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## **RAMPAGING PLANTATIONS- CAUSE OR CONSEQUENCE OF CHANGING LAND USE IN RURAL TASMANIA ?**

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### **Abstract**

Plantation establishment has recently expanded into the traditional farming regions of Tasmania. Significant community concern has been expressed about the rate and intensity of change to the social and physical landscape. Plantations have been blamed for social changes such as: a decline in the viability of rural communities due to a loss of infrastructure and services; the loss of agricultural land for food production; the devaluation of land; and the loss of amenity for other forms of land use or life style. However, many rural communities in Tasmania are undergoing substantial social change because of factors such as: the deregulation of the dairy industry; low commodity prices for many agricultural products; and social and demographic trends that are resulting in migration away from rural regions. Plantations currently offer the only viable alternative form of land use for many landholders. In this context, plantation development is more a consequence, than a cause, of social change. The rapid expansion of plantation establishment has nevertheless highlighted deficiencies in the processes for managing conflicts in land use. There has been debate on whether tree plantations should be treated the same as any other agricultural crop for the purposes of land use regulation. Government to date has indicated that the type of crop to be grown upon private land should be determined by the landholder and market forces, and not by government. However opponents of plantations have argued that tree crops are more likely to have offsite impacts related to shading, weed control, boundary fencing, water yield and fire protection. This paper discusses the strategies that have been used to manage land use conflicts that have arisen over plantations in Tasmania. The strategies include changes to regulatory instruments such as State Policy and the Forest Practices Code, and the development of a Good Neighbour Charter.

## INTRODUCTION

*“The green tide of plantation forestry has claimed its first Tasmanian town. The once robust North-West dairy community of Meunna is gone, lost beneath the relentless march of eucalyptus trees.”* (Whinnett and Rose, 2000).

Tasmania had about 180,000 ha of plantation in 2000, with about 55% established on private land and 45% on public land. The rate of plantation establishment has escalated rapidly in recent years, from about 5,000 ha per year prior to 1996 to about 24,000 ha in 2000 (Forest Practices Board 2000).

The acceleration in plantation establishment is a consequence of a number of factors (Drielsma 2000) -

1. The National Forest Policy Statement and the Regional Forest Agreement processes, which have resulted in a higher proportion of native forests being reserved for conservation purposes and additional constraints placed upon wood production in the remainder;
2. A trend towards more intensive forest management on remaining areas to maintain or enhance wood production;
3. The recognition of international market opportunities, with governmental support for expansion of plantations under the national Plantation 2020 Vision.

In Tasmania, the government's 1998 Forestry Growth Plan provides, *inter alia*, for the establishment of a world scale plantation resource of up to an additional 84,000 ha of new plantation on public land by 2008. A similar acceleration on private land has occurred as a result of rapidly expanding prospectus based investment programs.

In 1999/2000, about 13,400 ha of new plantation were associated with the conversion of native forest. The remaining 10,300 ha of new plantations were established on cleared farmland. The conversion of native forest to plantation in Tasmania is subject to the provisions of the Regional Forest Agreement and governmental policy on the maintenance of a permanent forest estate. The policy recognises that some continued clearing is necessary for the further economic development of Tasmania. However, conservation thresholds are set for all forest communities within each bioregion, and clearing limits can not be exceeded. Notwithstanding this, the conversion of native forest to plantation continues to attract criticism, and this opposition has encouraged a trend towards plantation establishment on cleared farmland. This trend is also a reflection of the availability and cost of suitable land in accessible and consolidated locations, and the much shorter lead times for establishing cleared sites, which are important factors for the private investment market.

However, the expansion of plantations into cleared farmland has attracted strong criticism from some who allege that plantations displace traditional agricultural land use and lead to the loss of rural infrastructure and the decline of rural communities. Others allege that plantations have detrimental, and apparently insurmountable, off-site effects on adjoining land users. In contrast, many landowners and investors have welcomed and embraced the opportunities that plantations provide in terms of diversification of land use, improved marketability of rural land, and investment potential. The plantation debate rose very rapidly to become a very divisive socio-

political issue during 2000. As usual, widespread media coverage tended to polarise and sensationalise the debate, resulting in highly emotional rhetoric and tenuous alliances of convenience between parties that were opposed to plantations for very different reasons. Green activists lost a great deal of credibility in the eyes of many by a remarkable reversal of their previous pro-plantation stance (Putt 1999).

### **CONCERNS RAISED IN RELATION TO PLANTATIONS**

Opposition to the establishment of plantations in Australia goes back to at least the 1920s (Drielsma *et al* 1990). Early opposition was related to conflict between the use of land for plantations and use for agriculture. Over the years, the concern shifted to land management issues such as the loss of rateable land and the control of weeds and rabbits. During the 1960s environmental concerns became increasingly prominent. By the 1990s concerns over plantations in Tasmania could be grouped into those related to the broad social landscape, which tend to impact at the 'community' level, and those related to local off-site effects, which more directly impact at the 'neighbour' level.

Concerns at the community level include:

- Loss of land for agricultural production;
- Loss of rural infrastructure and a decline in rural communities;
- Adverse impacts on rural amenity and visual landscape.

Concerns at the neighbour level include:

- Shading of residences, roads and crops;
- Use of pesticides;
- Browsing of crops by native animals;
- Effects on water quantity and quality;
- Increased fire risk.

### **CAUSE OR CONSEQUENCE**

In understanding and responding to the concerns raised in regard to plantation development it is useful to consider the community level concerns separately from neighbour level concerns. The latter derive from the actual or perceived characteristics of the crop and growing processes, and are amenable to site based attention and management.

The former can only be addressed at a broader regional or State level. The loss of agricultural land with conversion from edible crops to plantation forests has attracted a high degree of scaremongering-

*"How will Australia's fruit growing regions survive if its flesh is slowly gobbled up by distending maggots called plantations? The agricultural heart of Tasmania will be ripped out. Productivity will plummet and jobs will be lost."* Lane (2000).

In reality, economic factors largely preclude prime cropping land from being converted to plantations. An analysis of a sample of land established to plantation in 2000 indicated that there is virtually no conversion of the highest quality agricultural land (Class 1-2) to plantation other than where it occurs as small pockets within lower productivity land. (Table 1).

**Table 1. Area of plantation established by land capability class**

(source of data: Andy Warner, Private Forests Tasmania\*)

<b>Land Capability Class</b>	<b>Area in Hectares</b>	<b>% of Total Area</b>
Class 1 (Very High Quality)	0	0
Class 2	100	<1%
Class 3	2,000	16%
Class 4 to 7 (Very Restricted for Cropping)	10,000	83%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12,100</b>	

(\* sample represents areas planted by the major plantation establishment companies over land for which land capability mapping was available)

Nevertheless, even the apparent “loss” of lower class lands brings forward similar concerns.

It may be churlish to point out the enthusiasm with which the community supports tree planting projects to combat environmental degradation ( often doomed to failure, and usually of a scale far too small to make a significant impact), in comparison to the opposition engendered in respect of plantations which might actually make a difference. The reality is that any significant revegetation of our degraded rural lands which could begin to ameliorate such issues as salinity, inevitably will involve restructuring of land use and of our rural economies, not unlike that now perceived with recent plantation development.

But this begs the question as to whether plantations are cause or consequence. Our thesis is that they are more consequence than cause, responding to opportunities created by broader global and technological changes.

There are enormous economic pressures on rural economies resulting from competitive global markets. The collapse of the wool market in the early ‘90s, dairy deregulation, more latterly shifts in beef markets, when added to similar pressures in regional service industries ( finance, health and education, government), have seen jobs, population and infrastructure shift out of rural communities. Markets for new crops have emerged eg canola in SW Victoria, and poppy and vineyards in Tasmania, and of course hardwood plantations.

A recent study in south west Victoria (Petheram *et al* 2000) documents the marked changes in land use over the last decade. A decline in sheep and beef cattle has been balanced by a major increase in cropping, dairying and plantation timber. Interestingly while the shift to cropping was the dominant shift in land use, they report a low recognition in the community for cropping as a form of land use change, in comparison to plantations.

New technologies, and a drive to increase the utilisation of capital assets has seen shifts in some industries eg to irrigation lands, which leaves traditional production areas less viable. Land consolidation is an issue, but many farmers do not have the means to amass the necessary capital for expansion. Barr (2000) has noted the ageing of the farm population, and the increasingly problematic issue of generational transfer of farm assets.

In this context, the entry of plantation investors has allowed many farmers to diversify, re-locate, consolidate their holdings into more viable units, or to retire with dignity and a higher degree of financial security than was previously possible.

*“If farmers can’t sell their land for tree plantations, then what do they do? Do the people moaning about this situation want to buy the farmer out? Are they prepared to work from daylight to dark.....If putting trees on their land is the only way they can retire, then who are we to discriminate against their decision..... If so many people are still unhappy about the trees, then get a group together, raise the money and give up your weekly income, your normal working hours and go farming.”* Wright (2000).

The Government agrees with Mrs Wright, clearly signalling that it has no intention of telling farmers what crop they can grow on their land, believing that the choice of crops is a decision made by farmers on the basis of commodity prices, markets and other factors. The Government recognises that land planted to tree crops is not ‘lost’ to agriculture forever, and could easily be returned to other crops in response to future changes in commodity prices. The peak farmer groups acknowledge this, noting that the agricultural sector undergoes periodic re-structuring as shown by the current expansion of new products such as poppies and vineyards, and the rationalisation of traditional industries. For example, the number of dairy farms in Tasmania has been declining for many decades, with a 30% reduction in farms over the decade from 1987 to 1997 (Tasmanian Dairy Industry Authority 1987, 1997). Plantation forestry has been recently blamed by some as a cause of further decline in dairying. However, substantial re-structuring is currently occurring within the dairy industry as a result of de-regulation, and many farmers believe that plantations have facilitated re-structuring by providing a viable alternative form of land use for dairy farms that are no longer competitive because of size, productivity or location.

Plantations have more generally been blamed for accelerating the decline of rural communities. Population decline is an issue of national importance. The problem is acute in Tasmania, which has historically had a consistently lower rate of population growth than other States. Tasmania’s annual population growth rate declined from an average of +2.7% p.a. in the early 1950s to -0.4% p.a. in the late 1990s (DELM 1996, Department of Treasury and Finance 2000). The major cause of population loss is migration to other States. Within the State, population decline is most pronounced within rural areas (DELM 1996). It is probable that within some regions of Tasmania where broad scale plantations have replaced traditional agricultural land use there has been an accelerated loss of rural residents. Plantations have allowed the expression of these underlying forces. Overall, however, plantations have added to the diversity of land use within rural areas and have created new opportunities for employment in plantation silviculture, harvesting and processing.

Changes in the amenity and visual character of the landscape are to many people, the most immediate and obvious manifestation of rural change. Unlike the culture in many parts of Europe and North America, Australians tend to markedly differentiate between plantations and native forests.

*“Although the overwhelming majority of people subscribe to the view that they ‘shall never see, A poem lovely as a tree’, trees en masse as a plantation leave them cold”* (Editorial in *The Mercury*, 2000).

Many people understandably resent any change to their sense of landscape amenity. Any development that intrudes by way of noise, increased traffic or loss of privacy/seclusion is likely to be opposed, particularly by people who specifically live

in rural environments primarily for lifestyle reasons. With plantations, there are particular issues associated with the potential impacts on scenic views, sunlight, and the sense of 'open-ness'. Some of the concerns are almost primeval, reminiscent of ancient fears that forests were dark, sinister places that represented a threat to civilisation. (Warner 1983).

*“As the eucalypt plantations continue to spread ...the outlook for those who are being enclosed by tree farms becomes darker.....those ‘imprisoned’ in their farmhouses....No more the joy of a sunrise or sunset, just dark monotonous trees, the very visible ‘black economy’ – depleting, depressing and disastrous.”* (M. Wilkinson, 2000).

Notwithstanding the hyperbole, putting trees back into cleared areas certainly has implications at the landscape, community and at the individual property level. Plantations in traditional farming areas directly impact on a greater number and more diverse range of people than is the case in the lightly settled areas of native forests. Different rural industries lead to the development of distinctive human communities (Drielsma, 1985). Industrial change will lead to community change and it is reasonable to expect resistance to such change where they begin to influence the social order through changing norms and social hierarchy. For example, Petheram *et al* (2000) found that their respondents distinguished plantation forestry on the basis of its corporate ownership and suggest the absence of resident managers is an important element in community perception. They argue that land use changes are evaluated differently according to beliefs about economic and social impacts. Schirmer (2000) reports on the perceptions of a range of community members, including: traditional farmers; hobby farmers; organic farmers; local council and planning bodies; real estate agents; environmentalists; and foresters and the forest industry. Schirmer concludes that much of the opposition to plantations is a result of inadequate consultation within rural communities prior to the implementation of governmental policies such as the 2020 Vision.

There are useful opportunities for linking the issues of plantations to the broader body of research that deals with rural social and economic change.

### **ADDRESSING THE ISSUES AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL**

Governmental policy with respect to the regulation of plantations as a form of land use on private land is primarily addressed through three planning instruments: a State Policy on the Protection of Agricultural Land; local planning schemes; and Private Timber Reserves.

The State Policy on the Protection of Agricultural Land (PAL) was devised as a means to protect prime agricultural land from conversion to non-agricultural use and development, such as residential sub-division. The policy was reviewed and revised in 2000 and despite strong submissions from the anti-plantation sector, it continues to include intensive tree farming and plantation forestry within the definition of 'agricultural use'. The policy applies to all agricultural land within Tasmania and is implemented through local planning schemes.

Local planning schemes provide the basic framework for determining permissible land use on private land. Under the normal land use zoning approach, plantation forestry may be zoned as permitted, discretionary, or prohibited. Plantation forestry is

a permitted use within the majority of rural zones. Where the zoning is discretionary, the landowner must seek approval from local government, people may object to the application, and local government may approve, refuse or impose conditions on the application. Despite considerable pressure from opponents of plantations, local government has rarely refused, or imposed conditions on plantations that go beyond conventional industry practice.

The declaration of land as a Private Timber Reserve under the *Forest Practices Act* provides a landowner with the security that the land can be managed in the long term for wood production. Management activities related to wood production within Private Timber Reserves are exempt from the provisions of local planning schemes. Critics of Private Timber Reserve allege that this removes the right of appeal against plantation activities. However Private Timber Reserves can only be declared within zones where plantations are already a permitted or discretionary use. Local government and adjoining neighbours have a right of appeal at the time that an application for a Private Timber Reserve is made.

The planning systems in Tasmania therefore provide a very clear framework for determining where plantation development may occur. However, it is the accelerating rate and scale of change, rather than change *per se*, that have raised community concerns about plantations. Planning schemes, through land use zoning, ultimately determine the potential scale of change. The rate of change is more problematic for planning authorities. There has been no indication from government that it wishes to limit the rate of plantation establishment. To the contrary, the government's own strategy under the Forestry Growth Plan released in 1998 is to expand the plantation estate on public land by 84,000 ha over a 10 year period.

### **ADDRESSING THE ISSUES OF DIRECT EFFECTS ON NEIGHBOURS**

At the height of the public debate over plantations, there was much criticism from landowners that professed that they were not anti-plantation *per se*, but they had specific concerns in relation to potential off-site effects on their business or lifestyle. The criticism related to perceptions about the adequacy of -

- rules governing plantation development;
- commitment of big forestry companies to act as neighbours in a sympathetic way;
- appeal rights.

These concerns were addressed primarily through provisions of the *Forest Practices Act* and by the development of a Good Neighbour Charter, as follows.

#### *Need for plantations to be covered by a certified Forest Practices Plan*

Prior to 1999, timber harvesting plans (THPs) were only required under the *Forest Practices Act* to cover plantation development that followed on from harvesting operations. In 1999, THPs were replaced with Forest Practices Plans (FPPs) to ensure that forest practices such as plantation development on cleared farmland (where no timber harvesting was involved) were also covered by the requirements of the *Forest Practices Act*. This means that plantations (in excess of 10 ha) may only be

established and harvested in accordance with the provisions of the Forest Practices Code.

*Changes to the Forest Practices Code* – The Tasmanian Forest Practices Code was amended in November 2000 to improve the provisions that relate to plantation establishment. Technical matters, such as streamside reserves, cultivation and harvesting activities were extensively revised on the basis of new knowledge and practical experience. Other amendments were made in accordance with an approach that-

- recognises that issues such as fencing and the use of chemicals are already covered by laws and policies that apply to all land users, and that a consistent approach was appropriate rather than devising separate rules for plantations;
- fosters consultation and communication between the relevant parties;
- encourages negotiation and cooperation, rather than an adversarial approach.

The new Code requires that neighbours be notified at least 30 days in advance of operations. The aim is to encourage consultation, exchange of information, and negotiation on any issues that are of concern. The Code requires that consideration be given to the potential off-site impact of plantations on adjoining land, and that reasonable measures are taken to address issues such as: shading of residences; adverse effects on crops; safety; pest and weed control; fire protection; and potential effects on adjacent conservation reserves. The Code is not highly prescriptive with respect to such matters, recognising that many factors may be involved, and that each situation will need to be considered on a case by case basis. Critics of this approach argue that the rules are not clear and that too much relies upon the professional judgement of Forest Practices Officers. The alternative view recognises that the majority of concerns are currently resolved through a give and take approach by both parties. In the minority of cases where disputes can not be resolved by negotiation between the neighbours, it may be necessary to develop some principles or guidelines for matters such as shading of residences. However, care will need to be taken to avoid the regulatory spiral that results from an overly prescriptive approach (Garland 1996, Wilkinson 1999). This would see the current spirit of goodwill and cooperation replaced by an adversarial system based on rigid prescriptions and litigation.

### *Good Neighbour Charter*

The Good Neighbour Charter is an excellent example of a commitment to solving problems and achieving good outcomes through a self-regulatory approach. The Charter was developed by Tasmania's major tree farming businesses in consultation with local government and farming groups. It provides a commitment to address the concerns of neighbouring landowners through communication, consultation and negotiation. The Charter has an emphasis on resolving concerns at the local level. Concerns that are not resolved at the local level are referred to nominated senior managers within each organisation, and ultimately to the company's Chief Executive Officer. The Charter complements the cooperative approach that is a strength of Tasmania's forest practices system (Wilkinson 2001). In other jurisdictions, a more prescriptive and adversarial system often results in a minimalist approach, whereby companies only do the minimum that is necessary for legal compliance (Gunningham

and Sinclair 1999). Examples of outcomes negotiated under the good neighbour approach that go well beyond a 'minimalist' approach include-

- Voluntary set backs from houses and crops, often with the buffer area leased for other land use such as grazing;
- Increased buffers on streams and additional precautions taken with respect to the application of chemicals within domestic water catchments;
- Additional assistance with fencing (for example, Forestry Tasmania has voluntarily agreed to share fencing costs on a 50:50 basis with landowners adjoining plantations, even though it is not legally required to do so in respect of State forest lands);
- Changes to the method of controlling browsing animals, for example not using poisons;
- Planting of pines for short rotation Christmas trees rather than longer rotation wood fibre in special cases to maintain views from rural residences.

#### *Formal appeal rights*

- Appeals rights with respect to applications for Private Timber Reserves previously restricted to local or State authorities, were extended in 1999 to include neighbouring landowners who may be directly or materially disadvantaged. The Forest Practices Tribunal hears these appeals.
- Appeal rights against forestry activities are available to any party on private land where forestry is not a right (ie where forestry is zoned as a discretionary use and the land is not a Private Timber Reserve). The Resource Planning and Appeals Tribunal hear these appeals.

Those who favour an adversarial system as a means to restrict or stop the development of plantations have alleged that the appeal processes are deficient. Tribunal and legal processes are an inevitable necessity within most systems of regulation. However, they must remain as the port of final call for resolving intractable disputes, after all other processes of negotiation have failed. As Schirmer (2000) notes, consultative planning approaches are generally seen by a majority of people within the community as the preferred means of resolving disputes.

### **SUMMARY**

Plantation expansion into traditional farming areas has been seen by some as the cause of significant changes to the land use and social character of rural Tasmania. There is no doubt that the current rapid boom in plantation development has substantially accelerated the rate of change within some areas. However, plantation expansion is only part of a broader pattern of ongoing changes in rural land use brought about by re-structuring and diversification. These changes have been accompanied by social and demographic trends that have resulted in continuing migration away from rural areas and an associated decline in community infrastructure. In this context, plantation expansion can be considered to be more of a consequence than a cause of the broader changes to the socio-economic environment of rural Tasmania.

Many of the issues raised in relation to plantations at the community level are a function of the rate and scale of the current expansion, rather than opposition to plantations *per se*. Other issues relate to the potential off-site effects on neighbours.

Tasmania's approach to dealing with the issues can be summarised as follows-

- *Minimum intervention by State or local government* - Government recognises the right of landowners to determine land use within the broad guidelines provided by local planning schemes and a State Policy on the Protection of Agricultural Land that accepts plantations as a form of agriculture;
- *Legally enforceable environmental and operational standards* – plantations must be covered by Forest Practices Plans that are certified in accordance with the *Forest Practices Act* and *Forest Practices Code*;
- *Emphasis on consultation and negotiation to resolve neighbourly issues* – The Good Neighbour Charter demonstrates a strong commitment by the forestry sector to accept responsibility for addressing issues through a cooperative approach that complements the self-regulatory principle of the forest practices system.

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