

**Submission
No 371**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Denhine Pty Ltd tas Natural Asset Protection Agency
Date received: 31/08/2012

Inquiry into the Management of Public Land in New South Wales.

Denhine Pty Ltd

T/as

NATURAL ASSET PROTECTION AGENCY (NAPA)

Terms of Reference referred to in this submission.

- 2. The adherence to management practices on all public land that are mandated for private property holders, including fire, weed and pest management practices.**
- 3. Examination of models for the management of public land, including models that provide for conservation outcomes which utilise the principles of “sustainable use”.**
- 4. Any other related matters.**

Submission Author

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Summary

I represent and am a Director of Denhine Pty Ltd, a specialist land management company based at Oberon on the Central Tablelands of NSW atop the Great Dividing Range. In addition I am a 6th generation farmer involved in a family partnership on the original “Webb” landholding. For a grazing operation to have been as successful in terms of longevity and economically, we believe, through necessity, that we have been operating a highly environmentally sustainable operation.

Denhine Pty Ltd arose out of the need to spread risk away from the farm and to source off farm income. This we essentially do by the management of investment farms, or farms owned by absentee owner in the Central Tablelands area. We currently manage approximately 5000 Ha of absentee owned properties. This business has been operating successfully for 18 years.

Four years ago we added another trading name to Denhine Pty Ltd known as **Natural Asset Protection Agency** or **NAPA**. NAPA was primarily conceived to be specialist first response bushfire support to land managers, both public and private and also to our primary combat agency the NSWRFSS. This proposal also positioned itself perfectly to undertake specialist weed control, primarily on public land.

The NAPA proposal was bought about by the critical shortage of frontline NSWRFSS volunteer fire fighters at our semi-rural urban interface (Eastern Tablelands of NSW). We were given an initial undertaking by the NSWRFSS in central NSW to quote on undertaking a significant Hazard Reduction burn on Crown Land because as they directly put it, “we do not have enough volunteers”. This is an extremely worrying situation.

Our business sees us administer the “hands on” management of many properties across the Central Tablelands and therefore understand the landscape more than most.

Therefore the basis of our submission is twofold, it is on the basis of concern for rural communities adjoining public land and for public land itself, and it is on the basis of recommendation for innovative remedy. This Submission is specific to the high risk bushfire areas of Eastern Central Tablelands (Semi – Rural Urban interface).

Our concerns in terms of vulnerability of public land to bushfire as a result of land ownership changes from full time farmer to absentee owner (particularly in the last 5 years), is extreme.

Our professional perceptions in terms of vulnerability of public and private land to invasive weeds as a result of land ownership changes from full time farmer to absentee owner, is one of extreme concern.

Our professional perceptions in terms of vulnerability of public land to bushfire and invasive weeds as a result of insufficient “hands on” resources and lack of financial capabilities of our State Government, is of extreme concern.

The NAPA proposal has gained wide spread acclaim from landholders both private and public. In a nutshell the NAPA proposal aims to provide specialist “as needed” highly skilled rural men and women in a seasonal yet career capacity to help protect public and private land from the economic

catastrophe that is bushfire and weeds. ***The NAPA proposal is a federal pilot proposal relying on the support of our State Government.***

2. The adherence to management practices on all public land that are mandated for private property holders, including fire, weed and pest management practices.

Weeds and absentee land owners.

- Under legislation private landholders can be held liable for not controlling their weeds. Prosecutions rarely take place and weeds “notices” are rarely enforced.
- Weed education programs in terms of seminars, CMA funded field days have limited success as land owners still have to fund and then commit to doing the physical work. (You can take a horse to water...)
- Absentee land ownership creates many issues, mainly lack of education as to the effect of weeds on productivity and bio diversity. Not being able to accurately identify weeds.
- Too few weed control contractors, for a number of reasons. Legislation in terms of application, insurance costs (application drift etc.) makes it difficult to operate, as favourable conditions according to chemical manufacturers requirements rarely eventuate.
- Human nature, one land owner will control weeds in order to care for their property whilst through the fence a short term developer might “rape and pillage” the land knowing prosecution is unlikely.
- Seeing the limited resources of Public Land Managers failing to meet obligation in terms of weed control leaves a feeling of, “...if they don’t need to do it why should we?”
- Absentee ownership may lead to a lack of community and pride of surrounding lands due to not knowing ones neighbour.

Recommendation

- Enforce Weeds “notices” and prosecutions. Give the courts power to enforce Noxious (or WONS) weed control at land owner’s expense. A two warning system with a third notice being a summons. Similar to a parking ticket.

Weeds and Public Land Management Agencies.

- A distinct reduction in resources in terms of “hands on” workers or labour due to financial constraints means that the physical controlling of weeds generally gets passed onto contractors. Unfortunately the budget focus in our Public Land Management Agencies is on administration of duties in a hierarchical order leaving the perceived “lesser” issue such as funding for the control of weeds to be minimised.
- Weeds do not impact heavily on a radiata pine plantation and the returns they make and may therefore not attract priority funding status.

- The perception that one Government Department will not prosecute another for failing to fulfil obligations in terms of weed control. This creates the same issue as discussed with private landholders, if they don't have to, why do we?

Recommendation

- Increase Government Funding for contract works for weed control on Public Lands to create a positive community perception. If the Government land managers fulfil their obligations then it will "influence" the private neighbours to do likewise.
- Increased funding and actual carrying out of works are imperative. This will make it more judicial for the courts when a private land owner can no longer say, "well why aren't they doing it?" (Meaning Government).

Bushfire on Public Land

Bushfire on Public and private land stands to be the biggest threat to rural communities in Eastern NSW for the foreseeable future. In our land management business we see, due to a number of factors, a massive and worrying trend change in the demographic of our volunteer fire fighting agencies. This information is well documented.

- Ageing and Less available
- Absentee owner NSWRF members rarely in residence.
- Workplace Health and Safety requirements too stringent for volunteers.
- Training requirements unreasonable.
- Top heavy Bureaucracy driving rural volunteers away.
- Farmers retiring and taking local knowledge factor with them.

Without these volunteers, Hazard Reduction works will not and are not being completed. First response to bushfires has all but diminished in these high risk fires. It is difficult for volunteers to actively engage and suppress fire given strict WH&S laws. We firmly believe that as in other states, the NSWRF will have to implement a fitness test for its active frontline fire fighters (the Arduous Pack Test) as the WH&S laws are becoming nationally aligned.

The Public lands part of the equation is as simple as lack of resources in terms of bushfire management. The Government agencies also rely heavily on the efforts of our valued volunteers but as just stated, it is a spiralling catch 22 position. This is a very real issue and one that our organisation has put before the Government previously. It is innovative, economically sensible and morally correct.

The NAPA pilot proposes Tenure Blind approach to control of bushfire that is on both public and Private Land

Recommendation

Support the Adoption of the NAPA Pilot Proposal by the Federal Government.

3. Examination of models for the management of public land, including models that provide for conservation outcomes which utilise the principles of “sustainable use”.

Recommendation

NAPA Pilot Proposal

4. Any other related matters.

Recommendation

NAPA Pilot Proposal

Please find attached the NAPA proposal. We wish for the proposal (attachment) to remain confidential as it contains commercial information.