



STATE DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND INDUSTRY COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr GE Malone (Chair)
Mr MJ Hart MP
Ms KN Millard MP
Mr TS Mulherin MP

Staff present:

Ms M Westcott (Principal Research Officer)

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO RELEVANCE OF GOVERNMENT LAND TENURE ACROSS QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 3 SEPTEMBER 2012

Gold Coast

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Subcommittee met at 11.30 am

ARCHER, Mr Colin, Managing Director, Archer Rural

ADAMS, Mrs Rose, Secretary, Gecko—Gold Coast and Hinterland Environment Council

VAN REYK, Ms Petrina, Campaigns Representative, Gecko—Gold Coast and Hinterland Environment Council

CHAIR: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I declare open the public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the future and continued relevance of government land tenure across Queensland and thank you for your interest and attendance here today. Today's committee is represented by a subcommittee, and I would like to introduce the committee members. My name is Ted Malone. I am the member for Mirani and chair of the committee and the subcommittee. Mr Tim Mulherin is the member for Mackay and the deputy chair. Other committee members are Ms Kerry Millard, the member for Sandgate, and Michael Hart, the member for Burleigh. The State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee is a committee of the Queensland parliament and, as such, represents the parliament. It is an all-party committee which adopts a nonpartisan approach to all its proceedings. In relation to media coverage, the subcommittee has resolved to allow TV coverage and photography during the hearing.

Today we will be hearing evidence between 11.30 and 12.30 from Mr Colin Archer and the Gecko Gold Coast and Hinterland Environment Council. Although the committee does not have a swearing-in process, I remind all witnesses that this hearing is a formal process of the parliament of Queensland and, as such, any person intentionally misleading the committee is committing a serious offence. It is the subcommittee's intention that the transcript of the hearing will be published. Before I commence, may I ask that mobiles and pagers be switched off or turned to silent mode. I welcome our witnesses and ask the Gecko group to turn to your submission.

Mrs Adams: Thank you very much for this opportunity. We very much value it. We had understood that we had five or 10 minutes to speak, so I will be extremely brief. In our submission we actually neglected to introduce ourselves. We have done so many submissions over the years, we kind of get used to it. We are a not-for-profit environmental group that was established in 1989 and we have worked tirelessly since that time to protect and preserve the natural environment and to improve the sustainability of the built environment, and we do this not just with our members but other groups throughout the Gold Coast and the wider community. Petrina would just like to run through some dot points relating to our submission.

Ms van Reyk: I work in a volunteer capacity for Gecko. I serve on the campaigns committee and I was instrumental in writing the submission that has been submitted, together with my colleagues. Just as an overview of the points that we raised, first of all we say that we do support the Queensland Conservation Council, the Australian Conservation Foundation and the National Parks Association of Queensland submissions to this review committee. We have brought up issues of biodiversity decline; the higher ecological value of some of the leasehold properties; the fact that we need to improve the proportion of conservation estate, and leaseholders contribute to that; and the Delbessie Agreement conditions that were imposed upon leaseholders through that work, which is also supported by AgForce. There are some Indigenous issues that we raised in our submission. We also talked about land uses. There seems to be a lot of question over that. If we are letting development happen, as seems to be stated, what type of development? We are also interested in foreign ownership conditions and allowances, and of course this relates to the national register of foreign ownership. We are also interested in knowing what selling price will be involved and who buys. We are also very concerned about food and water security issues. There are considerable issues to be brought up in that regard.

We note that it is 65 per cent of Queensland land which is under leasehold. This represents a public asset for the people. That also brings up political issues from the last election, as well as conditions that we go into in the submission. We also wanted to talk about the Clean Energy Future legislation at a federal level and talk about the opportunities that are available within that for this state, specifically the Carbon Farming Initiative and the Biodiversity Fund. We see those as opportunities for both the state as well as the landholders that need to be investigated without political interest. We are aware that there is a dominant perspective of easing red tape to allow development to happen, and we would like to see the perspectives and principles of that clarified and how that impacts on this release of land tenure.

Finally, we would like to say that there should be some recognition by the committee shown—an overt recognition—that all Queensland decisions exist in a much, much larger context these days—that is, national as well as global. We are in a situation where we are facing total environmental collapse. That has been recognised nationally and at a state level in the biodiversity strategies and so on, as well as at a Gold Coast

world United Nations level. So we are in a situation of climate change. There are climate change and other issues that are going on within Queensland such as urban and mining development pressures and the natural phenomena impacts from climate change as well as normal biodiversity decline issues that we have already talked about. So all of these issues do heavily impact on Queensland decisions that are made and we would like to see that recognition by the committee. I think that that is more than my two minutes. Thank you.

CHAIR: Rose, do you need to cover anything more than that?

Mrs Adams: I have prepared a short statement to read through. Petrina has covered most of the issues. It went into slightly greater detail, but we wanted to keep it to the two minutes.

CHAIR: I would allow you more than two minutes. We are quite flexible.

Mrs Adams: It is not very long; I realise your time is important. In terms of the issue of biodiversity decline, every report that comes out highlights a decline in biodiversity. The situation is not improving in areas of high biodiversity value contained within the leasehold areas. The Delbessie Agreement that is currently in place was developed over many years of consultation with all interested parties—landholders, farmers, Aboriginals, environmentalists—and the tiered system that is in place was designed in part to allow for the expansion of the protected area. The lessees for areas under leasehold had certain obligations to protect the biodiversity and there were areas that were earmarked for future incorporation into national park. So it would be a real loss to biodiversity for that opportunity to be set aside and that land not used for conservation purposes.

There is also concern about foreign ownership of the land. If it is released from government control, there is no ability to control what goes on in those areas. There is the issue of freedom—of business protecting their interests—so the man in the street will have no idea of what is going on there. It is a constant problem that government does not have sufficient funds to regulate the legislation they do have in place. A lot of it is on a trust basis, but we have seen over the years that that trust basis has led to a biodiversity decline. It is my understanding that the AgForce submission makes the statement that it is scientifically proven that the landholders and the farmers have delivered the best outcomes for the environment. I think in many cases that is true. Many farmers love their land. However, during that time there have been situations where there has been excessive use of chemical fertilisers that have run-off to the reef. So there are repercussions from improper land use. I think the governmental role should be maintained in ensuring that the very highest standards are maintained on these leasehold lands and not handed over to foreign ownership.

We did refer briefly to the pre-election promise of no sale of public assets, and we consider that 65 per cent of Queensland as being under state ownership is a significant asset. So we agree there is a cost to the state to administer these lands, but the most fundamental and basic wealth the government owns is our land. Those costs have to be considered as part of the governmental responsibilities for biodiversity whilst also at the same time balancing the difficult job of the needs for housing, commercial development and infrastructure. But the protection of the environment must go hand in hand. I have seen very little reference to the conservation values in many of the submissions, other than those from the environmental groups. In terms of the ability of nature to provide the services that sustain our life—clean water, fresh air—those are not valued highly enough and there is a wealth of research being undertaken that shows how undervalued ecological services are, and those are the things that need to be protected in the land that is not developed so far.

The red-tape issue is extremely worrying, because what is seen as red tape is perhaps hampering free access to what people want to do on their land. I see red tape as the development over many decades of what is the best way, what is the safest way, what is the best practice, what is the benchmarking and the best standards? So that aspect of regulation really needs to be maintained. There is no doubt that there are areas where there is duplication of services or perhaps petty impediments to getting something done that will be done eventually, but the underlying principle of protection is really paramount.

Just a final point that seems prudent at the moment relates to the green paper which is just commencing its consultation on food security. Those issues tie very much into leasehold land. I think it would be really prudent if there is a hold-off on any decision making with regard to leasehold land until this green paper has been thoroughly discussed at national and state levels. What are the implications for our food security with a change in climate and a growing population? I think we could safely say we will not at any time get more arable land. We have lost so much to housing and infrastructure. What remains really needs the highest level of protection. Did you want to add anything to that?

Ms van Reyk: No. I was just going to say that we have also lost a lot of land to coal seam gas and other resource infrastructure.

Mrs Adams: I did not even touch on the mining. That is an issue. I notice the Bimblebox submission. That is a real case in point where that land was set aside specifically for conservation and the understanding was it would be protected in perpetuity. But mining interests override the protective environmental legislation and there is currently a very real possibility that an enormous open-cut mine will be allowed and will destroy that area. So there is no enduring protection for what is recognised as being important, and that is a constant worry.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. The subcommittee will now ask some questions and I might start. I note that you were saying that the cost of the Queensland government holding so much leasehold land is a real issue in terms of funding that protection. Do you have any other ideas of how the Queensland government can maintain the protection of 70 per cent of its land in Queensland—and that is a higher percentage than any other state in Australia? Can you tell us how you think we could fund that better?

Ms van Reyk: I think that basically if your priority is to ensure that the environmental values and ecosystem service values and the environmental economics of the land are preserved then the best place for that land to be is under state governance.

CHAIR: That is fine but how do you fund the maintenance?

Ms van Reyk: I think the secret is in the conditions that are placed upon the leaseholder, because you can impose conditions that ensure that proper best practice management of the land is ensured.

CHAIR: So basically what you are saying is to transfer the cost of maintaining that land from the government to the leaseholder—

Ms van Reyk: Exactly, if not in total then at least in part. And that ties in with things like the Clean Energy Future legislation with the Carbon Farming Initiative, the Biodiversity Fund, Caring for our Country and so on. There are a number of other federal and state funding buckets for protecting and regenerating land. If we can make use of that funding, that actually gives the farmer or the landholder an income stream and it does create local employment in terms of regeneration efforts as well as maintenance efforts—and you are talking about massive areas of land of course. There was a tangent to that but I have lost the tangent.

CHAIR: I will give an example of the situation in Western Queensland and to the north where the live cattle trade was terminated very quickly. If you understand the cattle industry, they move their cattle on every 12 months. So when that opportunity was lost they virtually doubled their population back on their leasehold land. The land values dropped and quite a lot of leases in north Australia now are uneconomical for those landholders to hold. A lot of these properties are on the market and are being sold up by the banks. So the outcome of all of that is that there will be no income to the state government from a lot of that land where property owners are walking off. So there has to be a compromise between what they can afford to pay and what the Queensland government would need.

Ms van Reyk: Without trying to evade the question, this all goes back to this lack of focus on the longer term and the larger context in which we operate. We need to change our perspective on how we manage backyards, our state, our country and our entire planet. We have to realise that it all networks together. For example, if best practice had been imposed upon the cattle growers and the entire cattle industry right through to the abattoir chain, then possibly we would not have confronted the situation that we did. The reality was that we were sending our cattle to be subject to inhumane practices that had not been monitored properly. I know it is very well to say in hindsight that we should have fixed the problem. But I am afraid that that is a factor in this. We need to be aware of the larger context.

To get back to a more practical level, the mainstream environmental movement certainly does not advocate getting rid of all agriculture or getting rid of all farming practices et cetera. We fully acknowledge the importance of the agricultural sector. But what we are saying is that if you do not take the longer term view we are going to lose it—we are going to lose the agricultural sector. It is crucial—it is pivotal—to have the natural environment protected if we are going to have a healthy agricultural sector. Then of course on the other side of the ledger we do not need to be imposing further stresses on the agricultural sector such as the coal seam gas and other extraction industries which are taking away the land from these farmers. We only have four per cent of arable land.

Mr MULHERIN: So you are saying that more emphasis should be put back on the leaseholder to maintain the environmental values. That will come at a cost. And if the cost of that forces the leaseholder to become quite marginal and they leave the property then who looks after the land after that? The state. So it is about getting that balance right I suppose. I would like to get an appreciation of what your views are on leasehold land. Do you think it is a gift given to a person by the state without any conditions?

Ms van Reyk: No. That is not my understanding of it.

Mr MULHERIN: There is a perception out there that this has been a gift given to people, whereas going back to the early times of European settlement the land was opened up for farming and grazing but also to populate the areas. It was virgin country and graziers have invested significantly in leasehold land at great cost, and that is reflected in the market: when they sell a property that is leasehold, it probably goes for about the same price as freehold because it is based around the grazing capacity of the place. I just wanted to get your views on that. You also talked about foreign ownership. Are you aware that the Queensland government has a foreign ownership register?

Ms van Reyk: Yes.

Mr MULHERIN: And that only about two per cent of land is currently owned by foreigners?

Ms van Reyk: Just on a point of clarification, what is the criterion for entry on that register? I know that at the federal level—

Mr MULHERIN: I think Queensland is the only jurisdiction that has a foreign ownership register. So when the transaction is completed it is on the title and that information is transferred to—

Ms van Reyk: So it is any land, regardless of value.

Mr MULHERIN: Yes.

Ms van Reyk: That is how it should be at the federal level.

Mr MULHERIN: In relation to the government buyback of land in the Springbrook area, what are your views on that? Has that been successful? What impact has that had on other property owners? What impact has it had on businesses in that area?

Mrs Adams: When the plan was announced it was warmly welcomed because Springbrook National Park is Australia's second smallest national park—and that is only by a few hundred square metres. It is very tiny. It is one of the most visited national parks in Australia and it has some significant hindrances to development: there is no sewerage system; there is no reticulated water system; it is poorly served by transport—it has an extremely dangerous narrow, winding road. So the opportunity to expand on the national park was greeted with great joy by conservationists. There is the most incredible array of biodiversity at Springbrook.

It became a bit of a political football. The properties that were purchased were all on the open market. None of them were coerced sales. Some of the properties had been on the market for our two years. The factors that led to those properties being available in part were ageing owners and declining interest in running the operations. One of the properties was formerly run as a dairy farm, but it began declining from the 1970s. So there was historical decline in a lot of the original uses of those properties.

They were bought back for very specific reasons, and I can give the reference to Hansard afterwards if you would like to read the report from the Australian Rainforest Conservation Society on the attributes of each one of those properties. So it was definitely a move for conservation. Those properties were not functioning as active businesses, and I think in hindsight to imply that they were enormous commercial enterprises is mistaken. Their value to the environment is much greater than them sitting there as underutilised properties, and they were all for sale on the open market. So that was a definite positive.

Ecotourism and visitation to Springbrook National Park can only be enhanced by having more areas to visit. A lot of the properties were originally completely cleared for cattle and so on, but over the years they have regenerated, and the rainforest has an amazing ability to regenerate to strikingly good condition if left to do its thing. So Dr Aila Keto was instrumental in getting those buybacks underway. She is a renowned ecologist and scientist. She has received international awards. She has just received one from the United Nations for her work on rainforests. Simultaneously, she was one of the leading movers in reaching the Delbessie Agreement. So she has been at this for decades, for 30 to 40 years, and really knows what she is talking about. So if the committee were to look at that report on the Springbrook buybacks, they would see the true value of that initiative and we would really like to see it maintained.

Mr HART: Ladies, you seem to be leaning towards more government oversight instead of less. We have heard from various leaseholders during the last week that the present leases under the Delbessie Agreement are very complicated, hard to renew, cost a lot of money to put in place and have basically ground the process of renewing their leases to a halt. They are telling us that the government has sufficient planning laws in place without the Delbessie Agreement. Can you comment on that?

Ms van Reyk: If that is the case then it certainly has to be treated with respect and their opinions and their experiences have to be given full and due consideration. But in my opinion—it is more than opinion: it is a fact that we all have to face—we are facing this larger context of environmental collapse within 30 years and we do have enormous climate change issues going on. There has to be a responsible science based compromise found between the needs of leaseholders and the larger needs of our present generation and all our future generations and our economy as well. I do not think that the Delbessie Agreement needs to be thrown out just because it is onerous. If there are administrative bureaucratic issues that are making this Delbessie Agreement onerous then address them rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater, because we are facing a crisis, a world crisis—a survival crisis.

Mrs Adams: I do not think we are looking for more regulation. That is entirely untrue. We are looking for effective regulation. Historically, at one point farmers would happily graze their cattle in river beds. That is no longer good farming practice. That is recognised and it is legislated against. If those rules weren't in place, that would be the convenient thing to do for many landowners. So it is those protective measures that must be retained. A lot of those measures were hammered out through the Delbessie negotiations. They respected Indigenous heritage and valuable ecosystems, some of which are dwindling to a small percentage of what once covered the land. Are we saying that those ecosystems should be just done away with or allowed to deteriorate beyond saving? So those are the measures in place to save those environmental aspects. Delbessie needs to be reviewed for the good things that it does. The onerous things might well be inappropriate choices by landowners. If it is wrong, it remains wrong. It cannot be called a nuisance or an onerous condition if it should not be taking place.

Mr MULHERIN: So would you say that you would support simplification of regulation?

Mrs Adams: Yes. I think farmers have enough to contend with without—

Ms van Reyk: As long as best practice science is not compromised.

CHAIR: I just want to clarify this point. Land management has changed dramatically from the first generation. There were regularly large fires throughout Queensland, and Australia for that matter. We have actually changed that whole environment by minimising the fires. So basically if farmers and graziers more particularly in North and Western Queensland are not able to make an income on that leasehold land, they will walk off it. We will then go back to a situation where there will be massive fires through that country just by the fact that it is going to grow without management. Obviously then with large wildfires you lose not only your flora but your fauna as well. So there will certainly be a dramatic change in the biodiversity of those properties if they no longer have that management by people living on them. So obviously we would need to be very careful about how we impose restrictions or imposts on those farmers. Are you aware of the number of pages in the Delbessie Agreement?

Mrs Adams: I know it is massive.

CHAIR: Would you just like to comment on that? To me it is a bigger issue than just saying, 'Our land mass is facing degradation or the biomass is disappearing.' You actually have to think through the process if you force the population to retreat to the coast because they cannot make a living in North and Western Queensland. You are going to change the environment forever.

Mrs Adams: The reason they cannot make a living could be for a range of causes, some of which are political or passing like the business with the cattle. That is perhaps a blip on the cattle-farming scene. It is not our role to—

CHAIR: It is going to be bigger than a blip if they cannot earn a living by selling young cattle into live trade, because that is really the only opportunity they have ever had. They cannot fatten cattle in North Australia. It is almost impossible. They would have to transport them south, and you know that the cost with the carbon tax for transportation of cattle is just horrendous. The only market that they have ever made money out of is actually exporting into that live trade. That is just something to think about.

Ms van Reyk: I just wonder whether alternative, sustainable, future based uses of land have been properly explored by the government and whether there is any kind of intention to educate landholders and introduce them to new uses for the land that can be sustained and can bring them profit. You did mention the carbon levy, but that is a reality that we cannot ignore. That is a world trend. There is money to be made from recognising carbon as an economic factor. Just using the land as carbon offsets alone will help to address some of these issues of landholders' income, as well as the issue that you spoke about of ensuring that the land did not become susceptible to fire et cetera. That is just one small blip. I understand that there are a number of other agricultural uses.

CHAIR: As a businessman and an investor, the carbon price has gone from \$23 down to about \$15 and probably less into the future, so I would not invest money in it myself because I am a businessman. Michael has a question.

Mr HART: You mentioned—

Ms van Reyk: Could I just comment on that?

CHAIR: Okay.

Ms van Reyk: That was a political decision to take away the fixed carbon price—the guaranteed carbon price. Personally I do not agree with that.

CHAIR: Well, it is a fact.

Ms van Reyk: I think it has been made in response to the situation in Europe—the crises et cetera. Human beings are not going to follow the correct path just in a linear fashion. We do backslide in many things. I think ultimately we will have carbon pricing across the globe and economies will recover across the globe, but they will recover as new economies. They will not go back to the way they have been. We will, as I say, backslide et cetera. The carbon price—internationally as well as nationally—will rise and it will become a viable factor that stands at the basis of all economies. We just have to be intelligent and have foresight about it and be prepared, because otherwise we are going to hurt the very people who are trying to keep the status quo.

Mr MULHERIN: So you think that a grazier could rely solely on carbon farming as an income?

Ms van Reyk: You mean right now at this point in time?

Mr MULHERIN: Into the future, right now?

Ms van Reyk: It is possible. Carbon offsetting is an incredibly urgent issue.

Mr MULHERIN: Have you seen any modelling that has been done on carbon farming in Northern Australia and the size of the operation to get a greater return? Would you see further aggregation of properties?

Ms van Reyk: I have seen modelling, but I have also seen modelling—

Mr MULHERIN: Does it suggest that people—

Ms van Reyk:—that comes from different perspectives. You can skew modelling however you want—however you start it, whatever starting point you come from. As Gecko we are saying that this is the reality of the world. We have to reduce carbon. Carbon sequestration is going to become a major industry, not just within Australia but we could open it up to the world. Australia is trying to import its carbon sequestration and really in my opinion we should be focusing on using our own—

Mr MULHERIN: So have a non-market system?

Ms van Reyk: No, I am not saying that at all. No, I am saying that we should open up our own lands to carbon sequestration, as has been mooted in parliament by the present government.

Mr MULHERIN: You said earlier that four per cent of the land in Queensland is of arable quality, so that is—

Mrs Adams: No, that was protection under national parks.

Ms van Reyk: Well, actually no. I was referring to arable land.

Mr MULHERIN: I think you said four per cent of the total land mass of Queensland is arable land, which suggests it is only suitable for cropping, which then suggests that the other 96 per cent that is either taken up with mining or urban development and what is left is of a non-arable nature and there are limitations as you go further west on the types of activities that could generate an income either for the state or for individuals to maintain that land to the ecological values that society demands. So that limits you really to grazing and mining, and you have mentioned carbon farming. What are the other types of industries that you would think would replace those industries?

Ms van Reyk: The world needs food.

Mr MULHERIN: Yes, but you need arable land. You need water.

Ms van Reyk: I am sorry, but I do not follow you.

Mr MULHERIN: You were saying that four per cent of the land is of arable nature, so that is for cropping.

Ms van Reyk: That is what we have been saying.

Mr MULHERIN: Yes, but in terms of the other remaining land you are saying that for western land we need to improve the environmental practices through things like Delbessie. But for that to occur—if you are going to leave it as leasehold land or freehold land or whatever—people who work that land and respect the values of that land require a rate of return, and there are not too many types of business activities that will give you the return—

Ms van Reyk: Besides grazing, you mean?

Mr MULHERIN: Besides grazing or mining.

Ms van Reyk: I do not think we are saying not to graze. I do not think we are saying that at all, are we?

Mrs Adams: No.

Ms van Reyk: Have we ever said that?

Mr MULHERIN: Well, you were sort of saying—

Mrs Adams: It has to be done within the framework.

Ms van Reyk: I cannot quite get a handle on what you are saying.

Mr MULHERIN: You were saying that the opportunities will come through carbon farming.

Ms van Reyk: It is not just that. I said amongst other things carbon farming.

Mrs Adams: That will be transitional. It will not happen overnight.

Ms van Reyk: What I am asking is for the government to play its part here and use its resources, because we are volunteers. But we are aware of a number of innovations that are constantly happening amongst humanity. Australia and Queensland needs to use its resources—the government should use its resources—to perhaps have some kind of investigation into what alternative, sustainable, long-term uses can be put into that land to try to help these people, because even without these constraints—even without the changes that are possible with this review—farmers are struggling. They are struggling very, very badly. It is not because of environmental constraints; it is because of a raft of other factors. We need to be realistic. We need to face what is really going on.

CHAIR: Sorry, but we are running out of time. Kerry and Michael would like to ask some questions and I should ask the local member if he would like to address the subcommittee as well.

Ms MILLARD: I have two reasonably quick questions. The first one is going back to the Springbrook buyback. Do you feel that the environmental management plan that was put forward with that was sufficient?

Mrs Adams: I think it required a lot more input from government agencies and funding to make it a reality. The purchases of the land were just the initial stage. The support for the restoration and the upgrading of those lands needs a significant investment.

Ms MILLARD: So at the moment it is not being managed terribly well, you do not feel?

Mrs Adams: No, I would not say it is not being managed well. There are insufficient resources to achieve the ideals of the restoration project.

Ms MILLARD: How would you see a good way of getting around that if there were future purchases or for even maintaining that moving on?

Mrs Adams: It is quite an out-there suggestion, but possibly charging for people to go into the national parks might be a way to increase the revenue. The proposals we are seeing at the moment of opening up the national parks are quite alarming, because it is moving away from the cardinal principles of environmental protection. We agree with the National Parks Association of Queensland submission that there are a lot of uses that are more suited to outside the national parks. So possibly any additional purchases would not necessarily be an addition to the national park; it could be protected areas that could accommodate those commercial activities that are being proposed. So there is a level of conservation, but it is not intruding on the World Heritage values of the national park itself. So that would be a way around. Queenslanders have always enjoyed free access to our national parks. Possibly that is something the government might consider as a revenue source, because the rangers are underfunded. I know quite a few rangers and the first three days of every week are spent fixing up vandalism, repairing benches and picking up litter and the actual work of maintaining the parks is falling behind. So if they have additional expenses to maintain the damage done by a lot of commercial activity—and there will be damage—the rangers will have to be significantly increased in number to handle all that. So we might have to face paying our way in.

Mr HART: Ladies, you mentioned that we should consider educating our farmers. I think you might have said environmentally appropriate farming. How would you suggest we go about that and who might do that?

Ms van Reyk: You need to have the research done in the first place about what other viable industries there are for the future, and both the Queensland government and the federal government and all governments across Australia have an education arm. They are quite accustomed to using advertising materials and mobile forums and committees and so on that do this sort of thing. It has been a practice in other areas that is quite common.

Mr HART: So you think we have people in government who are knowledgeable enough to—

Ms van Reyk: I do not think people in government are knowledgeable enough, no. Are you talking about elected representatives or are you talking about government departments?

Mr HART: No, educational people.

Ms van Reyk: Within the government, of course there are departments that are dedicated to finding out best practice in all kinds of things, I would hope, in a country that claims to be advanced. They do have education arms. We have had people come out to Gecko, for example, and tell us about whatever. With regard to the recent koala listing for example—that is a federal issue—there was a series of presentations around Queensland and around Australia. I have just been to one recently and I think we are organising another one to come to Gecko. There are sections within departments whose job it is to educate.

Mrs Adams: There is always an opportunity to liaise with universities who can provide specialist input.

CHAIR: I have always said—and I probably should not say it on *Hansard*—that the worst thing you can do on a block of ground is to put a 100 tonne of concrete on it and build a house. That is my view.

Ms MILLARD: This probably does not affect this area here so much, but just in general what are your views on introducing waters to areas?

Ms van Reyk: Waters?

Ms MILLARD: Yes, like creating dams and that sort of thing. Artificial waters I think they call it.

Ms van Reyk: Is that the term when you are talking about infrastructure—

Mr MULHERIN: Water storage systems.

Ms van Reyk: We have not heard of that term ‘artificial waters’.

Mrs Adams: I think as a starting point there should be no new dams.

Ms van Reyk: We have very grave concerns every time a dam is proposed. That is based on science as far as the effects on ecosystems are concerned—all ecosystems are extremely valuable.

CHAIR: So you are suggesting that we knock our dams down.

Mrs Adams: No. We are saying no new dams.

Mr HART: Or are you suggesting that we build desal plants?

Ms van Reyk: No. We are not saying that at all. Again, this becomes a larger context issue. We need to look at the population of Australia against the population of the entire world—the fact that we have just hit seven billion and, even if we put the brakes on, through natural conditions we are going to hit 11 billion. We have this, in our view, irresponsible attitude that Australia can hold 50 million and we have no policy in place to address the impacts of that in the short to medium term. We keep putting the population into coastal shires. We keep imposing more pressure on coastal shires while rural shires are suffering. We

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do not do any investigation into how we can spread the population load that is already happening and we do not do anything to address some of these irresponsible policies that are directed at increasing the population of Australia.

Mrs Adams: That is a whole other inquiry, I think.

Ms van Reyk: Population is a massive issue. I think this goes back to the other issue that we all need to stop having these dichotomies and these separations because we are facing a crisis and we need to look at our lives and our futures from a completely different perspective, from a survival perspective. That means throwing out this idea that economic growth is dependent on population growth, because it is irresponsible and it is plainly flawed. It is a myth.

CHAIR: So we should stop immigration.

Ms van Reyk: We do not need to stop immigration. There are numbers that have been done on that. We can keep it to around 70,000 I think is the number and that means that we cover the fact that Australians, because we are educated and wealthy, tend to have zero population growth. So that keeps us ticking along. I think we need to reduce immigration.

Mr MULHERIN: Are you aware of the CSIRO report into northern Australia in relation to opportunities particularly around using a mosaic approach with farming and grazing?

Ms van Reyk: I am aware of it but I have not read it.

Mr MULHERIN: It is an interesting read. It does address soil types and further work. Just for your information, there is a joint partnership between federal and state government and industry looking at soil types in the Flinders and the Archer River with the opportunity to open it up not only for grazing but for arable land. That CSIRO report indicates that the only opportunities lie in farming and grazing. I thought I would bring that to your attention.

Also, are you aware that industry does partner with government in the provision of extension services based on science to the agricultural sector and that there are partnerships with industry, government departments and the universities—for example, the University of Queensland with the Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation, QAAFI—which are looking at a lot of those things? Most modern grazing and farming is based around science. As you rightly pointed out at the beginning, most landholders do the right thing. But it is that investment by them in R&D, along with the government and along with the universities, that will assist us into the future.

CHAIR: Time is getting on, so I will now invite Ray Stevens, the member for Mermaid Beach, to address the committee.

Mr STEVENS: Thank you, Mr Chairman, for the opportunity to make an unscheduled speech to the committee because it is a great pleasure for me to see the committee in this area, giving the local people the opportunity to make submissions and make comment. As someone who has actually had a grazing homestead freehold lease and been an operator, I am well aware of the importance of your investigation.

Mr MULHERIN: Doncaster, wasn't it, near Richmond?

Mr STEVENS: Correct. Thank you, member for Mackay. That is absolutely spot on. It was north-east of Richmond in north-west Queensland.

CHAIR: And that was a luxurious lifestyle!

Mr STEVENS: That is why I moved to the Gold Coast. As someone who has been involved with the growth of the Gold Coast since I entered public life in 1988—I think the mayor of the Gold Coast in 1986 opened this wing where we are sitting here today—it is a pleasure to see that the good folk here have the opportunity to make their submissions. It is important work that the committee does so that the legislation that comes before the House is well considered by government and the opposition and that provides the parliament with the opportunity to make better decisions at the end of the day. It is great to see the good ladies of Gecko here. I have been dealing with Gecko probably since the early nineties. Was it 1992?

Mrs Adams: We were founded in 1989, so since then but not before.

Mr STEVENS: I started in 1988 in the Albert shire. Gecko have been making important points in relation to the Gold Coast region. All of those matters are important for the decision makers to consider. Thank you very much for the opportunity to say some brief words. I am listening today with great interest. It is very good to see your committee here on the Gold Coast. I wish you every success in your deliberations.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Stevens, and we welcome you on board. That is why we have allowed Gecko to have the majority of our time. I thought it was important that we do that.

Ms van Reyk: Thank you for that. We appreciate your hearing us.

CHAIR: So we might move on now to Mr Colin Archer. We are not going to restrict the timing, Colin. We will run as long as we have to in listening to your submission.

Mr Archer: I am here representing the Archer family rural enterprise from North Queensland. Thank you for letting me come down here; unfortunately I could not get to Cairns. I put in a submission in the standard AgForce format. I am a member of AgForce but these are my thoughts, not those of AgForce.

By way of background, just so you may understand that we are passionate about our land and that we do understand the correlation between responsible environmental management and sustainable beef production: our enterprise consists of two properties—one freehold, which is Wanora Downs in Western Queensland, not that far from your local member, Mr Stevens, whom I grew up with; and one leasehold, which is Glen Ruth in the Tablelands region and that is a 30-year term lease, expiring in 2035, of 32,700 hectares.

By way of background, the Archer family have been in the pastoral industry for 102 years when my grandfather acquired Wanora Downs in Western Queensland. We have run that property continuously in the one family for that long. We do understand that people can lose leases because Wanora Downs was actually a subdivision of the Ayrshire amalgamation which my great-grandfather owned and that was deamalgamated in 1910.

CHAIR: You mean divided off.

Mr Archer: Yes. It was divided off. A fellow called William Cameron had that—as was Glen Ruth divided off from the Cashmere property. Glen Ruth was the homestead block that the Atkinson family kept from Cashmere when it was subdivided in around 1920 or 1930. It was much the same time as this—

CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, but the subdivision was based on living area, wasn't it?

Mr Archer: It was based on what was considered a living area. What was considered a living area in the 1930s is different now. I know that on our place, which was 30,000 acres near Winton then, we had four single men, a married couple, a governess and a cook to run 30,000 acres. Now I have one part-time manager and my sons come in and do the mustering camps. So a living area has expanded quite substantially.

So the history behind Glen Ruth is that I acquired that property in 2007 as a drought-proofing mechanism for our cattle enterprise. It became our breeder block and we fatten our cattle in Western Queensland. Glen Ruth is a highly arable mixture of black, red and sandy soils, with an abundance of running water as it backs on to the Cardwell State Forest, which has a 90-inch rainfall. Glen Ruth has a 35- to 50-inch rainfall across the block. It has been used in the cattle industry since the early 1870s so far as we know and more recently by the Atkinson family, who developed the droughtmaster breed at Glen Ruth. So it has some priority for the droughtmaster. It has considerable white areas on it—about 3,000 hectares—which have been previously been farmed for corn and silage, including a large feedlot back in the 1980s when the Atkinson's developed the property.

My issue is that this property has huge potential but we only have 23 years left on our lease. It sounds like a long time but it is not. It is only half my sons' lifetime. I would like to see them get the benefit of that. What can be done with that block is limitless because it has an enormous overland flow of water, it has enormous underground water reserves and it has very arable soil—in fact, some of our neighbours farm potatoes and this property itself has had a substantial corn enterprise on it in past years.

When we acquired it it was in less than good shape and it suffered from extreme lantana infestation of over 12,000 hectares. In the past five years since we have had it we have cleared all the white areas of lantana and regrowth, we have cooperated in a joint program with DERM re lantana management on a 500-acre area and we have also—you probably will not want to hear this—got a licence, a development permit, for selective clearing of approximately 10,000 hectares which allows you to take trees to about a four-inch diameter, which is regrowth, and allows you to get in and clear out the lantana.

We are also allowed to do it with controlled burns, which we have done. I think that might be changing now with the new fire safety regulations that have come in this year, but it has been effective and we have probably increased production of that property by around 50 per cent in five years. We could see a limitless increase if we spend the money to develop the property further, but obviously you need tenure to do that because this task that is ahead of us is probably 10 to 15 years of work and a substantial amount of money. After that you only have seven or eight years left on the lease to recoup your dividend.

While we take heart from Delbessie, the concept, the thought process behind it and the cooperative nature between environmentalists and governments and farmers, unfortunately we get struck out at the first hurdle because there is a native title claim over 2,665 square kilometres in that area. While I am aware that there has been some talk with the North Queensland Land Council and 100 or so lessees from Mount Isa have got together and put in some short form of satisfaction, they are only lessees that are getting towards the end of the term of their lease and had to do something. I would like to be in a situation to apply under Delbessie and say, 'We had a 30-year lease. We've done certain steps. We're quite happy to enter into a land management agreement, but we need something to give us a 50-year foresight so that we can go ahead and comfortably invest the money and the labour so that when we do improve this property we do have something that is ours to keep.'

In respect of the Aboriginal claim, I do not think it is an enormous thing, but how do you bring it to a head? When I first went there Joe Morganson, who is the local representative of the Warrungu people, and his archeologist from Canberra in 2009—I think it was December 2008—were going to do a report. I took them out to the site and Joe had a smoke, had a look around for half an hour and left and that is the last I have heard of it. There certainly may be people who have claims, and I am quite happy to enter into one of those agreements, and I think there is a template agreement that the North Queensland Land Council have got. In terms of the cost and the difficulty in getting people together to sign off on something that is

suitable so you can then go to the Queensland state government to try to comply with Delbessie, it is not working for me. This is probably a question I have for you people on the panel—that is, how do we negotiate native title claim in the short form other than those people who have done it who, I understand, were just at the end of their lease and something had to be done? Really, they only have a stopgap template. Mr Mulherin, you have been doing this for a while. You might be able to help me, or Mr Malone.

CHAIR: The unfortunate part about it is that native title comes under the federal government legislation and we do not have the terms of reference to deal with that particular aspect of it. I think through AgForce's involvement in templates there may be some opportunities to look at trying to finalise native title agreements and access et cetera through some template type program that would lessen the cost to leaseholders, but it certainly is an issue. You were saying that with Delbessie you would not be able to get a 50-year lease, because that is the upper limit, isn't it?

Mr Archer: I would be prepared to apply for it, but I cannot get to apply because I have a native title claim over the land.

Mr MULHERIN: So if that is not resolved, you cannot renew. What is the renewal on your land then?

Mr Archer: There is 23 years to go, but I do not want to—

Mr MULHERIN: You would hope that it would be resolved by then.

Mr Archer: My sons have spent half their life on it, and who knows what the political mix will be in 23 years time. Certainly I know what can happen. Right beside me I have 100,000 acres of Yorke which has just been funded by Bush Heritage which is Bob Brown's vehicle to convert it into national park. On the other side is Kirrima which the state government bought for the Girraween people about 10 years ago.

CHAIR: So what development has taken place there?

Mr Archer: On Girraween?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Archer: On Badjuballa they bought some cattle initially, but now they lease it out to my neighbour at \$1.50 a head for their cattle and do nothing, and I fix their fences.

CHAIR: That was a good step, wasn't it?

Mr MULHERIN: You were saying with your property that when you took it over about 38 per cent of it was covered in lantana and you have certainly reduced the amount of lantana. So you would say that you would be best practice as an environmental land manager and grazier?

Mr Archer: Bernie English from DERM has been down there probably three times a year and he helps us and he gives us clues. Yes, we would certainly like to think we are best practice.

Mr MULHERIN: So your biggest impediment is not having an Indigenous land use agreement which would allow you to maximise the opportunities under Delbessie for a 50-year lease?

Mr Archer: That is my problem, yes. I know where Joe lives in Mount Garnet, but I cannot find him.

Mr HART: Colin, it sounds like you are really worried about what the government might do in the future—that is, sovereign risk type thing. If there was some comfort with that, are you happy to just continue the way you are going?

Mr Archer: We will not expand it and we will not improve it to the point of doing all this clearing. You are talking about a \$3 million or \$4 million spend that you just cannot justify if you have not got a better tenure.

Mr HART: So if there was some process in place that almost guaranteed that future governments would not change the structure of the way things are now or you were able to take an option on your lease for the next 30 years in some process, would that help?

Mr Archer: If you have leased tenure, but you cannot give me any guarantee on future governments. We could have who knows who.

Mr HART: Many people have talked to us about freehold being a guarantee of a future government not interfering in what they do, and that is the reason they are telling us that they want to get to that either perpetual lease or freehold area because they are worried about future governments.

Mr Archer: I would love to get to a perpetual lease or freehold.

Mr HART: If we cannot get to that because of native title, maybe the other option is there is some process we can get to. I do not know how we do it mind you, but some way of guaranteeing that a future government cannot interfere with this whole process.

Mr Archer: That is a bit difficult, Michael, but I would love to explore it.

Mr HART: We are here to think outside the box and to come up with ideas.

Mr Archer: The idea of Delbessie is to me fine, but it has not got around the complications. With regard to the idea of having a land management agreement that you have to stick with, I am very happy with that. But that has not been practically used anywhere that I know of.

Mr HART: What I am suggesting, Colin, is there may be some whole other level of tenure that we have not even considered that may give you that comfort.

CHAIR: Colin is probably in a situation where he will obviously say yes, but Kerry would like to ask a question.

Ms MILLARD: I am not sure if you mentioned whether you bordered any national park or forestry land. Do you?

Mr Archer: I do border onto the Cardwell State Forest at the back for about seven or eight kilometres.

Ms MILLARD: With regard to management of weed control, do you feel as though you manage well what comes from your land and trying to avoid it going into the forestry land or the national park land? Also, do you see a lot of problems coming out of there and going on to your land?

Mr Archer: No, because the national park is actually rainforest and mine is savannah. Cattle do not go back into there. We keep the fence up, but no generally.

Ms MILLARD: What about weed control?

Mr Archer: The sorts of weeds that grow, which is lantana, do not grow in the forest because the forest has a canopy over it. But certainly Bush Heritage is funded 50 per cent by the federal government and 50 per cent by Bob Brown's Greens. No-one funds their maintenance, so there are plenty of feral cattle on their place and plenty of feral pigs and plenty of brumbies and they do not really have a budget to look after it.

CHAIR: So there have been no shoot-outs with pigs or anything like that?

Mr Archer: That is pig capital there. When they have the Tablelands pig shoot, they all head to Yorka if they can get on.

Mr MULHERIN: You were saying that if you had longer tenure or certainty over tenure you could realise the optimum return on the property, both from a grazing point of view and also looking after the environmental values of the place. What length of tenure would you need for that? Is it 50 years?

Mr Archer: We are focused on 50 years.

Mr MULHERIN: You would get a rate of return of around about seven per cent?

Mr Archer: It would be well past my lifetime, but 50 years. The net present value of that in a financial sense when you bring it back at six per cent to year dot is nothing. So, yes, it is considered.

Mr HART: Colin, what about lease payments? Are you happy with the level of payments?

Mr Archer: That was the last one, Michael. At the present time we pay \$6,000, but the valuation is \$1.2 million of which the government's percentage is 1½. In my case the lease has just come down from \$1.8 million, so on the weighted average I think my lease payment in 2017 when the cap period expires will go from \$6,000 to \$23,000. So that will be a bit of an impost.

Mr HART: When you purchased your land to start with, did you pay a commercial rate for it?

Mr Archer: Because I purchased it in 2007, which was the peak, Michael, I probably paid a little bit more—a couple million over the commercial rate—but that is the way it is.

Mr STEVENS: Peter Kennedy is glad you did. He was the previous owner.

Mr MULHERIN: Colin, how does the purchasing of leasehold land compare with freehold land? Is it roughly on the same par, or is there much difference in pricing?

Mr Archer: No, there was a discount, but it depends on what freehold land. Most freehold land is cleared land whereas this only has 3,000 hectares of 30,000 cleared.

Mr MULHERIN: So really the carrying capacity is what you pay for.

Mr Archer: Yes. We paid around about \$1,700 or \$1,800 a beast area. They were paying about \$2,500 out west per beast area at that stage, so it is at a discount. It is a bit hard to compare apples with apples. If you come back to a beast area, you pay a little bit less for the lease.

CHAIR: Colin, we might leave it at that. We have gone a little over time. Peter Grayson has not turned up, and we have certainly gone over the allocated time for the hearing. I want to thank everybody in attendance at the public hearing today and I believe that the subcommittee has gained some relevant information that will assist the inquiry into the future and continued relevance of land tenure across Queensland. I also want to thank Hansard for their attendance here today keeping a record of everything we have said, and they certainly have assisted with today's hearing. I now ask committee members to second a motion to authorise the publication of the evidence. I move it.

Mr MULHERIN: I second it.

CHAIR: There being no objection, it is so ordered. Thank you again for your attendance here today. It was great.

Subcommittee adjourned at 12.44 pm