

## **Supplementary Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Native Vegetation**

"A lie can travel halfway around the world  
while the truth is putting on its shoes." Mark Twain

Ian Mott comments on the STATE OF THE FORESTS 2003  
(as reported in EnviroInfo and AFFA's Forest Info Newsletter (09/10/03))

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Australia's apparent forest cover has risen by 7 million hectares since 1998 according to latest figures from the 2003 State of the Forests Report.

The report finds, however, that the dramatic apparent increase in forested area does not reflect a real increase in forest cover, but is rather the result of improved technology and mapping techniques, a reduction in the amount of land clearing and an increase in plantations.

In fact, the report cites other data which indicates that net forest cover is decreasing, largely due to agricultural practices, although the rate of clearing has slowed since the 1970s and 80s.

The State of the Forests report, produced by the Bureau of Rural Sciences as part of its commitment under the 1992 National Forest Policy Statement, claims that less than 1 per cent of the potential 74 per cent of forests of harvestable quality are being harvested, and that the amount of area protected in nature reserves has increased by 22 per cent. The assessment shows that 164 million hectares, or 21 per cent of the nation's land area, is classified as forest (land with trees with an actual or potential height greater than 2 metres and 20 per cent crown cover).

For further information go to <http://www.affa.gov.au> and go to Publications

### **Gee Whiz, we misplaced five forests the size of Tasmania!**

The first surprise in this information is that these guys just happened to misplace 6,840,000 hectares of forest, AN AREA THE SIZE OF TASMANIA!! But wait, there's much more. This is only a net figure. The total area of land that has changed its status since 1998 is a modest 30.82 million hectares.

In a nutshell, we lost 2 Tasmania's worth of forest in WA and NT (12 million hectares) and, (behind a rock at the bottom of the garden?), we discovered 3 Tasmania's worth (18.84 million hectares) of forest in NSW, SA and QLD.

This was a 98% increase in SA (5.367Mha), a 28% increase in NSW (5.87Mha) and (only?) a 13.6% increase in QLD (6.68Mha). And we are seriously expected to believe that it was all due to new technology, that forest expansion from regrowth was ZERO!

A good look at the source data reveals the BRS statement to be ill-informed and highly misleading. It is not widely known that more than 50% of the area cleared each year in Qld does not fall within the national definition of forest (ie, actual or potential height less than 2 metres and less than 20% canopy). So even if 300,000 to 400,000 hectares a year is cleared in Qld, only 140,000 to 190,000 hectares can be of relevance to the National Forest Inventory.

This is only 2% to 2.7% of the NET 7 MILLION MISSING FOOTBALL FIELDS OF FOREST. And new plantations (not replanted ones) are only 87,000 hectares/year or equal to 1.2% of the missing football fields.

The cumulative results over the five year period from 1998 to 2003 come to;  
Clearing = a 10% reduction in net gain or a 3.7% reduction in gross gain,

Plantations = a 6.3% addition to net gain or a 2.3% addition to gross gain.

So the really interesting question, for those with more than a casual interest in the truth is; if factors accounting for a 3.7% reduction and a 2.3% increase merit a mention, can we really believe that the only other factor (accounting for 98.6% of the change) was better technology?

The authors could not possibly have tested the possibility that vegetation thickening could have converted land with, say, 17% canopy to land with 22% canopy? That is, that new forest been created?

It is a question of appropriate exercise of duty to consider all relevant details. We know from the work of Bill Burrows that thickening is taking place on 90 million hectares of open woodland. We also know that vast tracts of non-forest are artificially so from previous clearing and exhibit regrowth with very obvious "actual and potential height of 2 metres".

The latest satellite (SLATS) Report, Landcover Change in Qld, 1999-2001, also provides some very illuminating data. Table 6 (pp26) shows that the areas of forest cleared on land that was not mapped as woody vegetation in 1991 has increased over time. [www.nrm.qld.gov.au/slats](http://www.nrm.qld.gov.au/slats)

As expected, the 91-95 period showed no clearing of land that was pasture in 1991 because any regrowth was too small to be a problem. But the 95-97 period showed 34,500 hectares/Year and this made up 11.5% of all clearing of veg with Foliage Projective Cover (FPC)>12 (equivalent to 20% canopy).

By 97-99 this had increased to 64,100 hectares/Year or 18.1% of all cleared vegetation with FPC>12. By 99-00 this had increased to 166,400 hectares or 29.3% of a larger total of cleared vegetation with FPC>12. And by 00-01 the area had declined to 99,000 hectares but the proportion had increased to 37.9% of all cleared vegetation with FPC>12.

It must be noted that the vegetation with FPC>12 includes a lot of non-forest. In 99-2001 some 18.5% of this category was Tussocky or Tufted Grasses that were not 2 metres tall and could not be regarded as forest. And given that this category of clearing is associated with pasture improvement, it is unlikely to appear in subsequent re-clearing.

Indeed, it would be a very rare farmer in Queensland who seriously believes he has a problem with too much Buffel Grass regrowth. And it would be an even rarer banker who would loan him the money to get rid of it.

What this means is that at least 52.4% of all actual forest cleared in 2001 was not forest at all in 1991.

Furthermore, this data only compares pasture land in 1991, it cannot tell us what proportion of the 3.92 million hectares of land cleared over that decade was cleared twice. That is, forested in 1991, cleared in, say, 1993 and was cleared again in 1999.

But Table 6 does provide us with the smoking gun to tell us. We know that 34,500 hectares of clearing in 1995 was less than 5 years old. We know that 64,100 hectares cleared in 1998 was less than 7 years old and 166,400 hectares cleared in 1999 was less than 8 years old. And from this data we could construct an age profile of cleared vegetation but without access to the data sets, it would not be appropriate to attempt it in this article.

We can conclude, however, that in the decade to 2001 a total of at least 462,600 hectares of forest had been cleared from land that had no forest cover in 1991. And we can state that 3.9 million hectares is a pretty good statistical sample with a significant and highly relevant body of evidence.

Yet, the BRS would appear to be indicating, by omission of any reference to regrowth and thickening, that it is a statistically irrelevant factor accounting for less than 1% of the reported increase in forest cover.

It is incumbent on the Minister for Forests, Senator MacDonald, (Lib.Qld) and Minister for Environment, Kemp, to ask the BRS questions like;

How is it that this regrowth phenomena appears to be entirely contingent on a farmers future propensity to clear?

By what magic did seedlings only take root in the 1990's on land that would be cleared in the next ten years?

How can regrowth be the dominant portion of forest clearing on land that has or will be cleared but, according to the BRS's technology based explanation, it is non-existent on all other non-forested land?

And given the potential detriment to the lawful interests of Queensland farmers, both State and Commonwealth participants would be grossly negligent if they did not have answers to these questions long before any deal is struck on the Queensland clearing controls.

The expansion of forest onto pastured land by regrowth and thickening is most certainly a "relevant consideration" in determining the net impact of clearing. It may not be ignored if powers over this activity are to be exercised appropriately and consistent with best practice.

Watch this space

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