

Response to White Paper

As a current beef farmer and landcare member, I would like to respond to your White Paper.

Our family entered the farming industry 10 years ago. We built up our herd of stud quality cattle and purchased a property. Over the ten years our return on capital investment has averaged 10% gross. This is before deducting costs such as fertilizer, transport, fodder and veterinary fees. Over the past two years with fuel costs rising and droughts, it has been increasingly difficult to make any form of income. We rely on off farm income.

The reason I put forward this information is to suggest that agriculture is no longer a financially viable way of life that most people seem to think it is. ABARE statistics confirm this. To continue to expect the agricultural community to fund our environment protection is not equitable. There are areas where farming practices are destroying the environment due to the desperation of the owners to get some return. Rather than the current practice of having 'one off' funding projects where the criteria is restrictive and the paper work probably kills more trees than it saves, it would be sensible to have an on-going employment of the farmer to farm the land for the environment rather than produce. Due to farm returns being so low and the need to rebuild breeding stock, infrastructure etc, after the drought some farmers may consider the following proposal.

Proposal

Farmers in zones where productivity of land is limited or in an area which is seen as having high environmental significance, should be given the opportunity to farm the land for the environment. In other words, they are employed by the government on behalf of the tax payers (this shares the burden outside of the agricultural sector) at a reasonable wage (current wage of farm managers?) to eradicate weeds and pest animals from the property. Re-establishment of native grasses and vegetation would need to be funded separately – could be funded through carbon credit schemes etc. The property would still remain the property of the owner and should it be sold then a new employment contract would need to be developed with the new owner. While this may seem that the advantages of re-establishing the bush would be lost, I personally think that the property would be on-sold to people of like mind. (Covenants etc devalue land and would be very off

putting to an owner and it is unlikely that many would take up this employment opportunity). I would further suggest that the owner is still rated as a primary producer and may even keep a few stock for private use. There would have to be security in this arrangement. Where many of the environmental projects have fallen down, is due to lack of on-going commitment. E.g. – A farmer is often planning their business for the next five years. Annual projects that are offered at the whim of the government in power, would not be attractive. If the land is to be offered up for re-vegetation it would need to be done so for at least 10 years.

While there have been some occasions where land has been purchased for environmental preservation by privately funded conservation groups, this is probably too little, too late. Purchasing property is expensive and when you consider the amount of drought relief and the costs on rural communities, the cost of maintaining possibly families on a reasonable way, would be cheaper!

One further comment is that landcare networks worked very well in that the funding reached on ground works. We now have a situation where funding is now controlled by other agencies and it seems that landcare networks are only contacted when their own figures are needed to justify their existence. The further the funding is removed from those on the land (this includes everyone, not just farmers, the more bureaucratic the area becomes and the less effective it becomes.) It seems that due to funding being annual instead of on-going, there needs to be people employed just to apply for funding. This would seem to be very inefficient use of funds. Again, wouldn't it make sense to give some continuity to landcare and other agencies so that projects can be developed *and maintained*. I am sure if we ran government positions on the basis that they had to reapply for their salary every year, the effectiveness of their work would decline. Perhaps a three year funding base would be suitable.

So in conclusion, if we are serious about addressing environmental issues it should be 'farmed' like all our produce and the consumer (all of the population) should be responsible for the cost.

One more thing, please no more glossy brochures – any one would think that all politicians of all persuasions had shares in advertising or printing agencies!