

Native Vegetation Inquiry
Productivity Commission
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Thankyou Productivity commission for the opportunity to comment on the “Impacts of native vegetation and biodiversity regulations”. I am currently studying Environmental Science/Forestry at Southern Cross University. Through our study of the NSW Native Vegetation Conservation Act we have found parts of the legislation to be unclear and at times difficult to understand. I don’t feel that everyday people of the community should have to try and decipher what the act is saying when it is so difficult to understand.

Introduction

The conservation of native vegetation and biodiversity is important for any country but especially so for Australia, due to our huge number of endemic species and vegetation types. Legislation has to be established to prevent these environmentally significant areas from being lost to land clearing. In New South Wales the current Native Vegetation Conservation Act fulfils this task to an extent, but there are some problems that need to be addressed to improve its practicality.

Impacts of Regulations on Farmers & the Wider Community

Australian farmers control millions of hectares of native vegetation and are the ones who will be the most effected by changes in native vegetation and biodiversity regulations. A large number of farmers are finding it tough at the moment to establish long term plans for their property, largely due to uncertainty about rules and regulations they have to follow when planning to remove vegetation from their land. The majority of farmers are committed to caring for the native vegetation on their properties but they need an easily understood, consistent set of guidelines. No longer should public servants administer long winded technical guidelines for farms that they know little about, and that may change the viability of a farmer’s property.

The New South Wales Government was correct in creating the Regional Vegetation Management Committees, but due to the fact that legislators were reluctant to allow them to make their own decisions, the whole process, to an extent was a waste of time. The people living in community know the region better than somebody in Sydney who is making the final decisions for them. There should be consultation with the experts but the final decision should ultimately be left to the Regional Vegetation Management Committees, this way the community will be more inclined to follow and understand the legislation.

Currently the cessation of clearing on a farm will cost farmers not just in the initial loss of the land that was originally able to be cleared, but also in the control of weeds that will begin to grow in the uncleared areas and then spread around the farm. Quality native vegetation will not be a problem, but poor quality, open regrowth is a place where the weed problem will be at its greatest. Farmers will have to manage these areas quite intensively, at great expense to themselves. Examples of this weed invasion have been seen in National Parks that were formally managed by State Forests. After logging has ceased in the area and it has been locked up as National Park weeds are starting to get out of control, this seems to be the case in some areas of Mebbin National Park. There is also the problem of fire in native forest. Hazard reduction will have to be carried out, amounting to more cost for the farmer.

Education & Incentives for the Future

10-15 years ago farmers did not realize the extent of the ramifications that clearing their native vegetation was having on the environment. Most of them are now aware of the problems and are trying to reverse the effects. This is not an easy operation though, with their future plans for the farm being turned upside down and the dropping prices for most farm products. They have had to change many of their old methods and strive to understand and adopt the new processes to help the productivity of their farms while at the same time insuring that the environment is being looked after as much as possible. Overall this has meant re-education and in some cases reduced revenue.

Farms in different catchments have differing vegetation types, some vegetation is of significant value for conservation and biodiversity, while other areas, such as those that have been highly modified or no longer contain a large percentage of native species will be less important to conserve. If these areas of high conservation value were mapped and incentives such as tax breaks or education programs for the farmers in that area then farmers would be more inclined to preserve the area due to the reduced financial burden. If tax breaks were given to the owner of that property then the value of that land will increase, thus providing the farmer with even more incentive to conserve as much native vegetation as possible. Education programs will allow the farmer to increase their knowledge and so increase their productivity or just increase the price they are receiving for their product through a better knowledge of the market place.

Conclusion

The Current Native Vegetation Conservation Act is not appropriate and measures need to be taken to make it more accessible to the general public. Also I feel that farmers should not and in a number of cases can not suddenly change their farming practices, unless there is some form of appropriate compensation, education or incentive program.

Sincerely

David Stubbs