



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY  
Sessional Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development**

Committee Members:

Mr Peter Chandler, MLA	Member for Brennan
Mr Michael Gunner, MLA	Member for Fannie Bay
Ms Marion Scrymgour, MLA	Member for Arafura (Chair)
Mr Peter Styles, MLA	Member for Sanderson
Ms Lynne Walker, MLA	Member for Nhulunbuy

Apology:

Mr Gerry Wood, MLA	Member for Nelson
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**PUBLIC HEARING, MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2010**

**Northern Territory Agricultural Association**

Withess:

Mr Fergal O'Gara	Principal Project Officer
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**Madam CHAIR:** I declare open this public meeting of the Sessional Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. Our inquiry arises from a reference to the committee by the Honourable Alison Anderson MLA, former Minister for Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage.

I welcome Mr Fergal O’Gara, Principal Project Officer with the Northern Territory Agricultural Association and thank you for appearing before us today. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. I remind you that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. Whilst this meeting is public, witnesses have the right to request to be heard in private session. If you wish to be heard *in camera*, please advise the committee prior to commencing your answer.

Today’s proceedings are being electronically recorded. As soon as practicable following this hearing, the transcript of your evidence will be uploaded to the committee’s website, but not before you have proofed it.

Also, members of the committee include Mr Peter Styles Member for Sanderson, Mr Peter Chandler Member for Brennan, Ms Lynne Walker Member for Nhulunbuy and we will be joined during the proceedings by Mr Michael Gunner Member for Fannie Bay. So over to you, Mr O’Gara

**Mr O’GARA:** Fergal O’Gara is my name. I am the Principal Project Officer for the Northern Territory Agricultural Association and that role involves an executive as well as technical function for the association. I guess if you like, I will start of with a brief summary of what the association is and who we are and what we try to do. Is that okay?

We are a small incorporated agricultural body representing a diverse range of primary producers, from cattle and hay producers to forestry, agriculture, irrigated grain production and some horticulturists. So despite the fact there is an NT Cattleman’s Association and an NT Horticultural Association, we have members of both of those enterprises in our association because of an overlap of issues. We largely support and work through the Katherine-Daly Basin and hopefully we will make more in-roads into the Darwin region.

The association has been in existence for about 10 years, but it has just recently started to get back on its feet. Previously we just had a committee and a CEO who was largely a lobbyist, if you like. But we have changed dramatically to an association that is based on not only lobbying government and working with government, but working collaboratively with the industry on R & D projects.

We have got three fairly big Landcare projects, our Landcare/*Caring for Country* projects. We provide specific and technical advice to our members and the wider community. We even provide that advice back to government. We source external funding for R & D projects. We promote agriculture to the wider community, as I said. We write and publish technical information; and I have just handed Peter a copy of a Landcare funded publication that we are doing with a snapshot of agriculture in the Top End. It’s probably the only one of its type for Northern Australia. We try to work at the community level to address issues and we assist new people entering the industry or considering entering the industry, so we give them a bit of a heads-up on what the industry is all about.

Our association is partially government funded, so I do acknowledge that and I do appreciate the funding we get from government. As I said, we have three *Caring for Country* projects which include the employment of two full-time officers under these projects and when you consider my experience as a Project Officer in the industry and these other two very experienced officers, we have got over 70 years of accumulative Northern Territory knowledge and experience within the association. While we are very small, there would be few organisations with as much direct Territory experience and that covers pastoral and cropping, irrigation, R & D, rural education, extension and soil conservation.

I have gone off the track a little bit about our association, I guess, but our association is actually taking on a lot more of the role which was formerly the domain of government in terms of R & D and extension. Over the past 22 years I have been in the industry, and I have seen a steady erosion of government funding and services to agriculture in terms of research and development and extension services and I believe this has reached a critical stage in which government has got to decide what it is going to do. It is at a crossroads.

In fact, we are now the first point of contact for many people entering the industry or wanting information and, in fact, government refer the extension of to us, rather than the other way around. So we are taking up the role of government, but we obviously need funding to do that and that is why we are so pro-active with getting federal funds.

We have got representation on many government committees including DRMAC, the Water Licensing Review Panel, the Eco-Link project, the Katherine Weed Management Advisory Committee and we have made submissions to several government policy papers, including the Clearing Guidelines, the 2030 strategy, the Tropical Rivers and the Federal Government's Land and Water Task Force. So we are pretty active in the policy area, but also very active in working hand-in-glove with producers.

So that is the summary of our association. If we get on to agriculture; I guess we are about agriculture in its broadest terms. If you look at agriculture in the Top End, it is very small. I make no bones about that. In terms of a national industry it is a very small industry. Probably gross production is anywhere between \$20 to 40 million, but it depends how you do the figures. That doesn't take in to account value-adding products, like when hay is valued and turned in to processed pellets for the live cattle trade. So those figures are very loose, but it is a small industry and better figures need to be generated as to the true value of our industry.

The critical aspect of agriculture up here is that it now operates successfully and is self-sufficient. As recently as 20 years ago, when the CLP Government put a lot of money in to agricultural development in the ADMA scheme, the Agricultural Development Marketing Authority, down in Douglas-Daly, people were literally going broke on a regular basis for a variety of reasons and it was not the ADMA scheme at fault. I mean, the ADMA scheme probably had good points, but what I am trying to say is agriculture has matured up here. The producers that are there, although small in number, are self sufficient, successful and it is a growing industry.

The other critical aspect of agriculture and hay production and pastoral production is that it is a critical component of the live cattle trade; which is one of the Territory's biggest primary industries and it supports the whole Territory cattle trade in general. The farmers, workers and families are a critical aspect of many communities and regional towns. They live, work and spend their money in the regions. Douglas-Daly is a prime example of a small but vibrant rural community based around farming families and grazing enterprises. It now has forestry, which is part of the whole primary industry mix.

But notwithstanding that farmers up here and farming families work in extremely difficult conditions, both physically and economically – you all know what the environment is like here and many of the farming people spend 12 to 14 hours on a tractor or in cattle yards and things like that. Why do they do it? Because they are passionate and that is their industry.

The other aspect with the economy of Northern Territory agriculture is that costs are considerably higher up here. Distances are further. We are a long way from markets. Infrastructure and supply for agricultural products are lacking. We are a long way from suppliers, as I said, and mainstream markets. But just as an example - and it is amazing how these farmers and graziers actually do make a living and are viable; it is a testimony to their efficiency - fertiliser alone is \$200 a tonne in the Northern Territory before you open a bag. So what I am saying is it costs \$200 a tonne just to get fertiliser here. Before they use it, it is \$200. If producers down south had to pay an extra \$200 per tonne it would send many to the wall. So it is testament to the efficiency of how people are operating up here.

So with all that said you could ask: why agriculture? Why not just shut it up? It is a small industry and why persist with it? I am here to possibly give you two reasons why we should persist with it. Firstly, it has got real people involved in the industry and they are contributing to the whole economy. While they are small in number, they are big on passion and they really believe in developing an industry for the Territory.

But why should we persist with it? Well, by 2050, the world will need to produce twice as much food as it does today – that is a pretty scary thought. 99% of our food comes from the Murray-Darling, which is stretched to the maximum right now, environmentally. Predictions for the Murray-Darling are not very good. In fact they are dire, especially with global climate change. But we will still continue to rely on the Murray-Darling to feed us. What if food stopped being produced in the Murray-Darling and what if they just said: 'We can't export food to the Northern Territory any more'? What would happen?

I think we have got to think as Australians and not just as Territorians. We cannot just sit back and criticise the south for the mistakes they have made. It has made mistakes in agriculture and environmental issues, but those mistakes were more out of ignorance rather than malice. But they're still feeding us, so we cannot sit on our high horse and criticise the south. As Australians, we have got to play a role in developing our resources in a sustainable fashion and start contributing to our own food needs and by only doing that, we will take the pressure off the south.

You know, as Australians we have got no right to say that our resources up here are any more precious than the resources down south. So as Territorians, if we stand up to the plate and start contributing, we are taking the pressure off southern Australia to some degree and hopefully they will continue to produce food viably, so we can enjoy it as we have – the wine, the wheat, all the products. But we do, as a state, have to stand up and be counted.

I think we have got to think in the longer term as well. As I say, if the Murray-Darling basin continues to decline, what are we going to do? What is wrong with eating our own Territory beef? By developing our resources and having good sustainable practices and science in place, we are in a better position for 2050 when it becomes an economic and ethical imperative to produce more food or fibre.

We need to continue to discover what we can grow best in the Territory and what crops give us the best economical advantage and production advantage. It may be biofuel or it may be a pharmaceutical crop, who knows? But we need to continue that search and we need to make those contributions and when we talk about agriculture, it doesn't necessarily have to be irrigated cropping, it can be a dry land crop because we can grow many, many crops in the high rainfall areas without irrigation.

So anyway, I think we have got to think globally as well. State and Federal governments, producer groups, communities and farmers need to be continually involved in developing better ways to farm in this region and to use our resources wisely. This will not only put us in a better position, but it puts us in a better position to help other tropical countries that will have dire food shortages in the future.

If we develop good tropical agriculture systems and science in the Northern Territory, that knowledge and that science and that experience is going to be in high demand in other tropical countries. That is where we have got to act globally because it is not only a better situation for us, but a possibility to improve the global situation.

So anyway, despite its current size, I believe it would be foolhardy to neglect agriculture and leave it for the next generation when we have an ethical imperative to support the development of sustainable agricultural industries not only for our future, but for a global future. They might be high and mighty words, but I believe that unless we do that, we are going to be caught short and we have a responsibility.

When I looked at your Terms of Reference - I can stop there if you wanted to ask any questions with regard to what I have said.

**Madam CHAIR:** I just wanted to ask you before I forgot, before members of the committee had a chance to question you, Fergal, recently we saw the Senate Committee that did the parliamentary inquiry in to the Northern Territory and part of their recommendations or that report, as I understand was saying was that the Northern Territory should not be seen as a food bowl for the rest of Australia or that we shouldn't go down that road. Have you read that report?

**Mr O'GARA:** I've got it.

**Madam CHAIR:** You seem to be saying the opposite to that - or are you just saying that we should not discount any possibilities of trying to develop those industries?

**Mr O’GARA:** Madam Chair, I am glad you raised that because I agree with the report: we are not going to be the food bowl of Asia or Australia. But what I am saying is that we have resources to develop here and develop sustainably and contribute. I mean, we are all consumers.

Really I think it is unfair on the rest of Australia for us to sit up here and criticise and say: ‘We want to drink wine, we want to eat pasta, we want to eat bread, we want to eat beef’ and get it all from southern Australia.

We have got resources, we have got soil - in limited abundance, if I can put it that way, in limited quantities - and they should be developed sustainably and sensibly and certainly I have got the report here and anyone that has been up in the Territory for any length of time knows that Territory is not going to be the food bowl of Asia. But that does not say that we can not contribute, and that is where I am coming from and our association, and the people out there that are working from 6am to 6pm. There are more people that can contribute and use our resources wisely. Does that clarify that, Madam Chair?

**Madam CHAIR:** Yes. Any other questions?

**Mr STYLES:** Fergal, when you said that the fertiliser is \$200 a tonne at the gate, is that \$200 gross cost or is that just the transport cost?

**Mr O’GARA:** That is the transport cost. That is probably what it is when you pick it up in Darwin and Katherine. But then by the time you get it down to the station, probably another \$50 a tonne.

**Mr STYLES:** So what is your total cost per tonne, roughly?

**Mr O’GARA:** Depending on the type of fertiliser. I mean, if it is an NPK, it could be up close to \$1000 a tonne depending on its concentration. When the global fuel crisis or energy crisis hit 18 months ago, fertiliser prices just about doubled; so by any global movement, we get hit twice as hard.

**Mr STYLES:** So a fertiliser plant in Darwin; as part of the bi-products of gas production is going to benefit you guys a lot?

**Mr O’GARA:** Yes, if that ever happens. I mean, a lot of fertiliser companies have looked at the options. But again you look at all our cumulative agricultural and pastoral industries, it is relatively small for fertiliser use, so a lot of fertiliser companies did not see the economies of scale. But even if we could get phosphorous or urea, that would be a huge, huge saving.

**Mr CHANDLER:** Fergal, I visited the Ord River area prior to Christmas. Do you see much potential for the NT side for the Ord area?

**Mr O’GARA:** I do, but I think the development of the NT side will be linked very closely to the Ord and Kununurra and be part of their economy. It is like a separate geographical area and it would be tied to that economic development, I guess, in that part of the world. Services and supplies will come from Kununurra. I don’t see another township on the Territory side. It would be illogical, I think. So yes, I do see potential there. But the big question is: what are people going to grow? Sandalwood has taken off there and that is one of the issues I was going to bring up in some of the issues concerning sustainable development.

Again, that is why I say we have to work on what we can produce viably and that gives us a production and economic advantage. But, yes, I see that is the Keep River area being developed in time and having a role to play, but cotton has pulled out, sugar has pulled out.

**Mr CHANDLER:** Because you mentioned it, sandalwood, I suppose a concern I have with that particular product is that while the world market for sandalwood oil is very good today, there is a heck of a lot being grown down there and there is potentially a risk, which I think that we should be aware of in the NT because if we all of a sudden hit the world market with - - -

**Madam CHAIR:** Over supply, yes. But it is like the forestry project where you have got the acacia magnum and the woodchip market being absolutely flooded. Is there a danger of having that of - - -

**Mr O'GARA:** I think there is a big danger in managed investment schemes where they are not responsive to market signals; they are responsive more to the shareholder and to government tax regulation. We have seen it in the Douglas-Daly where some really prime agricultural and grazing land has been bought up by forestry companies and two of those companies have now gone broke. Yet that land is taken out of production; it is out of hay production and cattle production, although one of the foresters is getting back in to hay production.

That was one of the issues here about sustainable development. When you have got an unlevel playing field and you have someone or some company or organisation that can come in and pay 10 times the value of land, it makes agriculture and grazing and pastoralism increasingly unviable, because people can't afford to buy the land. That is the thing: farming up here is a young person's occupation because you need to have the energy and you need to have that fire-in-the-belly, but young people can't afford to buy land. In Katherine 700 acres was being sold for \$1.5m. You can buy a big station down in Queensland or northern New South Wales for \$1.5m. You are not going to make a living out of 700 acres of cattle.

So there are issues that State and Federal Government really have to get their heads together on and if one part of the community is getting unfair tax advantages. -

**Madam CHAIR:** Which is where you said with the managed investments before.

**Mr O'GARA:** Yes.

**Mr CHANDLER:** In essence, it is worthwhile to actually slowly lose money for tax advantages, but it is not sustainable for the long term. I know what you are saying.

**Mr O'GARA:** Yes, and I am not against forestry. I mean, farm forestry is another thing that I think producers should look at, like locking up maybe 500 hectares or some land as a forestry block, like superannuation for the future but when we say we have got limited land and water and big strips of it are bought by managed investment schemes and locked up for forestry, it doesn't auger well for the future of agriculture.

**Ms WALKER:** Through the Chair, if I could ask a question of Fergal? You mentioned early on in the piece about the three big Landcare, *Caring for Country* projects that the Agricultural Association is looking after. Can you give us a brief overview of where they are, what their objectives are and the outcomes you are seeing on those?

**Mr O'GARA:** Well, the smallest one is production of a book on sustainable farming and grazing called *Striking the Balance* - it is not a manual but a snapshot of agriculture in the Top End. I have just given Peter a copy. If you would like to pass it around. It is pre-print so it is just to show you. That is funded by Landcare, our Association and Department of Resources. It is probably the only book of its kind in the Top End on agriculture.

Our other projects are considerably larger and they involve the employment of a Project Officer for each of those projects. One is sustainable reduction in re-growth vegetation, a lot of country has been cleared in the past and are allowed to regrow and the issue is how to manage that and bring it back in to production in the most sustainable fashion where you protect the biodiversity. By bringing that previously cleared country in to production, it eliminates the need for clearing new virgin country. So we have got a Project Officer looking at how to do that sustainably, what is the cheapest and most effective way of doing it because sucker regrowth is a big cost to the industry. It is a big cost on machinery when you have got to put machinery through it and it reduces pasture biomass.

We have got some large scale trials on Tipperary. In that project, there is a big biodiversity aspect measuring bird life and ants are a big indicator of changes in biodiversity. So there is quite a detailed study on that aspect if you use this practice and you can use heavy cultivation versus chemicals versus slashing versus ploughing and what is the nett result. Also it is tied to economics: what is the best result for your money?

The other project is the sustainable farming and irrigation project and as water is a very topical issue, we want to see producers, and producers themselves want to, use the water sustainably and use the rates of water required to grow the crop without wasting it. Greg Owens; former departmental Extension Officer, is running that project through Katherine and the Douglas-Daly and he is working with producers to look at their irrigators see how much water their putting on because lots of times they are irrigating and they do not have any handle on what they are putting on or they think they do, but looking at the whole design of their system, their nozzle outputs, how much water is actually hitting the ground, how much is evaporating off, how much is passing the roots so a lot of it is measured with electronic probes so that you just water to the root zone and you are not pushing water beyond. So it is increasing efficiency.

He is also looking at biodegradable mulches for melon producers; which, if it was successful up here, it would be a huge advantage in that it just breaks down biologically, it is an organic product. Instead of burning tonnes and tonnes of plastic, which is what people do now, is bury it, the mulch is used to keep the weeds from the crop and after the season is done, it can be ploughed in and just go back, broken down to water and organic matter. There have been several workshops run in conjunction with those projects and we intend to do a couple more this year. We work with the Horticultural Association on that as well. So they are very good projects and they will run until half-way through next year.

**Ms WALKER:** Thank you for that summary.

**Mr CHANDLER:** Fergal, you mentioned before about the cost of doing business and some of the impacts, weeds and so forth. Mimosa - is it very costly to the industry?

**Mr O’GARA:** Oh, yes. For the northern pastoral industry, it is very costly. I used to, but in this current role I don’t deal with a lot of the northern pastoral people, but I mean Mimosa is just like a cancer. You can’t let go; you have got to keep on it. When you see one plant, you know that that plant has got the potential to produce thousands and thousands of seeds that will come up for generations. So it is a huge cost and it is something that people have got to keep on at. It is not something that you can just turn your back on. But the strategy when they are clear is to sow vigorous improved pastures because that is really the only way that it is going to suppress it. Nature doesn’t like a vacuum; so where there is a vacuum, something will take it in, something will take over that area and Mimosa is so vigorous. So you need to have something to be able to compete with it and that is the strategy that the pastoral industry is working out now. But also for Aboriginal communities and tourism; it is a horrible weed.

**Madam CHAIR:** We have seen how it has choked many waterways.

**Mr STYLES:** Fergal, land clearing down at the Douglas-Daly; are there any ideas about how much land people would like to clear down there? Do you have an indication? There is a moratorium on land clearing but that is going to finish soon.

**Mr O’GARA:** You are talking about a couple of thousand hectares over a period of three to four years. It’s not thousands and thousands of hectares; it is relatively small. People are putting in applications for 300 and 400 hectares and that will finish their development in some cases. So cumulatively, in the Douglas, I don’t have an exact figure for the next five years, but it is in the thousands of hectares, not the ten of thousands of hectares.

On the land clearing issue, most of the producers down there understand the need for biodiversity and they really have embraced NRETA and then had NRETA people down there looking at their property. But at the end of the day, when you are clearing, it is the producer that knows which country needs to be cleared or which is the best country and sometimes there is conflict with people who look at a map and say: ‘Oh, we would rather you keep that little bit of strip’ but that is often the best land. So there is a lot of compromising to be done. Less than 50 per cent of most properties down there has been cleared so there is still a lot of native country on these farms.

**Madam CHAIR:** You did mention, Fergal, before that you are part of the Water Licensing Review Panel?

**Mr O’GARA:** Yes, our President is on that committee; Phil Howie.

**Madam CHAIR:** And participates in that. I know that there was a regime brought in, in terms of water licenses and all the regulatory frameworks. Are there barriers the association feels are - because as well as the cap on land clearing with the moratorium, there is also a cap on the water.

**Mr O’GARA:** We understand the need for the allocation plans to be in place and to have a precautionary principle so that we don’t over-allocate the resource, but there are certain individuals within any organisation or in the industry that do feel the allocations are too restrictive, there is too much allocated to the environment. There are issues over levels of security, whether you have got 70% or 30%. Water modelling is an inexact science and you can only go on the best models you have got. Some people dispute the current science, but it is what we have got to go with at the moment.

There are still issues to work out and, you know, a few things have happened in the Katherine Water Allocation Plan so it is not only the water allocation but it is the interpretation of the Act and the administration of how things are managed and water trading in the future. Our association believes that the water should be available equitably to people that want to use it and not be tied up and subject to speculation.

**Madam CHAIR:** So if a producer reaches the cap on their allocation within their license – I am just trying to get a sense - - -

**Mr O’GARA:** No, it is more to do with speculation in terms of applying for a water licence and have no intention of using it and holding on to it for profiteering.

**Madam CHAIR:** Okay, so banking up their licenses?

**Mr O’GARA:** Yes, banking them and then selling off the land at a hugely inflated price. So we are against that. We are all for people to get an allocation for their development and then when they step up their development again to have more allocation; rather than people getting a big allocation and not using it – you are supposed to have plans to develop and that is all written in your license and your application, but like any industry, there is the potential to speculate on water and what we want to see is the water being used wisely and for production.

There are things to be worked out with the water planner. It is new up here in the Territory and I think we need more advice from down south just to say: ‘Have we thought of this, have we thought of that? What about 10 years down the track?’ But we are working with the water planner and water resources on these issues and through the DRMAC process.

**Mr CHANDLER:** Fergal, one of the issues that has been raised with me is the fact that the new water plan may have where someone is given an allocation that may not take in to account the fact that this particular year, you as the primary producer don’t need as much water because we have had better rainfall or whatever, and then there is a risk of losing part of your allocation because you don’t use it. That is one concern that has been raised with me, that next year, they may need that allocation and more depending again on the crops they choose or the year we have had. Have you heard of anything about that?

**Mr O’GARA:** Yes. There is a fear of that, but I don’t think that is going to happen. If you have got a license, the water planner can’t just take it away. You have got to plan. It’s a 10-year plan, but it is reviewed after five years and everyone will use different amounts of water depending on the season. So it is a fear and I have heard it, but I guess people that do fear that have just got to confirm that that is not true. That is your license. The water planner can’t just come in and snap, just reduce it like that it. It is reviewed after a five year period. There are lots about the water

allocation process that I am still trying to get my head around, but, as I say, there are fears out in the community and those fears have got to be alleviated.

**Madam CHAIR:** As I understand, Fergal and Peter; if you apply for a license - just say I have got a property and I want to grow some cashews or whatever and I am going to clear so many hectares of these trees, I apply for an extraction or a water license for that crop. As I understand the license, you get a certain amount in which you can extract the water for the production and even if you don't use that full amount, what you are saying is that the Controller of Water can't reduce your license the following year because you didn't use all that. Whatever that amount was for your license for extraction, you should be able to keep to that amount.

**Mr O'GARA:** Yes and that brings in trading as well. Under the watering initiative  
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**Madam CHAIR:** Yes, that is where it is grey, though.

**Mr O'GARA:** Under the National Water Initiative, they encourage water trading and that would give you an opportunity. If, for some reason, there was ill-health or a downturn in the market and you were only going to use half the water because you are growing half a crop, you could trade that water to your neighbour that wanted to expand. So water trading - - -

**Madam CHAIR:** Particularly if your neighbours used over his allocation of whatever his license conditions were.

**Mr CHANDLER:** From your understanding; is there enough scope within there to manage market demands? Like, you may be growing cashews and the market has fallen out, so next year you have got to change to another crop.

**Mr O'GARA:** With cashews, it is a perennial crop, so you can't just change quickly. It is like mangoes. But if you were growing melons or pumpkins, it is an annual crop so if the market drops out of that, you can just switch to another crop - squash or you could even grow irrigated hay. But with perennial tree crops, it is hard.

But under your water license, you should be able to switch crops and if it uses more water, you just have to budget and you have to say: 'I've got a couple of options here.' If you were going to go from melons to bananas, for argument's sake, bananas are a hugely water hungry crop, so you grow half the area or, alternatively, you buy water from your next door neighbour. You'd say: 'I want to grow 100 hectares, not 50 hectares and I have only got water for 50, but I will buy from somebody else.'

So I think there is a lot of flexibility in the plan, but there still is a lot of fear out there that it might be a bit restrictive and I think Water Resources are trying - and we are trying as an association - to drill down to the nitty-gritty of the issues and then make sure people are comfortable with it.

**Madam CHAIR:** Is there anything else, Fergal, that you wanted to put to us?

**Mr O'GARA:** No. I just thank you for having us and hearing me out. I was a bit worried there for a while when Peter was the only one here.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you for having the patience to wait. Some of us were running late, but thank you.

**Mr STYLES:** Fergal, is that document available on a website somewhere, or can you email it to us?

**Madam CHAIR:** You are saying that it is published? We should be able to get a copy of that?

**Mr O'GARA:** Very soon. It is just the last polishing of it and then it goes to print. But that was one of our Landcare-funded projects and it was published previously 10 years ago, but it has just been updated. It is just a snapshot. It is really good for an international visitor getting a snapshot of what we do up here, but especially for new people that are considering entering the industry because while it is not a manual, it just allows them to ask more pertinent questions.

**Madam CHAIR:** But if someone can pick up a manual like that and have a look at it, it gets rid of - people have just this one view of, for example, the Cattleman's Association or Agricultural Association. People just think: 'Oh yes, they just want to clear the bush and do all these things' whereas, that is not true. The associations are and do want to do sustainable development and things like that.

**Mr STYLES:** Is it possible for us to get copies of that?

**Mr O'GARA:** Once it is printed, yes.

**Ms WALKER:** I was not aware that sesame seed was a crop in the Territory.

**Mr O'GARA:** Sesame has got a huge potential, it really has, if people the time and money in to it because we import all our sesame from Japan. You want a loaf of bread and you see all the sesame seeds, multiply that by several million.

**Madam CHAIR:** You see that is why I always had a problem with the forestry project on the Tiwi Islands, Fergal. We send the woodchip overseas to China to become woodchip and then we have got to pay for it to come back in to Australia so that we can use it. It is just crazy.

**Mr O'GARA:** Yes, it is hard.

**Mr CHANDLER:** With everything, steel included.

**Madam CHAIR:** But we could do the industries here. Wollongong used to have steel industries.

**Mr CHANDLER:** It all goes overseas now.

**Madam CHAIR:** Yes, even our call centres.

**Mr CHANDLER:** Although they seem to be more Indian-focused.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Fergal. That was interesting. The only reason I asked you about water was because I think more and more industries have been talking about the water issues and I think at some stage the committee needs to look at it.

**Mr O’GARA:** Have we got two minutes?

**Madam CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr O’GARA:** In your Terms of Reference, you have issues concerned with the environment and issues concerned with sustainable development. The issues concerned with the environment, I believe the issues that concern all agriculturalists and pastoralists are the land clearing issues, water allocation, which we have discussed, but climate change and carbon reduction strategies - we really have to develop systems to cater for what we expect with climate change.

Sustainable land use and erosion control - and again, that is tied to climate change and carbon reduction strategies because erosion is a really major factor in the Top End and we don’t have a Soil Conservation Branch any more. We used to have. I can’t over-stress the fact that if we are going to have good land management, it has got to incorporate good erosion control and we really need funding for that because once your top soil is lost - and there are pictures in there - that is it. We don’t have very deep top soils.

Research and development and government and community resources, capacity and commitment and they are issues to do with the environment. Government’s commitment, the community’s commitment and our resources. The only way we can address those is with funding and working together and getting federal and state funds working with associations like ours and the Cattleman’s and NTHA.

But issues concerning sustainable development, some of the issues that Madam Chair has raised, the Land and Water Task Force report saying that the Top End is not going to be a food bowl, and we agree with that, but we agree that there are still things to be done.

Availability of land and water is a real issue and the cost of land these days for sustainable development and viable development.

The other thing that I have seen in other transcripts is the prediction that cattle and pastoral production could double up here in the Top End. That has implications for land management and erosion and all those sorts of things, so that is imperative. If we are going to expand our cattle industry, and hopefully we can, we can do it in a way that is sustainable and with good management, but government has got to play a big role in that.

As I say, capacity - again, soil and carbon management - and Indigenous development I think offers tremendous potential. That word ‘potential’ is bandied around but there could be a lot of agricultural businesses or small scale, like even growing their own fodder for their own cattle operations, they have got an Indigenous pastoral program but if they got in to producing their own hay for their own cattle and their own weaners, it is value-adding their own cattle; there are lots of things that can happen there.

All those things cannot be looked at in isolation, but I just thought I would flag those issues as being very important to agriculture.

**Madam CHAIR:** You said that there use to be a Soil Conservation Branch. When did that close, do you know?

**Mr O’GARA:** It was like the death of 1000 cuts. It just gradually evaporated. When I started 22 years ago with the department, it was a very strong branch. They had equipment and they would go out and do contour banks for people and I know that has all gone by the wayside, the government doing things like that where private enterprise can take it on, but we don’t have the specific soil conservation officers. There are people that do give advice on soil conservation and erosion control strategies, but it is not the same. You used to have active Extension Officers going around and if they saw an issue, they would say: ‘Hey John, listen: you are going to have a real problem there. You have run that fence line down the track and you need to put in some contour banks or erosion control measures’.

**Madam CHAIR:** And what sort of remediation work needs to be taken if you have got problems, erosion starting.

**Mr O’GARA:** Yes. People were there all the time, but there are no people now. If you want soil conservation advice, you have got to go in to the office and ask for it and you might get somebody down to help you. There are some very good people at NRETAS; it is just lack of resources because soil conservation officers have retired and they have never been replaced. A case in point has been the Daly where there was a moratorium on clearing for seven years and some industries came in recently and I think they have done the right thing now, but they came in and they started working the land and there was more erosion than I have seen in the last 20 years. Now, there wasn’t a tree cleared in seven years but because new people came in and they came in under the radar and they had no advice and they had no one saying: ‘Hey, hang on. You can’t do that, you can’t cultivate that slope and take all that grass away, because it is going to wash’ and they did it and it wasn’t out of malice, it was out of ignorance, but there was no one there. As an association, we got the community together to try and address that, but there were no departmental people involved. What I am saying is that there will be a stream of new people coming in and, as I say, it seems to be falling to little organisations like ours to provide advice.

**Madam CHAIR:** Does the Cattleman’s Association play some role with that, though? If it is a pastoral property, stocking rates and stuff to stop the erosion of certain areas.

**Mr O’GARA:** They do to a limited degree, but they are not an advisory body. We have sort of become a bit of an advisory organisation as well and we will only be able to do that while we have got resources and funding. But the Cattleman’s Association do to a limited degree, but they are more a lobby group. The work with the department and the Department of Primary Industries are always looking at stocking rates, they have got lots of stocking rates trials out at Pigeon Hole and with some of the big pastoral properties.

**Madam CHAIR:** Yes, Kidman Springs...

**Mr O’GARA:** Yes, Kidman Springs and stuff like that. So there is activity there, but it is even more critical in this higher rainfall – say the Katherine-Douglas area - where you can cultivate one paddock and the next morning, your soil has moved down the slope.

**Madam CHAIR:** Because of the shifting.

**Mr O’GARA:** So we are trying to get away from cultivation and more into minimum tillage and that is why we produce stuff like this. But it is a major issue; land management, carbon and if you are losing soil, you are losing carbon and it all comes into the whole mix. Anyway, I have probably used up enough of your time.

**Madam CHAIR:** That is okay. Thank you very much for coming. We could probably keep talking about this, but we do have another meeting. So thank you very much, Fergal, and, once again, I do apologise for holding you up a couple of minutes and thank you for your patience.

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The Committee suspended

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