

**From:**  
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To the Committee

“SUPPORT AGRICULTURE , DO NOT CRUCIFY IT”

This is a very concerning Act as it will further polarise and alienate the bush especially from the urban centric Labor Party . Its roots used to be in the bush but it seems to have forgotten them Unfortunately Labor is traditionally seen as the enemy in the Bush . This will further reinforce this attitude . This is not ideal as Agriculture is so strategic , it needs complete bi partisan support . Julian Cribb ( “The Coming Famine”) makes the point that agriculture is so important strategically that it should be put on the same level as defence

Ideally the role of good Government is to unite not divide

This Act and the real fear induced by it is going to further polarise the Bush . The Blueprint for the Bush was an attempt to include and address this divide . This seems to have stalled and its purpose has been forgotten

One of Agforce’s early initiatives was to investigate what rights farmers had . After a period the question was asked of the findings . The answer was simply that the only rights farmers had were the ones that Governments had not taken away . The ultimate of course is Zimbabwe All farmers when they freeholded believed that they had purchased the timber and thus owned it . One could ask now who actually owns the carbon rights . What would happen if this is legally tested? How can you own the carbon rights but not the trees ?

This Act seems to overlook some very important implications and thus will not benefit the community at all

## PROFITABILITY

Agriculture is a very marginally profitable industry

Rural Debt is at concerning levels ( about \$76B ) whereas farm management deposits are only about \$4.5B

Ben Rees ( see [www.benrees.com.au](http://www.benrees.com.au)) has explored this and suggested that it is “policy failure not market failure”

QRAA ( Qld Rural Adjustment Authority ) rural debt figures showed escalating debt levels up until figures were not provided for a number of concerning reasons

The MLA Northern Beef Situation Report also reported that producers had only made profits in a few years . Recent improved prices will not have changed the underlying basics

America is more objective and mature and correctly describes farm debt as a low farm income problem and has long taken policy steps to deal with it . Australia still has not risen to this level of understanding even though it was predicted 50 years ago . Europe with the Treaty of Rome ensured that farmers did share in the prosperity of the wider economy

Most modern developed nations understand the importance of food security and implement policies which protect and assist agriculture and ensure food security . Even though Australia has experienced food shortages ( the First Fleet , we imported food in 1901 and post WW2 migrants escaped and bought with them vivid experiences of food shortages ) we have become complacent . The Arab Spring was precipitated by an increase in bread prices in Egypt

The crop insurance scheme in USA seems to significantly underpin agriculture and thus regional areas . It is wisely supported heavily by the Government

Productivity , which has resulted from the outstanding past efforts of our agricultural scientists , has enabled us to stay ahead of the “cost/price” squeeze . This was the result of significant past public funding of agricultural RD&E . However this public funding has substantially decreased in the last generation and as a result productivity has now stalled. This has grave implications for the future . The last LNP Government made the public statement that they did not see public funding as the role of their Government ( this was commented on by myself on beef central a few years ago )

Roxburgh and Pratley ( The Rangeland Journal 2015 Vol 37 “The future of food production research in the rangelands “) expressed concern about the reduction in public RD&E funding and the implications

A visiting Professor, David Hughes commented at a NFF ( National Farmers Federation ) Forum that as public funding for agricultural RD&E wanes , private companies will step in but they will only fund the profitable bits but not the public good bits and the benefits will flow to the shareholders not the general public

“The only sustainable agriculture is profitable agriculture “ Bill Burrows and many others  
As a response to a claim that our present farming systems were unsustainable , I had to agree ( see “thank you for the food we eat” in Blue’s magazine) We failed on all the five criteria of sustainability

HYPE?

“Land Clearing” has become a very emotional issue with any objective analysis long since lost . There are claims of so many football fields being cleared .Much of this I suggest is “reclearing” so the reality is that there is much double , even triple counting . Accountants call this “creative accounting”

A similar example of an overhyped story can be found in Marc Morano’s “Amazon Rainforest : clear-cutting the myths” Upon an investigation much was found to be just unsubstantiated hype and in fact the Amazon was actually growing in area . Could this be the case here?

TREES vs GRASS

For most producers keeping vegetation under control is a constant battle and very costly . I would suggest the recent increase in clearing is just a catch up after years of very low profitability with minimum property maintenance

Bill Burrows ( an internationally acclaimed woodland scientist) has outlined the significant reduction of trees upon grass and forage production ( see Tropical Grasslands (2002) Vol 36 .202-217 The Harry Stobbs Memorial Lecture 2002 “Seeing the wood(land) for the trees... “) In another presentation he showed the dramatic depressing effect of trees in a very dry year . It was about 20 times depression of forage yield . Thus trees have a very dramatic negative effect in a dry year . This is when available feed is critical . For a person who started with a “green” block I can attest to this figure and the debilitating effects

REGIONAL FLOW ON EFFECTS

This potential reduction of productivity will heavily impact on profitability . This then flows on to

the local and regional economy . Most regional towns have dramatically declined in population and the best have only managed to just maintain their populations .Any further impost will sound the death knell of more small towns forcing people into bigger towns and cities and further stressing their services

The socio-economic effects are significant . A number of ABARES publications have outlined this – such as

“Native Vegetation – Public conservation on private lands – cost of foregone rangeland development in southern and western Queensland” ABARE Research Report 06.13

It suggests a negative net effect to society as well as stating expected public benefits will probably not exceed the costs

“Native Vegetation – cost of preservation in Australia” Australian Commodities Vol12 No 3 Sept , 2005

This says that legislation is imposing a large cost on the farm sector and will reduce the future competitiveness of broadacre agricultural industries in world markets . Remember Agriculture is one of our major export earners

Another report is “ Queensland Land Clearing Proposal .Socio-economic impact” A report to the Commonwealth Government May 2003

It said there would be high social and economic effects in certain areas and thus this will affect employment . It also said that it will meet with strong resistance – how true!

“Public Good Conservation : interim report of the inquiry into the effects upon landholders and farmers of public good conservation measures imposed by Australian Governments “ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage , Sept 2001

This covered much including the “rights” of landholders to be acknowledged and it suggested rewarding and assisting farmers for desirable outcomes . Purchasing of now unviable farms was proposed .Tax incentives were suggested

They also said “ There is scope for more research on the impacts of government programs “ and “the need to motivate farmers”

This proposed Act fails on all grounds of equity and common sense

## HISTORY OF OPEN vs CLOSED LANDSCAPES

Anecdotal evidence suggests the landscape of the past was much more open and the landscape this Act will engender will be more “closed” This will not be a “traditional” landscape . The real conversation we should be having is what policies , programs and incentives we need to put into place to determine a landscape which will provide for our growing population . Jared Diamond in “Collapse “ and Tim Flannery in “The Future Eaters ” suggest a sustainable population of a bit over 20 M . I suspect this was based on a report by the Federal government in the late 1990’s which suggested a sustainable population of about 20M . One point the authors made was not just what level of population , but at what standard of living ?

Heathcote ( “Back of Bourke “ 1965 ) and Noble ( “The Noxious Scrub” ) recorded the thickening of vegetation even back in the 1800’s

The “ Pilliga Scrub “ used to be open!

Contrary to “green “ beliefs , a landscape left to its own devices does not move to a pristine state but becomes “feral” with little or no benefit to anyone .Mankind has always managed the landscape for his perceived needs

Most of the worlds grasslands are fire climaxes , remove fire and they become woodlands

## FOOD SECURITY

We hold to a Myth that we export about two thirds of our food production . This may well be the gross figure but the net figure is much lower , about 25% . This was established by the “Custom House Agreement “ and expanded on by Mark McGovern ( “On the unimportance of exports to Australian agriculture” Australian Journal of Regional Studies Vol 5 No 2 1999 p228) We are also actually net importers in several foodstuffs

So we cannot rely on a comfortable surplus of food and if we are to provide for a continually growing population and accept that we will need to be self-sufficient in domestic food production , we need to start planning for and establishing the landscape needed for our future needs . This past landscape may be no useful guide for the future landscape needed .

Alternatively we need to be seriously discussing a restrictive population policy

A thickened landscape covered in trees and regrowth is not going to provide security for our future food needs and neither will reflect the “traditional” landscape . This was “managed” by our indigenous people and has evolved over 60K+ years

A survey in Europe years ago concluded that most people felt more comfortable with a open savannah which is where the human race evolved

#### IMPLICATIONS , SUGGESTIONS , CONTRADICTIONS AND CONCERNS

This intent of the Act of a more “closed” landscape suggests that the biodiversity of a closed forest is preferred , not an open woodland or grassland . Is this choosing a biased biodiversity ? And reflecting unrealistic and uninformed value judgements ?

Grahame Webb in “Wildlife Conservation-The Belly of the Beast” suggests to conserve something , you need to create value for it . Too many trees are a significant cost impost on farmers . Webb also commented on the murky arena of “bio-politics” where politics over ruled good science . He gives many examples around the world

Even the Greens Sustainable Agriculture policy supported “ profitable farmers”

Some studies point out that grasslands can sequester more carbon than trees . Mature forests seem to be net emitters rather than sequesters . This research needs to be more closely examined and expanded on

The landscape is very cultural . Europe which had extensive forests in the past now accepts that farmers and farming are part of the desired landscape . Their rural policy has moved from a production to an environmental focus and rewards landholders for good environmental outcomes . I understand that about 40% of the EU budget goes into agriculture

People have an innate wish to be “on the land” . This should be supported as food self-sufficiency is strategically important . We need to reward our farmers for this so we do not have an emerging disadvantaged “sub class” in regional areas

Stewardship payments or similar incentives need to be considered to encourage and reward environmental public goodies

Sustainable regional communities require a sustainable income base . For most regional areas this is simply agriculture . Any constraints on an already marginally profitable industry will further negatively impact on producers and thus regional areas

Youth unemployment is highest in outback Qld ( recent Government statistics)

We need to decentralise ,not increase the drift to the cities . Charleville and Longreach are good examples of depopulation as a result of poor/marginal profitability in the Bush

A recent QCL ( Queensland Country Life ) article said that whilst carbon farming might be good for the individual , it did not create many jobs . This will not help support regional areas

The Act states it is to protect the Great Barrier reef . Many of Queensland’s rivers and streams

do not flow to the coast , they flow into the Murray Darling Catchment or Lake Eyre . Thus these areas will have no discernible benefit for the Reef

It must be remembered that old growth forests are mostly net emitters . They will not store any more carbon

There are producers now who accept that repeated repulling is a very efficient way to manage their landscape for production and also for protection . It does not kill all the trees and it maintains good ground cover . I would suggest it also captures and stores significant net carbon and also draws essential nutrients from deeper layers and recycles them in the soil profile . By banning broadacre clearing , you are removing a very cost effective sustainable management option . I would suggest this is just a low key version of coppicing used extensively overseas

It is inferred that trees are superior to grass in reducing erosion along waterways . This view has always been suspect and landholder experience has often seen grass as being a better control option . Some authorities suggest trees produce larger raindrops which create more erosion . Much of this Act rests on assumptions which are very suspect or doubtful and should be further investigated before the Act is implemented . It may well be that we could be worse off by implementing this Act

Governments in general seem to lack understanding of the hardships and challenges of being a farmer . If there is insufficient rewards , we will lose the productive farmers . I suspect that the Bush is already subclinically suffering now from exporting the best brains for at least a generation. They have gone to better and more secure occupations in the city

A secure population requires food security and affordable food . By adding to the risk faced by farmers , you are making this system less resilient .

There is a rise in “hobby” farmers but they are not motivated by profit but by lifestyle . How resilient are we by relying on these for strategic food security ? There is also the issue of overseas ownership

This Act is very complex and confusing and thus producers are almost guaranteed to be caught out unless they spend much time in reading it . Farmers should be left to their expertise , growing food and fibre , not having to decipher a very complex Act

And the penalties are frightening ! It should be a very good revenue raiser! As well as open to interpretation and thus victimisation

Much of the vegetation on public lands is very overgrown . This does not set a good example of how private vegetation will be managed under the Act . Furthermore it seems that much vegetation is incorrectly mapped . If this is flawed , then doubts flow to the Act itself . How much of it is based on incorrect and flawed assumptions?

Producers still have sceptical memories of the “salinity scare” which just seemed to fade away when reality emerged . Is this Act just another costly repeat of this

One Act I read talked of “rigid” soils . This is a term foreign to farmers and agricultural scientists The thickened timber on publicly controlled lands is a real fire risk . if we get a run of wetter years which will allow a fuel build up , the subsequent fires will be difficult to control

Fire needs to be re-introduced into the landscape to make it more productive and restore it to a traditional landscape

Do Governments expect landholders to put their lives at risk to control a fire which should not have occurred if landholders had been listened to

The fires in Victoria , Canberra , California and others should have woken us up to the fact that man has used fire to manage the landscape for many centuries . The urbanised public seem to have lost the understanding of the need to manage the landscape to serve man’s needs especially with fire . A small fire regularly has small losses and damage , if the country is left

alone , big wildfires will occur with proportionally much greater collateral damage  
 Tessa Vance ( Vance et al , Journal of Climate Vol 26 2012 “ A millennial proxy record of ENSO and E Australian rainfall ...”) says that the last 100 years has been unusually dry ( 1920-2009) similar to 1000-1260 AD . If we return to a “wetter” period what will the vegetation outcome be especially with more potentially extreme fire events . Fire has not been used for a while simply as there has been few opportunities

Producers will tell you that operating in timbered areas is much more costly and dangerous . Does society expect this of farmers when safety is such a big issue in other industries . Are farmers becoming a neglected subclass?

In the 1970's our stock numbers were 36 M cattle and 170 M sheep ( Some say there was a phantom herd of another 4 M cattle? ) . They are at present about 26 M cattle and 70 M sheep . This does not sound like a productivity increase to me .

Weeds are a very underappreciated problem and I would suggest that “woody” weeds ( regrowth ?) are simply that , a plant out of proportion to its traditional range and should be controlled , not encouraged

Weston et al ( AJAAS Vol 32 No 2 1975 Special Issue : Research Priorities in the Condamine-Maranoa Basin of Southern Qld )in their recommendations saw the proliferation of native suckers/seedlings as being significant enough to be classified as plant pests . This area was seen to be a potentially highly productive area with “clearing “ as a prerequisite but asked for research to quantify changes associated with clearing and the need to control woody weeds  
 Do the proponents of this Act really understand why farmers need to clear land? If this question was asked maybe a more constructive Act may emerge and society might be better off resulting in a more useful and productive landscape

The Act keeps claiming to protect high value regrowth . This is a meaningless term . How is it going to be managed to produce the desired outcome ? What is the desired outcome ?  
 Regrowth left to its own devices will just become a thickened moribund mess of whipstick seedlings and suckers and stunted . Is this the desired outcome? Surely not?

Sher and Sher( Journal of Research in Rural Education , Spring , 1994 Vol 10 ,No 1 , p 2-43  
 “Beyond the Conventional Wisdom : Rural development as if Australia's Rural People and Communities really mattered”) suggested that Australia should construct a rural development policy which grows rural populations and employment and equitably shares the results of rural resources , increases the quality of life and creates more cohesive communities . This proposed Act will not deliver any of these aims

One report said the major problem is that Australia does not have a bipartisan strategic agricultural policy . Most policy is ad hoc and tends to solve the immediate problem with “perverse” consequences reported down the track

Jared Diamond in “Guns , Germs and Steel “ makes a very compelling argument that a viable agricultural sector is essential for a successful economy/nation . This Act does not contribute to that

If farmers are not convinced of the benefits , this Act will possibly produce further strong resistance with sub clinical civil disobedience escalating and probably becoming more visible . The extreme may be the NSW incidence

This committee must realise that this ACT is not only challenging farmers livelihoods but also their birthright and inheritance and their sense of being . It is a polarising Act , not the act of good Government , it is polarising an essential sector . The collectivisation of the Ukrainian farms in the 1930's left bitter memories with many Ukrainians on the Nazi side in WW2

Most farmers do not believe in the AGW aspect of climate change so they will see no value in trees saving the planet ( Informal extensive clearing survey by myself ) If farmers do not believe



in the benefits logically there will be resistance

The report by Bill Burrows et al which was confiscated must have been very much against the original Act . This was produced by highly regarded employees of the Dept of Agriculture . Is this politics dominating science

Maybe a reread of it might just point out the potential perverse implications

We should be talking about the landscape required to provide the needs of an ever growing population . This Act will not progress that ! And the past landscape may not be a good guide for the future

Further more if this Act is implemented , there will be an urgent need to further intensify productivity on the "cleared" lands . This will need significant funds allocated to pasture RD&E .

The capacity and ability is simply not there in the existing agriculture department

Charles Nason

Ph

B.Ru.Sc.

Dip.Agric.Econ.

Past chair of SQBRC ( South Qld Beef Research Committee )

Member of several organisations and societies such as

Australian Society of Animal Production

Tropical Grasslands Society ( now closed down )

Australian Rangelands Society

Royal Society of Queensland

Rural Debt Roundtable



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