Yet the current philosophy is "its useless scrub that I can't do anything with".

Why not determine a per hectare value of native vegetation and pay farmers (and governments) an annual fee to maintain and preserve it. This would place a value on the vegetation and address the issues of lost productivity small rural communities meeting the costs of State and Nation heritage values etc.

*In assessing applications to clear (or otherwise modify) native vegetation, do any of the regimes under review allow or require an assessment to be made of the potential economic and social impacts.*

Observation of the approval process indicates that the main criteria for consideration are the considered impact on the flora and fauna species. It is not apparent, from local governments perspectives, that economic or social impacts are considered.

With respect to a specific case 2002/2082/933 (SA native Vegetation Council)  
A major grain industry operator sought approval to undertake a significant upgrade of its grain handling facilities in a local township.

Through negotiation with the Company and Council both parties were able to minimise the Native Vegetation clears to .34 hectares. In recognition of the .34 hectares clearance required the Company indicated their willingness to provide a native vegetation plantation offset of 1 Ha which would be incorporated with the existing native vegetation.

This application met recommendation for refusal from the Native Vegetation Council.

Approval was finally obtained from the Native Vegetation Council which required an offset revegetation area of 1.45Ha (which is a ratio of 5:1 of offset area to clearance area).

The economic impacts of the application being refused clearance approval would have seen failure of upgrading grain loading capacity from approximately 12tph to 400tph.

The additional capacity of the upgrade will reduce costs by 50%, significantly contribute to economic efficiencies and reductions in required road transport complications.

It is contended that without the commitment of 5.1 offset area to clearance area, vegetation clearance approval would have been refused. This would have resulted in negative economic attributes to the Company and community.