

Wednesday, 17 December 2014

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission and the opportunity to have a say in the development of Australia's future agricultural policy.

Please find attached documents supporting our submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper.

[REDACTED]

We noted that the issue of Non Occupancy on properties or Absenteeism has not been identified in the Green Paper as a specific issue or category for discussion.

We feel that this is a significant issue that has been increasing steadily over the last 10 years in particular and has the potential to significantly affect the future production of food and fibre in Australia.

As such, our submission is focused around this issue as well as several others and we wish to present a case study we have undertaken in South West Queensland as to property occupancy rates. We have identified seven categories of occupancy and have mapped these to the best of our ability across the SW region of QLD to represent the different issues. We believe that if nothing is done to support the people remaining on properties to stay and provide incentives for people to return to properties this issue will continue to grow exponentially and have serious ramifications in land management and food security.

It was highlighted in the Green Paper that the "top 25% of properties equate to 54% of production". This leaves 75% of properties at production rates lower than capacity and we believe that one of the contributing factors to this is the % of properties currently functioning under minimal labour and animal husbandry management due to the property being managed from afar.

If the land manager / owner were able to be present on the property all facets of land management would have the opportunity to be significantly improved and then also improve the earning power for the property to remain viable and support families and building communities.

To create a situation where people live on these properties for the future of sustainable grazing in this region we must create the following incentives. This includes to both retain people remaining on property and to entice people back to properties currently being managed from afar.

- Reconstruction and Development Bank to provide long term low interest loans and some competition to the commercial banks, these loans need to be targeted at keeping families in agriculture, used to develop marginal properties into viable enterprises, succession of family properties to encourage young families back into agriculture.
- Costs must be kept to a minimum through Government management of the economy so that input cost like road transport, wages, rego, insurance etc are affordable and not costing more than what can be reasonably earned.
- Ongoing and increased support from all tiers of Government in policy, funding and on ground programs in association with landholders for feral animal control (Wild Dog). Dog control will increase revenue back into both Government and local communities. Controls may entail the standard baiting and trapping programs run by Shires but needs to include support for fencing for sheep production areas – in particular in the more marginal landscapes where sheep are more ideally suited and other species such as cattle are not as productive and the need for diversity in an enterprise to protect it from market crashes and fluctuations. Subsidised predator fencing options at 100% for materials in the lower productivity landscapes is needed because of the distances involved and the greater cost to erect.
- Removal of veg laws on freehold land and ongoing and increased support for management of woody weeds including native species such as Mulga regeneration on leasehold, which is turning many areas into monocultures of almost impenetrable scrub.
- Ongoing and increased support through Water Infrastructure Grants for piping water and building large scale stock dams where bore water is too deep to access affordably in the arid areas where climatic conditions enable large scale collection of water at one time followed by long periods of low rainfall needed for replenishment.
- Ongoing natural disaster funding for those in need aimed at properties with short term viability problems.

It is vitally important to reverse the trend towards vacating properties particularly in the semi arid areas or the trend will continue to impact into the more productive country as a result of the increased pressures generated by lack of feral control, weed control, fire management and the lack of community and the social pressures this creates.

Currently when pressures become too great the inclination is for properties to be sold either voluntarily or via Bank Foreclosure. This just continues to aggravate the issue as these properties usually go unoccupied which exaggerates the pressures for the neighbours and the new owners.

Over the last twenty years where a property has been sold there has been a tendency for that property to be successively sold several times due to the new owners being unable to stay viable due to same pressure impacting on previous owners.

The management of areas or regions are only as strong as the weakest link therefore areas with low on ground management due to Absenteeism or minimal management have dramatic ripple effects across the region for both other graziers and for local towns and communities.

If we can provide any further information or clarify existing points within our submission please feel free to contact the following people.

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