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To the NSW Natural Resource Commission
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Submission

providing feedback on the protection of biodiversity on private land

Preamble:

With climate change already having negative impacts for biodiversity, particularly through drought and bushfires, and predictions of an approaching mass extinction event, the need for ramped-up conservation efforts has never been more evident.

Land clearing is rampant across the country, and not only for agriculture, Much of the NSW coastal strip to the Great Dividing Range consists of bushland zoned as large lot residential, mostly around 40ha (the 100-acre block), and these properties are being cleared, and ‘under-scrubbed’ at a higher rate than ever before. Much of this is illegal and authorities are turning a blind-eye so, along with education, incentives must be introduced to encourage the retention of bushland to ensure this trend is reversed.

The clearing of regrowth forest is allowed in NSW, but we must remember that regrowth forest is old-growth in the making. Regrowth was defined under the Native veg act in about 2005 as any vegetation that had grown since 1990, **i.e. under 15 years old!** For some reason that 1990 base has not been changed, and today it is still legal to bulldoze 35-year-old trees as ‘regrowth’. This has to change!

Practically every privately owned property has unproductive land that has the potential for rehabilitation as wildlife habitat, and helping create wildlife movement corridors across the landscape, a critical feature to facilitate migration of wildlife in the face of a heating planet.

The easiest way to increase wildlife habitat is to stop clearing it in the first instance. Many of those who purchase bush (lifestyle) blocks, have no understanding of biodiversity. Invariably, their first action is to hire or purchase a bulldozer and “clean out the rubbish”, i.e. remove all vegetation except the larger trees, a process known as “under-scrubbing”, effectively destroying upwards of 90% of the land’s biodiversity in the process. Again, this must stop!

Australia’s rivers and streams are, in the main, a disgrace, with water so filled with particulate matter that it is undrinkable. With every storm, millions of tonnes of valuable topsoil washes into the ocean, to a large extent caused by the clearing and degradation of riparian areas by logging and grazing activity, and this is happening on both private and public land.

Cropping and intensive horticultural practices must be altered. Currently much of this activity occurs on sloping land with no contour banks to retain water and prevent erosion.

In fact, ploughing and cultivation is invariably undertaken working up and down slopes, rather than across, simply because it's easier. Orchards likewise usually have rows of trees running up and down slopes. This too must change.

Grazing is one of the farming activities that is most damaging to biodiversity, trampling and compacting of soil, causing erosion along waterways and spreading weeds. However, the worst impacts occur during times of drought with low stock prices deterring landowners from selling stock, leading to overstocking and over-grazing.

During every drought we see images of sheep and cattle standing on bare ground with imported fodder, often donated, being tossed on the ground in an attempt to keep the malnourished stock alive. There is no inspection of this imported hay, which can come from thousands of kilometres away, nothing to prevent the spread of noxious and invasive weeds. Keeping livestock in these conditions is animal cruelty, leading to their death by starvation, while denuded soils contribute to dust storms that carry away what is left of the topsoil.

Weeds too are a serious threat to biodiversity, and currently there is far too little focus on their control. On large-lot rural residential land, we see weeds like Lantana being allowed to clog ecosystems when a few hours effort every week by the landowners themselves could see these pests eliminated from those properties. Landowners need to understand that they are the stewards of the land they own, and have responsibilities to maintain it in good order. They also need to understand that they operate in a water catchment area, **and everything they do on their property has the potential to impact on neighbours, and everyone downstream. Landowners have no social licence to do anything they want on their land!**

Suggested actions:

- Strengthen land-clearing regulations, and enforcement.
- Close the regrowth definition loop-hole. Regrowth should be defined as anything that has grown during the previous 15 years, not since 1990 which is now 35 years ago.
- Get rid of self-assessment of the impacts of proposed land-clearing.
- Educate prospective buyers of large-lot and rural residential properties on the importance of biodiversity, and their legal obligations, and social responsibilities, in relation to native vegetation, including the need to control of weeds.
- Reverse the 25m boundary line clearing allowance, 5m is perfectly adequate space for fence maintenance.
- Provide incentives, grants or rate reduction, or both, to regenerate land for habitat.
- Whichever agency, or council, is charged with regulating land-clearing, it is essential that adequate resourcing is provided.
- Provide assistance and incentives to landowners to fence off wetlands, marshlands and waterways from livestock, and encourage regeneration of natural vegetation.
- Mandate wider buffer zones along those waterways from logging. 5m, the current width, is woefully inadequate.
- Educate and actively encourage, by mandate if necessary, the contouring of sloping cropping land to help prevent erosion and retain soil and moisture.
- Keeping badly malnourished livestock during drought is animal cruelty. Laws governing animal cruelty must be policed and enforced, to encourage owners to destock and prevent overgrazing.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment
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