Submission No 98

INQUIRY INTO RURAL HOUSING AND SECOND DWELLINGS REFORM

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Secondary dwellings can either support or undermine both the natural environment and agricultural land, depending on how they're managed. In many cases they provide real social and environmental benefits. For example, older landholders with high-value bushland who have spent decades managing weeds and restoring ecosystems often want to age in place. A secondary dwelling can allow a family member—such as an adult child—to live on the property, help maintain the land, and provide care, without the strain of sharing the same home or forcing the landowner to hire costly contractors.

The same applies to low-income farmers and "weekend warriors" who work full-time off-farm. Many cannot qualify for a rural workers dwelling under current rules, yet they need additional people on the land to expand operations, diversify into more intensive farming, or regenerate degraded areas. In regions where rent is high, housing is scarce, and populations are small, this becomes a major barrier to agricultural viability.

However, councils must be properly funded and empowered if secondary dwellings are to be supported responsibly. Rates should not be tied only to land value. A fairer and more sustainable model would consider the number of bedrooms and dwellings on a property, as these directly correlate with population and service demand. More people should mean more rates to fund infrastructure and services.

Councils also need the tools, standards, and authority to assess environmental and agricultural impacts. Secondary dwellings must be prohibited on land where ecological values are too high or where land use conflicts are likely. Right now, councils are severely under-resourced by both state legislation and local development controls. Agricultural capability assessments are often inaccurate or deliberately drastically understating the lands capabilities and exaggerating limitations —like those identified by DPI in the Cudgen Connections reports—leaving councils to make decisions without clear criteria, benchmarks, or accountability frameworks.

Any policy on secondary dwellings on rural land must balance three things:

1. The need for people to live on and manage land,

2. The protection of environmental and agricultural values, and

3. The capacity of councils to service additional residents.

Without reform in funding, assessment standards, and exclusion zones, councils are left to carry the risk without the means to manage it.