

SUBMISSION TO THE GOVERNMENT'S AGRICULTURAL COMPETITIVENESS WHITE PAPER

Thank you to the Commonwealth Government for the opportunity to make a submission to the development of a White Paper that examines ways to improve agriculture in our country.

My submission covers three main topics which I believe are critical to the sustainable development of agriculture into the future. Firstly, I wish to put forward a proposal concerning foreign investment in rural lands in our country which I believe will provide a means of reasonably balancing the interests of all those concerned. My second recommendation concerns climate change and my third concerns removing the threats to our underground water supplies inextricably tied to coal seam gas exploration and production.

1. FOREIGN OWNERSHIP OF RURAL LANDS – AGRICULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES

My wife and I recently planted over a 1000 trees on our small rural property, as part of our responsibilities under a Voluntary Conservation Agreement entered into with the Sunshine Coast Regional Council late last year. At about the same time controversy was raging in the media over the strong growth in Foreign Investment, particularly in rural/agricultural lands. The controversy appears not to have diminished.

It is appreciated that foreign investment is necessary for the further development of our agricultural industry particularly as food security looms as a major issue, both internationally and nationally. Clearly there is concern at a national level about the need to balance the demand for increased agricultural production on the one hand and protection of a sustainable bio-diverse environment that supports agriculture on the other.

I believe there is real scope and opportunity to strengthen the balance between agricultural development, environmental protection and combatting climate change, in pursuit of the Government's ambitions for both agricultural and environmental sustainability. My suggestion as to how this might be achieved follows.

USE OF PERMANENT CONSERVATION AGREEMENTS WHEN DEALING WITH FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN AGRICULTURAL LANDS

My understanding is that currently there are provisions for the Foreign Investment Review Board to refer specific application assessment matters to appropriate agencies for comment. I assume where there might be a question relating to biodiversity, the matter is referred to the Department of the Environment. Further, I understand that Department has the power to enter into conservation agreements "for the protection and conservation of biodiversity in an area of land and sea" and a number of such agreements are already in place.

From our own experience and knowledge, conservation agreements, particularly permanent conservation agreements, are proving a very practical way for rural landowners both large and small to protect and sustain the significant environmental elements of their properties without diminishing the productive use of their land.

Without hopefully appearing presumptuous, it appears to me that in the case of agricultural land, there is a golden opportunity to link foreign ownership ambitions with our own national desires concerning protection of the environment. What I propose for consideration is:

1. The current FIRB limits exempting the need for certain foreign investors to apply to invest in rural lands be removed and that all foreign investment proposals in respect of rural lands be subject to application, assessment and approval processes.

2. All foreign investment applications in respect of rural lands be referred to the Department of the Environment for its consideration of the biodiversity implications. Following its examinations the Department would be required to identify and recommend such measures and actions needed to be taken to protect and improve the environmental attributes and sustainability of the property. Such recommendations would form the basis for biodiversity requirements to be applied as conditions of sale. Such conditions would then be incorporated in a permanent conservation agreement covenant tied to the property.
3. Where differences of opinion arise as to the application of the permanent conservation agreement between FIRB and the Department, the matter be referred to the appropriate Ministers for resolution.

BENEFITS

I believe there are a number of significant benefits associated with my proposal.

For the investor I believe some of the benefits include:

1. Increased credibility from demonstrating their commitment to balancing development and environmental needs in the best interest of all concerned.
2. The generation of more ready acceptance of any further investment proposals they might have.
3. Diminishing the risk of environmental protest actions by being seen to be doing the right thing by the environment.
4. Greater community acceptance of further foreign investment.

For certain vendors there can be reassurance that by selling their properties they are not abandoning the conservation improvements they have made over the years to their properties.

For the Government and the community I believe some of the benefits that would accrue from the proposal include:

1. Enhancement of the Government's environmental ambitions and credentials.
2. An increase in the area of threatened habitat under permanent protection, without significant associated costs to the Government.
3. Provide a significant opportunity for the farming community to play an even more significant part in combatting climate change.

I strongly recommend the above proposals for implementation.

2. CLIMATE CHANGE

I'm afraid I am at a loss to understand how a Paper directed to looking at a climate critical industry such as agriculture, can examine future growth and competitiveness, without dealing with the very real ramifications of significant changes to the physical environment in which the industry will be operating. It is certain that these changes are now occurring and will accelerate to affect agriculture and agricultural communities around the world, not only in Australia.

Without drastic action now, CSIRO modeling predicts huge shifts will occur in farming viability and sustainability across the nation.

Surely, the problems and need for solutions must be recognised and dealt with as a vital part of the White Paper considerations.

It is strongly recommended that the White Paper examine and put forward policies and programs which translate rhetoric about "accepting the climate change science" into real action policies and programs that will protect the future of agriculture in this country.

3. CSG EXPLORATION AND MINING

Another significant risk to the future of agriculture in Australia is the threat to ground water supplies across the country posed by coal seam gas exploration and mining.

The rush to profit from high overseas prices for gas has led to the development of this form of mining on a large scale across Australia, clearly without full understanding and it appears due regard, to the possible/probable poisoning of our nation's underground water supplies.

Just to take one example of the associated risks relates to the operations of the SANTOS company in N/W NSW where they are reported to have sunk 56 test wells. So far there have been 16 reported spills or leaks, that is, nearly a 30 % failure rate. The scope of the risk is illustrated by the reported intention of this one company alone to build 850 wells in this area.

Consequently, it is further strongly recommended that the White Paper examine and put forward a policy that puts a halt on CSG mining until a proper examination is done on the cost benefits that might be involved, with particular attention paid to the risks to water supplies, farmers and their communities and the environment generally.

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