National Farmers’ Federation

Submission to the Consultation Draft
Australia’s Strategy for the National Reserve System
2008-2030

16 January 2009
Member Organisations

- Australian Dairy Farmers
- ADFA
- AGFORCE
- CANEGROWERS
- Cattle Council of Australia
- Cotton Australia
- NSW Farmers Association
- RGA
- SHEEPMEAT Council of Australia
- Victorian Farmers Federation
- Woolproducers Australia
Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................4
2. Protected area targets ..................................................................................................4
3. Extant Regional Ecosystems .........................................................................................6
4. Recognition of Private Land Biodiversity ....................................................................7
5. Water ............................................................................................................................7
6. Management Plans .......................................................................................................8
7. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................8
NFF Contact .....................................................................................................................9
1. Introduction

The NFF welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Consultation Draft Australia’s Strategy for the National Reserves System (NRS) 2008-2030 (the “Draft Strategy”).

The Draft Strategy notes that Australia’s biodiversity is globally significant, with Australia described as “mega diverse”. Consequently, NFF understands that the primary driver for the National Reserve System is to protect examples of key ecosystems in accordance with Australia’s international obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The CBD provides the framework under which ecosystems can be “added” to the National Reserve System, and that formal legal protection is the mainstay of that framework. NFF are concerned that there are foregone opportunities to enhance Australia’s biodiversity by the strict legal protection. Significantly, farmers or Indigenous nations privately own much of Australia’s land. Farmers occupy and manage 61% of the landscape, with conservation and protected areas occupying a further 20% and minimal use covering 15%. The Draft Strategy notes that Indigenous land covers 20% of the continent, presumably irrespective of its use. Indigenous Protected Areas are part of the NRS, without the need for legal tenure and secured by the use of Memorandums of Understanding.

Hence, the most important concept is not how Government’s can acquire further land for the National Reserve System, but how can the Government protect important ecosystems on privately owned land because between farmers and Indigenous peoples, 81% of the landscape is privately owned. If the CBD is the limiter due to the requirements to protect ecosystems via "legal title", then perhaps the Convention must develop new ways of doing business. Australia should take a lead to negotiate such changes.

Importantly the Draft Strategy recognises that it may not be possible to achieve all biodiversity conservation objectives. This must also recognise that despite Australia’s best endeavours, to save all extant species from extinction or save all (or even 80%) of examples of extant regional ecosystems, may not be possible.

From NFF’s perspective, the acquisition of land from willing sellers to add to the NRS will lead to less than optimal outcomes for agriculture, particularly given the context of climate change and global food security. A more cooperative approach that will allow delivery of dual objectives without the need for formal legal tenure must be investigated and adopted.

2. Protected area targets

NFF is having some difficulty in reconciling protected area targets, with significant differences between the Caring for our Country Outcomes Statement (20-year targets), Business Plan and the Draft Strategy. While this observation may seem pedantic, the quantum of land (both hectares and percentage increases) can be quite significant.

The Outcomes Statement has the following targets:

- Increase in NRS to 125 million hectares (a 25% increase); and

---

1. 2001 BRS Land Use in Australia – At a Glance
• Increase in Indigenous protected areas by 8-16 million hectares (at least a 40% increase).

The business plan targets are:

• Increase the NRS by 5 million hectares per annum for five years = 25 million hectares;
• Increase the Indigenous protected areas by 2 million hectares per annum for five years = 10 million hectares.

The first point indicates that the total NRS today is 100 million hectares\(^3\). Total land area of Australia is 768,826,956 hectares\(^4\). Yet the Draft Strategy notes that the total NRS is 11.5% of Australia, or 88,415,100 hectares. However, the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage & the Arts (DEWHA) NRS website\(^5\) notes that the total NRS area is 89,528,859 or 11.62% of the total continent. NFF assumes that the latter is the most accurate assessment of NRS total area. Given this, the Caring for our Country target of a 25 million ha increase by 2013 is in fact a 33% increase.

A similar exercise can also be applied to the Indigenous Protected area. The DEWHA website notes that the total Indigenous protected area area is currently 14,594,415 hectares. The Outcomes Statement increase of between 8 and 16 million hectares are an increase of between 55% and 110%, not 40% as indicated. Likewise, the Caring for our Country target of 2 million hectares per annum (10 million over 5 years) corresponds to a 69% increase.

The Business Plan targets indicate a target to increase the NRS by a total of 35 million hectares (i.e. NRS and Indigenous protected areas) to 124,528,859 million hectares or a total increase in the NRS of 39%. Total NRS will account for 16.2% of the continent, an increase of 4.6%.

The concern for agriculture, in the context of the current global food security situation, is the future of food production in Australia, and the importance to the Australian community of being able to maintain access to safe, good quality food. Globally food shortages will also improve the terms of trade for farmers, providing the cost of inputs remains competitive. Farmers are best placed to determine what commodities to produce given the prevailing market conditions. Biodiversity is largely protected by both State (vegetation regulations) and Federal laws (i.e. listings for species and ecological communities under the EPBC Act).

As food shortages globally become more pronounced, and when interfaced with climate change, there will be significant pressures on the use of the Australian landscape – whether this is to protect Australia’s unique and globally significant biodiversity or to produce food.

The most fundamentally important concept is how to provide the dual objectives of biodiversity outcomes, while preserving Australia’s capacity to produce safe, quality food for the world. NFF believes that this can be achieved by use of market-based instruments such as the Environmental Stewardship Program in the first instance. Such programs can provide a source of funds to assist the costs (pests, weeds, fencing etc) of managing private land biodiversity.

In the longer term, NFF is interested in discussions with the Government about improved mechanisms that deliver on agricultural production and biodiversity.

---

\(^3\) 100 million increased by 25% is 125 million hectares  
\(^4\) 2005 Directions for the National Reserve System, p. 18.  
3. Extant Regional Ecosystems

The Draft Strategy (along with the Caring for our Country 20-year and 5-year targets) is fundamentally built around protecting at least 80% of the number of extant regional ecosystems in each IBRA bioregion and each IRBA sub-region. However, the Draft Strategy does not provide any assistance in terms of ascertaining:

- What is the area that is appropriate to achieve the protection of 80% of extant regional ecosystems, i.e. what is the sustainable size of each regional ecosystem at bioregion and sub-bioregion;

- What extant regional ecosystems are currently identified, including size;

- How does this relate to the NRS;

- How can non-legal title assist in delivering against the above; and

- How is climate change going to affect the above going forward?

NFF understands, following discussions with DEWHA, that there is no clear rule to assess the needs for protection of extant regional ecosystems. This is problematic for the agricultural sector as there is an unknown about what is needed and how this will consequently affect agricultural production in Australia (i.e. not just at a farm level). Nor is it known what biodiversity is already retained in the landscape on working farms that may assist Government in delivering on this biodiversity outcome.

According to the BRS\(^6\) approximately 35% of the continent was used for conservation, protected areas (including Indigenous) and minimal use (see Figure 1). NFF queries whether these parts of the landscape in public ownership that are not currently part of the NRS could be transferred to the NRS and protected for conservation and biodiversity outcomes. This may assist in meeting Australia’s international obligations and would reduce the pressures and likely confrontation in transferring valuable agricultural production land to the NRS.

Figure 1: 2001-02 Land Use of Australia

---

\(^6\) 2001 BRS Land Use in Australia – At a Glance, p. 4
4. Recognition of Private Land Biodiversity

As noted in the introduction, the limitation on the NRS is that international obligations require Australia to seek legal tenure of title for land to be “counted” in the NRS. Such tenure includes legal ownership and voluntary covenants. NFF notes that the Indigenous Protected Areas is included, although legal title is retained by the relevant Indigenous nations. In lieu, the Federal Government enters into a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the management of Indigenous lands.

Many farmers are against protection via legal title, including covenants. One of the reasons, particularly regarding covenancing, is that once the legal title is transferred or protected, there is little in the way of management support or resourcing to enhance and protect the environmental assets. The farmer is effectively left with the ongoing management decisions and funding/resourcing of the conservation area. This will lead to less than optimal outcomes for both the landholder and the environment.

NFF notes that environmental assets on privately owned land are in existence because of the strong “legacy” of the landholder – which some have noted is as strong as the linkage between Indigenous people and Country. Landholders are rightly aggrieved when governments seek to “protect” these assets from the very people who have managed their land to enable their existence today.

A research project is required to better understand what extant environmental assets and ecosystems are in existence on private land, and how these assets can be acknowledged as already contributing to protecting Australia’s biodiversity and international obligations, yet without requiring a formal legal title. Such options may include land managed under Environmental Stewardship and other such programs. Australia may already have been achieved its conservation outcomes through private landholder conservation efforts. Until data is collated to establish this knowledge gap, precious resources may be allocated to acquire or covenant land when there is no requirement.

Once this data gap is closed, the question then becomes how can Government and private landholders work together to achieve the dual objectives of agricultural production and conservation. One way is to seek a dialogue with the agricultural sector on how landholders wish to contribute. The fundamental principles that should apply are mutual gain, complementary landscape management and to enhance rural community values. These principles must apply to both conservation and agricultural production outcomes.

NFF strongly recommends that the Federal Government investigate options, other than legal title, for recognising the private protection of extant biodiversity and ecosystems. NFF is willing to work with the Government to achieve such a productive and beneficial outcome to enable delivery of dual outcomes of enhancing biodiversity outcomes as well as maintaining our agricultural production base.

5. Water

NFF notes that the Draft Strategy seeks to incorporate water management. NFF notes that there is significant policy and reform of water management, and that this is continuing under both COAG and the Federal Government. The role of the Draft Strategy should be to identify
opportunities for use of water in key environmental assets under the NRS, e.g. wetlands. Subsequently, discussions should occur with water environmental holders in those regions to seek the appropriate strategy for the use of environmental water to protect and enhance these assets.

The Draft Strategy should not seek to replicate the existing work of environmental holders but to seek to work constructively with those organisations to identify high priority assets that could benefit from the use of environmental water.

6. Management Plans

NFF understands that the Draft Strategy proposes to develop regional based management plans for NRS holdings, in lieu of individual property plans. NFF does not object to such an approach providing these management plans are adequately funded (see discussion below) for implementation, are an efficient use of resources and address agricultural concerns regarding pest and weed management. The concept of “good neighbour” should also be applied, e.g. maintenance of agreed boundary fences, fire management controls and so on.

The regional NRM organisations will also need to be involved in the NRS to incorporate alignment of local and regional priorities with the NRS. Catchment “blueprints” or plans may need to be altered and the Draft Strategy is silent on how the NRM organisations may be able to assist in delivering on NRM objectives.

NFF understands that the major issue with the NRS is that funding to establish new protected areas is available. However, funding for long-term management is problematic. There are largely two issues. One is the long-term management options, particularly managing land for conservation after a previous agricultural tenancy. The issue of management of weeds and pests becomes an issue, particularly after the removal of pressures such as grazing stock and cropping that to a large extent included management (control and suppression) of weeds and pests. This will include a research component.

The second issue is the funding and resourcing of the new conservation regime. Without the long-term allocation of sufficient resources (monetary, skills, support and so on), there will undoubtedly be a decline in the value of conservation lands. This will have flow on social and economic impacts for the local and regional community.

NFF strongly recommends that sufficient long-term (i.e. long than five years) resources are allocated to the NRS and protected areas.

7. Conclusion

NFF understands the need for the protection of biodiversity outcomes. However, the prerequisite of legal tenure must be reviewed. Landholders, like Indigenous people, have a strong connection to country and legacy is an important focus for farmers. NFF notes that voluntary approaches are likely to be more effective. There must be appropriate recognition of the contribution of landholders to the protection of extant biodiversity and a method of allowing non-legal tenure recognition of these outcomes as contributing towards Australia’s international obligations. A research project is required to better understand the extent of current private land biodiversity.
NFF is willing to work with the Federal Government to investigate appropriate methodologies to give effect to such recognition in a way that applies fundamental principles of mutual gain and benefit, that that is achieves the multiple and complex objectives of landholders, government and of course, the environment.

Long term resourcing of ongoing management also remains problematic and NFF suggests that this also be addressed.

**NFF Contact**

Deborah Kerr  
NRM Manager  
Ph: 02 6273 3855  
Fax: 02 6273 2331  
Email: dkerr@nff.org.au