



Covering the costs of our land

The House Environment Committee is asking: Who should be responsible for protecting our land even when it is privately owned?

Photo: John Feder, Newspix.

As our anthem proclaims – Australia is a land of beauty, rich and rare. But how much is this land costing us? We budget for house repairs, vehicle maintenance and even consider the costs of our own personal health and well-being. But, who foots the repair and maintenance bill for our environment? And, who should be responsible for protecting our land even when it is privately owned?

The House of Representatives Environment Committee has been considering these issues through its inquiry into public good conservation. The inquiry, which focuses on the impact of environmental measures imposed on landholders, was announced last April. Since then, the Committee has received nearly 250 submissions and has visited a number of rural and regional areas in Victoria and Queensland to review the issues first hand. In November, the Committee will continue its public forums and site inspections when it visits regional areas in New South Wales. Future visits will be determined early next year.

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The Committee is looking at the impact and cost of the conservation measures that governments require farmers to undertake. It wants to establish how much of this cost should be the farmers' responsibility and how much of it should be met by the taxpayer. It is also collecting ideas on ways of sharing conservation costs between the community and farmers.

The background to the Committee's inquiry is the serious damage to the land and waterways that Australian agriculture has caused over the past two hundred years.

"Governments, farmers and environmentalists all agree that land and water must be used and managed more sustainably," explained Ian Causley, House Environment Committee Chair and Member for Page (New South Wales). "Farmers accept that they

are stewards of the land, that they have a duty of care to look after it at their own expense to ensure that they will continue to be able to earn a living from it. However, they feel that some of the actions that governments are requiring, such as not clearing land, are much more for the benefit of the public at large than for their own good. Farmers feel that they are bearing all or most of the cost of this public good conservation and this is unfair."

Mr Causley said that when Committee members visited regional Victoria they learnt of a paddock near Edenhope that cannot be planted with blue gums, because Victoria's native vegetation controls prevent the clearing of existing shade trees. In Queensland, the Committee was told about a draft coastal plan that included strips of vegetation to be retained along waterways, yet this proposal would impact on the viability of some cane farms.

Other information gathered by the House Environment Committee has come from experts in land management. According to a CSIRO Tropical Agriculture study of four cattle grazing properties in south-east Queensland, these properties would experience 9 to 16 per cent decline in income if the owners were to adopt more sustainable practices.

Senator Hill, Minister for the Environment, has asked the House Environment Committee to investigate ways of sharing the cost of public good conservation measures more equitably among all members of the community. Among the suggestions made to the Committee is that compensation should be paid to farmers when they are prevented from using their land as they expected or as they have in the past. For this to be possible, farmers' property rights might need to be defined more clearly.

Alternatively, the government might buy back particularly significant blocks of land, or make ongoing payments to landholders for restoring or maintaining native vegetation in a specified manner. The Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment is considering a scheme in which farmers would be invited to bid for contracts to deliver particular environmental outcomes on their land. A similar scheme operates successfully in the USA.

The House Environment Committee is considering a number of suggestions, and will complete its report in 2001.

For more information on the Inquiry into Public Good Conservation – Impact of Environmental Measures Imposed on Landholders

Visit: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/enviro/pubgood

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