April, 2016

Submission to the Review of the native vegetation clearing regulations

I am a livestock and grain production farmer from [redacted] Victoria. Our property is 640ha situated in the [redacted] area on the edge of the Western District Plains. We produce Beef Cattle, Wool, Prime lambs, Canola, Wheat, Barley, Oats and Oaten Hay.

Our property has been in our family since 1930 and developed since that time under the considered best practice of the time.

I welcome this opportunity to provide feedback on the current native vegetation clearing regulations and the proposed changes discussed in the consultation paper, bearing in mind that our property is situated in an area that was native grasslands.

Red tape reduction essential

The consultation paper discusses 29 proposed changes to the current regulatory system. Whilst some of these changes will help clarify the current regulations for landholders, the bulk of the proposals will result in an increase in red tape. These changes will amount to greater cost, time and effort, further burdening farmers – who are already the primary caretakers for native vegetation on private land and already spend significant amounts of time and dollars on managing their native vegetation.

Allowing for farm productivity and profitability

Clearing restrictions are stifling productivity growth by preventing the use of new machinery and technology in paddocks. Any improvements to native vegetation clearing need to consider how farms will be able to utilise machinery that is ever-increasing in size, as their productivity, profitability and ability to innovate will depend on this.

Recognition of prior Landcare works, private and supported

Farmers recognise the value of preserving, enhancing and protecting native flora and fauna. Over the years many have undertaken programmes to ensure that native vegetation is improved, in conjunction with farm productivity and profitability.

On our own farm we have participated in a number of Landcare shelter belt programmes with over 15 per cent of our farm now under these programmes. We also have 50 hectares of native flora and fauna under the control and monitoring of the Volcanic Plains Protection Tender programme, leading towards a covenant in the future.

In general, it is the landholders who are the best placed to make decisions about what happens on their own land. These decisions should be made in consultation with proper monitoring programmes conducted by those who have the proper knowledge and understanding, and at no additional cost to the landholder.
The work that farmers do to care and preserve their native vegetation must be recognised, and the landowner must be allowed to make changes that enhance productivity and cost savings without the need for onerous offset regulations.

Setting offsets

Calculating offsets is currently too difficult. The regulations are onerous and expensive, discouraging farmers from taking proactive action to deliver environmental benefits. Offsets need to be able to capture prior efforts, such as Landcare works described above.

Common sense needs to be used

Ultimately, these regulations need to embody a common sense approach. The clearing regulations are too complex and applying for a permit is a difficult process. It is very costly in time and dollars, and too often ends without a sensible result. Local and State governments must ensure that officers dealing with these issues have farming experience and an understanding of the practicalities of operating a farm.

For example, in recent years control of fire prevention works on roadsides has changed. The expectation now is that the adjoining landowners provide firebreaks on their own land instead, which has significantly reduced the effectiveness of the fire breaks. Common sense has not prevailed here.

In conclusion, the native vegetation clearing regulations must allow for farm productivity and profitability, but not necessarily at the cost of native vegetation. Farmers recognise the value of preserving and enhancing native vegetation on their properties and Government needs to trust the landholders, and every day caretakers of the land, to make the best decisions for their farm. This will allow native vegetation to be managed in a sensible and sustainable manner.