

# The Plantation Debacle

Since about 2000, when the Federal Government introduced legislation allowing 100% tax deductions for tree planting, Managed Investment Schemes (MIS) and wood-chip exporters had a field day, as 'buckets' of money poured into the plantation industry.

On the North coast of NSW an estimated 80,000 hectares of land were planted, mainly to Eucalypt species for wood-chip, but also some Swamp Oak and Silky Oak for bio-energy production.

Ecologically, these plantations have been a disaster, with allowances to clear remnant native vegetation of less than 1 hectare, and irregular projections of forested land to allow more efficient plantation management. Even habitat trees, those old paddock trees that provided shade for cattle, could be knocked over and burned as long as 10 or 20 seedlings were planted to replace them.

Despite strong lobbying by environmentalists, the NSW Department of Primary Industry, headed by ex Minister Ian Macdonald, refused to halt the destruction of native vegetation and old-growth trees to make room for monocultures of Eucalypts. There was copious use of cocktails of herbicides, routinely used to allow the trees to establish, followed by regular applications of insecticide to combat the insect attacks that are always attracted to large areas of a single species.



Dying Dunns White Gums at Upper Kangaroo Creek, 2010

The World Financial Crisis saw an immediate impact on the managed investment plantations as the flow of cash dried up, an impact that saw the three main proponents, Southern Cross Plantations, Forests Enterprises Australia, and Wilmott Timbers file for bankruptcy.

With the demise of those plantation owners, concerns that had been highlighted by

environmentalists, about the long-term viability of the industry, and the choice of species being grown, became apparent, with the realisation that there was no market for the product. The commonly planted Dunns White Gum, which has no commercial use other than for wood-chip, has suffered widespread dieback and death, and those that have now purchased the land are faced with no option but to dig up the trees and burn them.



**The same Kangaroo Creek plantation in 2012, with all trees bulldozed into windrows ready for burning.**

It's not only the new owners that are facing this dilemma. Many landowners were persuaded to lease their land with promises of lucrative payments over 20 years, but have now found themselves with no income, and faced with the expensive job of removing the now worthless, and unsightly plantations before they can return to regular farming activities.

If the Plantation debacle in NSW has achieved anything, it has highlighted the pathetically inadequate regulations that are in place to ensure compliance with the equally pathetic Code of Practice that is a part of the Plantations and Reafforestation Act.

That Code includes Clause 23 which requires that, in a plantation larger than 30 hectares, “*at least 30 native habitat trees must be retained on any given 30 hectares of plantation (where available).*” However, the Code then rules that despite various subclauses attached to Clause 23, any tree required to be retained under those provisions may be cleared if they are replaced with 10 or 20 new seedlings, depending on the size of the tree removed.

At the Upper Kangaroo Creek plantation, which had mostly succumbed to dieback and has recently been partly bulldozed, the landscape had been dotted with numerous hollow-bearing paddock trees, and small remnants of native forest which, despite protests from locals, were all bulldozed to establish the plantations.

So were those seedlings, that the proponent was required to plant to offset the destruction of the paddock trees, retained? The answer is no, whole sections of the plantation area have now been flattened, with the windrows of timber presumably awaiting burning.

This raises a number of other questions: Were those offset trees marked, or their location recorded by the regulatory authority, or was there any requirement by the plantation operator to prepare a site plan to show where those trees were located? Were the new owners made aware of the previous owners' obligations under the Plantations and Reafforestation Act, and were they required to obtain any sort of permission to bulldoze the plantation. Was there even a tally of the destroyed habitat trees in the first instance?

And will investors, who previously owned the plantation trees, receive anything, or have they lost all?

We put those question to the regulatory authority based in Wollongbar, but could not get any immediate answers from a senior officer who was unaware that the plantation was being bulldozed, and was uncertain as to where the relevant records were held. However, he did promise to check it out and get back to us with answers. That was several weeks ago, and we have heard nothing.

Compiled by John Edwards  
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