

CLEARING BANS – The Great Cost Shift

Since the 1990s, the Association has opposed the Government shifting the cost of public conservation onto private land holders by imposing blanket clearing bans on rural land.

THE PROBLEM

Current native vegetation policy, in NSW and elsewhere in Australia, is designed to:

- Create proxy national parks on private land at no-cost to the public purse;
- Offset increases in fossil fuel emissions from coal-fired power stations, which have increased more than 50% since 1990.

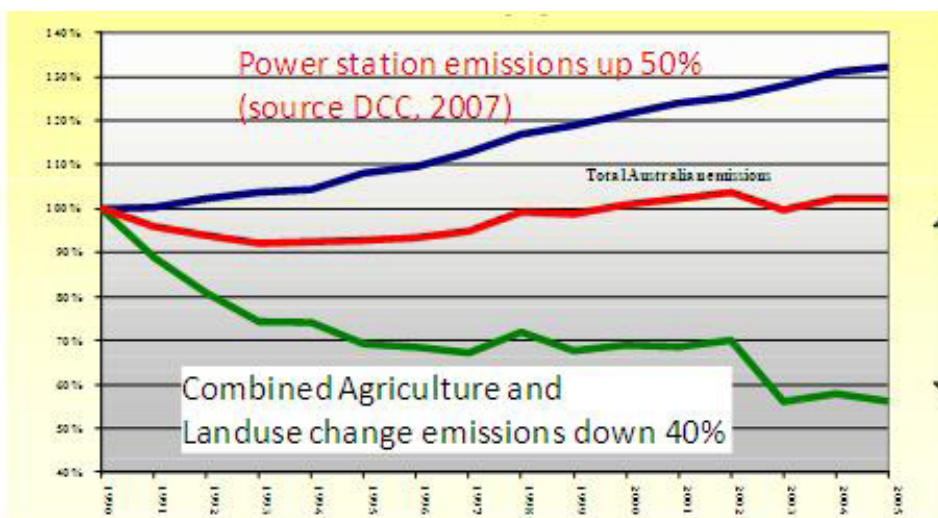
Proxy “national parks” on private land

National parks are costly to purchase and costly to manage. Cash-strapped governments have realised that the cheapest way to extend the national reserve system is to lock up vegetation on farm land using legislation and without any compensation to the land owners. This cost shift, however, has catastrophic impacts on farmers as their income and mortgage payments depend on using all of their land.

Not only are these farmers prevented from developing their land, they have to deal with the weeds, feral animals and dangerous fuel loads that build up in these unfunded, compulsory nature reserves

Carbon offsets – the missing billions

A similar cost shift has occurred with regard to carbon emission reduction. The all-inclusive clearing bans imposed in the 1990s were designed to offset increased coal emissions with decreased emissions from land clearing. (Avoided land clearing can be used as an offset under Article 3.7 of the Kyoto Protocol - the infamous ‘Australia Clause’). Coal emissions have increased more than 50% since 1990. Without the clearing bans as an offset, Australia would be seriously in breach of the Protocol and its international obligations.



The coal sector has not paid farmers for this \$2 Billion offset

It is profoundly inequitable that the carbon offsets embodied in native vegetation on farmland, have not been paid for, either by power station operators, or by Government. These offsets have been valued at billions of dollars by the Climate Institute (Mission Billions, Climate Institute 2006).

Policy out of balance

Few urban citizens understand that the governments' so called 'broad scale' clearing bans in fact apply to single specimens of plants. In other words, approval is required to clear a single tree or shrub. This level of micro-management is absurd and blocks the intelligent, sustainable development of 'mosaic' rural landscapes, where conservation coexists with efficient production.

Current NSW vegetation policy excludes any opportunity to consider social and economic factors in relation to clearing approvals. If the clearing will enable increased or more efficient production, that is considered irrelevant by the Government; if the clearing is vital to the economic viability of a farm, or the social viability of a farming region that, too, is irrelevant. No tradeoffs or compromise can be permitted when biodiversity on farm land is involved. This is in stark contrast to the rules that apply to property developers or mining companies.

THE SOLUTION

Farmers value both native vegetation and biodiversity and voluntarily retain certain native vegetation in mosaic patterns on their land. Where this retention goes beyond a reasonable duty of care, however, farmers must be paid for the conservation service at a rate equivalent to the lost value of production. This is not a minority view; it is mainstream in the academic and economic literature on conservation, and best practice in many nations.

The Productivity Commission, in its major report, Impacts of Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Regulations (2004) found that native vegetation legislation imposed unreasonable costs on farmers and was an inefficient way of achieving public conservation outcomes in rural Australia. It recommended proper consideration of the social and economic impacts in relation to clearing approvals.

Likewise, the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists has called for farmers to be paid for provision of environmental services and for more flexible, collaborative approaches to conservation on private land.

Governments throughout Australia have continued to ignore these recommendations.

NSW Farmers' Association will continue to fight for a restoration of the ability of farmers to sustainably develop their properties, for market rent for provision of environmental services and for other forms of just terms compensation.

The Association's most recent submission to the NSW Government regarding the Native Vegetation Act 2003, as well as links to the documents cited above, can be found at: http://www.nswfarmers.org.au/policy_committees/crm/priority_issue_1