

SEPP 46 FORUM:

**SEPP 46 dealing with the broader community's expectations:  
A grazier's perspective**

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I want to talk to you today about our local community's reaction to last year's introduction of SEPP No. 46 and how we decided to deal with it and are continuing to deal with it.

I want to talk to you about our ongoing commitment to taking part in matters that concern our livelihood, our property and our resources, be they economic, environmental or social. I also want to impart to you what I believe is the only workable strategy if we are going to pull back from the precipice we have approached where conservation-ists and landholders have been at loggerheads.

I do not believe for one moment that the goals of the conservationist and the goals of the farmer are mutually exclusive. They are in, most instances, entirely compatible and symbiotic. The skills and interests of the farmer lie in the careful nurturing and propagation of plant and animal life. His ability in this regard is indeed crucial to his livelihood. The farmer is a naturalist in every sense of the word. He possesses a depth of local knowledge that in itself is invaluable. He is the custodian of his heritage and best placed to manage all facets of his holding including its ecological integrity. He presents a resource of great value.

As part of the community he shares the same concerns as other community members and is aware of declining ecosystems around the world. Is this the picture of all farmers? Perhaps not, I am sure we all know there are some that do not fit this picture. There are certainly some farmers out there who do not share an appreciation of their natural resources and natural heritage. But they are the minority. At the other end of the spectrum there are conservationists who believe preservation of all things indigenous must take precedence over all else. However again these, I believe, are the minority. What exists is the broad middle ground of good sense and empathy where both landholders and conservationist realise the importance of economic and social sustainability, the importance of people hav-

ing the opportunity to improve their overall well being and the importance of arresting the serious decline that has occurred in natural ecosystems. A spirit of co-operation is emerging that will result in a far better result than could ever be hoped for otherwise. We are beginning to pull back the extremists from the precipice.

I would like to go back now and lead you through the thought and emotional processes that occurred in our community from the time SEPP46 was first announced on the Monaro. I would like you to understand the rift that has occurred in our local community and the steps we have taken to repair it.

The first public announcement on the Monaro of the NSW Government's State Environmental Planning Policy No. 46 occurred on Monday 18th September, 1995 when Dr. Ian Garrard of the Department of Land and Water Conservation attended a meeting in Cooma. I am sure it is an occasion he will remember for a long time! The indignation and animosity present on that occasion was almost palpable. Landholders, some whose families had been graziers on the Monaro for many generations felt openly insulted that their management was now under question and regulation and controls were being put in place without a word of warning let alone prior consultation. They felt they were being asked to sacrifice their fundamental economic resource for the common good with no thanks or compensation. At a time of drought and poor prices it has been a bitter pill to swallow. As a public relations exercise for the government it has been a disaster and the explanation of avoiding the unfortunate consequences of prior warning as experienced in other states was not acceptable.

Many meetings have been held since September 18th and the reaction of farmers both through the NSW Farmers Association and individually has been predictably hostile. It was decided that our best approach was to tackle the issue through Landcare.

The image of NSW farmers to the broader public was felt to be inferior to that of Landcare and indeed it was felt Landcare represented a truer picture of the vast majority of landholders and their sense of responsibility regardless of whether they were members or not. People are proud of the achievements of Landcare and its adoption and therefore from a philosophical and practical point of view it was and is the most appropriate voice on our side of the debate over SEPP46. I, among others, strongly felt that farmers were not the environmental vandals some were keen to paint us as but I had to agree we were, on the whole, fiercely independent. This fierce independence has run a serious risk of being construed in the public eye as a sign of lack of concern for matters environmental. SEPP46 did indeed have the effect of encouraging those that would ordinarily be conscious and positive on environmental issues to become quite negative. Through frustration, disillusionment and anger and not through a change of heart. Monaro LandCare was formed in October and represented the 18 Landcare groups present on the Monaro.

At the first meeting of Monaro Landcare I put the following overhead up (Table 1). I did not nec-

essarily agree with all of it but I felt it was important to make these points to focus our attention on the way we should best deal with the issues at hand. It was not met with unanimous approval. There is still much indignation in our community and there is a division in the district between those of us who want to take a conciliatory approach and those who are still outraged by a government who they feel has no right to be involved in their affairs and has offended them deeply.

My own point of view is that SEPP46 is only the tip of an iceberg and we are witnessing our first brush with the broader community's growing concern for our environment. As surely as the pressure of the world's population continues to grow and impact of the earth's natural resources, the concern of responsible citizens here and elsewhere will grow with it. Agriculture has been largely spared until now but as farmers I believe we have to be aware of the concerns of others, be they perceived or otherwise, and become involved rather than taking a defensive or aggressive approach to those with whom we don't necessarily agree. The correct approach I am sure will lead to a flow of

Table 1. Our present situation.

<b>Where we are</b> (The reality of our situation)
<p><b>Government regulation</b> Government regulation is becoming an increasing part of everyday life. Agriculture is perhaps the last area to be burdened by red tape for development work. Virtually every other business or community group has to deal with development applications, environmental impact studies, building approvals etc. Often dealing with several government departments as well as local government.</p>
<p><b>Freehold rights</b> Freehold rights, over regulation, the undemocratic nature of SEPP46's introduction, pursuit of other agendas etc may be entirely accurate and valid reasons for action however will not contribute to the achievement of our objective in any way. Concern for the environment is so strong now the public puts conservation clearly ahead of freehold and individual rights.</p>
<p><b>The timber industry</b> The timber industry serves as a useful precedent. Despite a concerted effort and an extensive media campaign to educate the public about modern sustainable timber harvesting they are losing ground.</p>
<p><b>The politics of the environmental issue</b> The Government and political parties score well by being tough on environmental issues. Farming communities are electorally and economically unimportant in the eyes of the present government. The more we squeal the more they will like it.</p>
<p><b>The likelihood of an about face</b> The prospect of the government backing down from SEPP46 or excluding the Monaro is remote. They will have to be involved in the administering of a new plan in some form. All governments see it as their responsibility to be involved in environmental issues.</p>
<p><b>Saving face</b> The government will only agree to the implementation of a Monaro Landcare plan if they can save face.</p>
<p><b>Pro-active in conservation</b> The conservation movement will only gather momentum. We have to take a pro-active role in conservation issues or otherwise lose control. Many of us, through Landcare, have been doing this already.</p>
<p><b>The green image of LandCare</b> If we tarnish the green image of Landcare we will lose credibility.</p>
<p><b>The policy and goals of Monaro LandCare</b> Monaro Landcare must represent a consensus of opinion and the goals of the Landcare movement on the Monaro.</p>

information, more informed opinions and everyone's concerns will be better understood by each other. Communicating directly with those who have other interests and other perspectives will result in much healthier relationships and help bridge the ever broadening gap between rural and urban people.

From the first meeting of Monaro Landcare we decided to put together an alternative to the government's SEPP46. We considered this to be an appropriate and positive response to the regulation and the Minister for Land & Water Conservation's decision to review SEPP46 after a period of consultation. The Monaro Landcare Plan paved the way for the submission of other regional plans including a revised Monaro Plan which drew on contributions from two public workshops held in our district. Submissions from local government, Greening Australia, The Rural Lands Protection Board, the Timber Industry, Catchment Management Committees, NSW Farmers and of course Landcare, were also received and included.

Further review of SEPP46 is being undertaken presently and will be finalised by the middle of the year. We are presenting a further submission to the

government as part of our continuing commitment to have in place a balanced and acceptable policy with regard to agricultural production and environmental preservation. We are presently assisting the World Wide Fund for Nature who wished to undertake a study of Remnant Native Grasslands on the Monaro. A local steering committee co-ordinating the project is now established and has appointed a project officer. He has already organised several field days on the Monaro to increase awareness of grassland remnants and to introduce methods to ensure their preservation. Other initiatives in train include the organisation of whole farm planning workshops to introduce and encourage farm planning as part of an overall management strategy. A database is being established so as to create an accurate picture of the Monaro from a botanical and ecological perspective so that at any point in time we will know where we are and what is happening. It will also be used to establish patterns and trends.

What I feel is vital in any attempt to deal with an issue which has potentially so much to gain but equally can be so divisive is the establishment of a vision of what all members of the community want their area to look like in 20-30 years time. If

**Table 2.** The monaro in 2020

The Monaro Of 2020 will be an era in which:

- Conflict between productive agriculture and environmental management has been resolved.
- Governments have embraced all land use and management issues under one umbrella and given equal importance to all.
- Skills and knowledge are shared.
- Voluntary Conservation Agreements have become widely accepted and an integral part of most farm management plans.
- Understanding and knowledge of threatened and endangered flora and fauna has increased and habitats preserved and restored to ensure survival.
- A far greater knowledge than ever before has been established as to the composition of the Monaro's biological resource inventory and the requirements of biodiversity preservation.
- Eco-tourism has become increasingly popular and many farmers regularly hold open days where urban people have access to farms to see conservation projects first hand, simultaneously gaining a better understanding of rural issues. Farmers have, in turn, a better understanding of broader community concerns.
- The use of biological and genetic control measures are helping to make agriculture a much more viable and safer industry than ever before.
- Invasive weeds and destructive feral animals of the last century have almost been eliminated.
- The presence of woodlots are a common feature over the Monaro plain. Timbered areas where socio-economic reasons have necessitated clearing has been done sensibly and sensitively and offset by areas specifically managed to encourage regeneration.
- The area of the Monaro with sustainable, naturally regenerating trees have increased and their ecosystems enhanced.
- Areas of intact native grassland remain in a state of high integrity owing to enlightened management and control of exotic weeds and pests.
- Areas of native vegetation are not so much valued for overall size but more for the quality, integrity and sustainability of their type and their contribution to the preservation of genetic diversity.

agreement can be reached as to the environment the majority of people are happy with (be they from the city or the country) then progress can be made towards set project goals.

We have started along this path. Already (as mentioned previously) we have gathered together in one committee representatives from major stakeholders and interested parties. This committee was responsible for the Monaro Grasslands Management Plan. It is a sub committee of this group which is now co-ordinating the World Wide Fund for Nature's Remnant Grassland Project.

Please cast your eye over the futuristic look at the Monaro of 2020 (Table 2). This list of objectives formed the basis of the introduction to the Monaro Grassland Management Plan as presented to the NSW Vegetation Forum in January this year. I believe it is vital for any community be it as large as a nation or as small as a family farm to establish a vision of what they want their land to look like within a given time frame. It is not important how long or short the time frame is so long as it is realistic, but it is vitally important to do it. The essence of proper planning is to start with a vision. Once you have sought all the different ideas, once you have heard all the opinions and points of view you can then establish a list of the features of your futuristic land as we have done here and start to work towards it. It has to remain flexible and able to accommodate changing circumstances but the spirit and intent must not change. Make it as detailed as possible. I am sure this one for the Monaro is far too general but it suited our purposes earlier this year. We have to build on it and it will become our "to do" list.

There are other opportunities with increasing community concern for the well being of the environment. The potential for farm tourism has been well recognised however the possibility of eco-tourism should not be underestimated and could provide valuable additional income for the financially restricted rural community. Increasing the flow of information between the city and the bush through this and other avenues of communication will also create a better understanding between all groups concerned with the future use of rural land.

Much of our success so far on the Monaro has been due to a lot of effort by a relatively small group of people. Farmers, local Department of Land & Water Conservation staff, Landcare co-ordinators, Catchment Management Committees, local government and other interest groups have got together, studied the issue in depth and arrived at

workable alternatives. It has united sectors of the community in a very positive way and begun to heal the wounds of a well intentioned government which was badly out of touch. We are actively trying to include all the people of the area in this issue and trying to reconcile different approaches and ideas.

Communication is a vitally important ingredient in any project. As far as getting our message across and airing our concerns and ideas, the media has played and will play a very important part. We appointed a Public Relations firm to get our message across initially to assist us with keeping tabs on recent developments in the debate. Using the media effectively is crucial to building support and creating awareness of what you are trying to achieve. If used properly it will also accurately relate the reality of the situation and defuse the rumour and gossip that so quickly spreads.

We have to restore trust and confidence now and overcome the mindset among some landholders who have now decided to actively conceal or ignore important species of fauna and flora for fear of regulation imposing restrictions upon them. We also have to overcome a perception among some conservationists who fear informing landholders of ecologically valuable areas or species will automatically invite destruction.

We have to rebuild the trust and spirit of co-operation that existed between landholders and government agencies prior to the announcement of SEPP46. We have to strengthen those ties and forge new relationships with all parties involved in the correct management of natural resources.

To sum up - to landholders, I say this. Heed the lessons of history. There are innumerable instances in the past where individuals or groups have not accepted a change in community expectations. They have let pride and an unwillingness to accept change take precedence over their better judgement. And they have suffered as a consequence.

As farmers you must maintain the right to improve the productivity of your land and improve your overall well being with every opportunity presented. But also understand the risk you run of losing control of your destiny if you totally ignore a fundamental shift in the broader community's desires.

To conservationists may I say to you that you have no greater resource available than the help of

the enthusiastic and co-operative farmer. Understand and treat him well and you will receive in return many times over. Alienate him and no amount of regulation or legislation will help you achieve your goals.

There is a middle ground where farmers can proceed with the development of their land and also

be positively involved with those committed to conserving remnants of ecosystems now threatened with extinction. Both must maintain their own position but listen with sympathy to those who see the land from a slightly altered viewpoint.

Who knows, you might even begin to find it interesting.