

BREMER BARKER CATCHMENT GROUP INC

POSITION PAPER

Version 1 - 22 May 09

DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL LAND IN THE BBCG CATCHMENT FOR HOUSING AND INDUSTRY

The Bremer Barker Catchment Group Inc (BBCG) is a community organisation based in Mt Barker. Our focus is to raise awareness of the importance of our natural environment, and to support those who want to improve or restore their land, waterways or environment to its natural balance. In the past, we have financially supported rural landholders with revegetation, watercourse management projects, pasture management, farm forestry and property planning.

The BBCG is concerned about the pressure to develop rural land in the BBCG catchment. This has the potential to reduce the amount of productive farmland in one of the State's prime agricultural regions.

The South Australian Government's Direction Paper "*Better Planning Better Future*" begins the process towards developing a 30-Year *Plan for Greater Adelaide* (The Plan). This will provide regional targets for housing and population growth. That is, it will project the number of houses needed to meet the needs of a growing and ageing population by region, and will identify the areas where housing growth will occur, (The Plan p6). The Plan also states that the Government is committed to housing 500,000 more people, nearly 250,000 new dwellings and 160,000 new jobs within the next 30 years in Greater Adelaide. (The Plan p17) As yet, it is unclear as to how many new dwellings are planned for the Mt Barker region.

In conjunction with these targets the South Australian Government is committed to sustainable population and economic growth. The future growth of Greater Adelaide is grounded in the principle that the region can grow and quality of life can be improved. The location of new homes and land for jobs and services will need careful long term planning to ensure that Greater Adelaide can grow without placing unsustainable pressure on resources (The Plan p17).

Direction 5 in The Plan 'Preserving our Natural Resources and Productive Capacities' includes a priority action to identify and protect the productive land base for agriculture and horticulture, recognising likely climatic changes, and ensure that productivity is able to be maintained into the future.

Direction 3 in The Plan 'Facilitating Economic Growth and Employment' targets a Princes/Dukes Highway Strategic Industrial Corridor from Murray Bridge to Metropolitan Adelaide encompassing a large area surrounding Mt Barker. This would result in a loss of the local agricultural industries which are at present located in this area.

The Group is of the opinion that the agricultural land in the Mt Barker region is high quality productive land which is rapidly decreasing in extent and will become increasingly precious as the impact of climate change begins to be felt. More broadly, unsustainable urban development places further pressure on our already stressed natural resources, for example, water, biodiversity and clean air, and jeopardizes our attempts to reduce our ecological footprint. The Group is also aware of the additional strain that would be placed on other resources such as transport, health care, power and education facilities.

The Group's position with regard to the population growth of the Mt Barker district, as promulgated by the Directions Paper 'Better Planning Better Future', is based on the following considerations.

1. In planning to reduce the 'Ecological Footprint' for South Australia, it is important to preserve agriculture in the Adelaide Hills, which is a unique region in SA

We feel that the Adelaide Hills are important in South Australia for the agricultural potential they provide. The unique combination of soils and climate in the Adelaide Hills allow crops to be grown in the region that are not ideally suited to any other region in the State. The loss of agricultural land in the Adelaide Hills will mean the loss to South Australia of the potential to effectively grow crops, and produce foods from those crops, which are suited to this region. The result of this loss would be future dependence on interstate or overseas markets and the importation of those foods. The added transport involved in this greatly increases the 'Ecological Footprint' of this food production. In contrast the aims of South Australia's Strategic Plan are to reduce our *Ecological Footprint*, an aim which we support.

2. The issue of providing a secure water supply for people, enterprise and the environment currently in SA should firstly be addressed before there is planning for any increased usage of water in the state, including water required for artificial population growth.

Most people in SA are currently affected in some way by the water shortage. Some people and some environments are suffering greatly. The livelihoods of many irrigators along the Murray are being threatened because they are only able to use a fraction of their water entitlements. People using domestic water supplied from the Murray are on water restrictions and even the most recent desalination plans for Adelaide will only account for half of their water supply at current population levels. Potential long term environmental damage to the Lower Lakes is looming.

The issue of providing a secure water supply for people, enterprise and the environment currently in SA should firstly be addressed before there is planning for any increased usage of water in the state, including water required for artificial population growth.

3. We would like to ensure that the natural resources of this and other catchments, which lie within the Government's investigation area for their '30 Year Plan for Greater Adelaide', continue to be treated sustainably and believe there is widespread community opinion supporting this.

For almost two decades the BBCG has been a community leader in most facets of Landcare. Our efforts have gone toward ensuring the natural resources of this catchment are cared for and managed in a sustainable way. Practical environmental action facilitated by the BBCG has resulted in approximately 7000Ha of revegetation or remnant vegetation protection. We would like to ensure that the natural resources of this and other catchments, which lie within the Government's investigation area for their '30 Year Plan for Greater Adelaide', continue to be treated sustainably and believe there is widespread community opinion supporting this.

4. Existing primary production land that has significant value or potential for primary production should be retained for primary production use and protected from urban and peri-urban expansion and the best productive land (especially land suitable for growing horticultural crops with adequate water) should be identified and mapped.

~ The Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan (INRM Plan) for the Mt Lofty Ranges and Greater Adelaide (MLRGA) Region 2003 – was the first South Australian resource management plan to be accredited. From the extensive research and consultation that took

place to formulate this plan a resulting Goal was: '*Existing primary production land that has significant value or potential for*

primary production retained for primary production use and protected from urban and peri-urban expansion'

Comments about this goal from within this Plan include: "The maintenance of productive land for primary production is seen to be in the best long-term interests of the region and of the State".

We support the findings of this first plan and feel that some of the plans and policies that have superseded it or are based on it have not matched its complete meaning. In particular some of the plans and policies following the first INRM plan have focused on the retention of Agricultural land alone, without also addressing the matter of ensuring that it is viable to continue primary production on the land being retained.

There is a need to identify and map the best productive land (especially land suitable for growing horticultural crops with adequate water), to enable appropriate planning decisions to be made for rural areas.

5. To retain and protect the best farming land in the Adelaide Hills it is crucial to not only have policies relating to the development of the land but to also, with consistency, address the issue of policies affecting the viability of primary production on that land. It is also critical to give certainty and consistency to the business climate into the future for primary production in the Adelaide Hills.

We are of the view that it is critical to have consistency between governance policies which address the retention of primary production land and policies which affect the viability of primary production on that land being retained. Consistency in policy is needed so there is certainty in the business climate for the primary production businesses in the Adelaide Hills. The Region has developed and changed greatly over the past two decades in particular. The change in the type of primary production needed to suit the newly shaped region will naturally lag behind the development of the region by numerous years. If there is no consistency and certainty in the business climate into the future then the changes which are needed will not be able to be made with any confidence.

Fluctuations in the whim and fancy of different Governments and their Ministers also creates uncertainty in the business climate for primary production going into the future, illustrated by the following:

In the Mt Barker Courier Wed 26 Mar, 2003, p1 Planning Minister Jay Weatherill is quoted as saying:

"If we keep slicing into the countryside there are all sorts of issues.....we don't support unlimited growth into the surrounding farmland" consistent with an election pledge of containing urban growth

Then the Mt Barker Courier Wed 18 Mar, 2009, p1 reports Urban Development and Planning Minister Paul Holloway as saying the State Government would have the "*final say*" on plans for the region's expansion – regardless of Council or community opposition, this being in relation to the investigation: '*Better Planning-Better Future: directions for creating a new plan for Greater Adelaide*', which is investigating substantial new development in the Adelaide Hills.

6. There is currently a community initiative supported by Mt Barker Council to start a "Farmers Market" in Mt Barker. We support this and feel it is a positive step toward a sustainable future for our region.

The Australian Conservation Foundation's (ACF) assessment of Victoria's food and farming system has matters from which South Australia, and not least the Adelaide Hills, can learn and benefit from.

The background paper '*Paddock to Plate -food, farming and Victoria's progress to sustainability*' suggests:

“Food chain redesign should aim to achieve various combinations of several objectives: to shorten food chains; to reduce transport and energy costs associated with food distribution; to support local producers; to keep people in touch with where their food comes from and how it is grown; and to increase consumption of fresh, whole foods..” (page xvii)

This ACF 'Background Paper' identifies that there is “considerable scope to expand alternative fooddistribution strategies such as Farmers Markets..” (xvi)

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7. The State Government has for many years supported the principle of retaining primary production land in the Adelaide Hills for primary production, yet the primary production land keeps being lost. It is time for action to be taken to ensure this loss does not keep happening.

In the mid 1970s there was a SA Government report about the preservation of agricultural land in the Adelaide Hills, forwarded by the then Minister of Agriculture Brian Chatterton. The Government had accepted the idea that agricultural land would be preserved but there was discussion about how this would happen. Now, more than thirty years later, the State Government still accepts the idea of the protection of agricultural land in the Adelaide Hills and there is still discussion about how this will happen. In the meantime though, prime agricultural land continues to be lost. It is no longer time for ineffectual reports and discussion, it is time for action to be taken to achieve what has been talked about for so many years.

Comments and intentions of the State Government, about the Mt Barker district, were reported in the

Mt Barker Courier (“PLAN TO STOP URBAN SPRAWL” Article: Wed 26 Mar, 2003, p1) saying:

- “*The State Government has signalled it is unlikely to approve any further expansion in the district as it honors an election pledge of containing urban growth. . . . Planning Minister Jay Weatherill said the Labor Government was elected on a promise of containing metropolitan and urban growth. Mr Weatherill said the Government wanted to consolidate growth in metropolitan Adelaide, as well as protecting rural land for farming. 'If we keep slicing into the countryside there are all sorts of issues' he said... 'we don't support unlimited growth into the surrounding farmland'.*”

Productive farmland has continually been “sliced into” in the Adelaide Hills over the past 30 years. Why is there even an “Investigation”(Better Planning-Better Future: directions for creating a new plan for Greater Adelaide) happening now considering whether or not to plan for more !

8. There is a need for analysis of the type of primary production being practiced in this region and an assessment of the type that is most desirable and sustainable into the future. Change to the best land use for this region should be facilitated and Government policy and incentives should preferentially favor the best land use.

The type of primary production in the future that is sustainable, viable and most desirable for the Adelaide Hills may not in all cases be the type of primary production that is currently being practiced. The type of primary production that was historically established in this region, and has continued on, was established when circumstances were different. There is a need for analysis of the type of primary production being practiced in this region and an assessment of the type that is most desirable and sustainable into the future. Change to the

best land use for this region should be facilitated and Government policy and incentives should preferentially favor the best land use.

9. The Development Plan policies of the State Government and Councils work against the cause of good natural resource management in the region when primary production becomes un-viable and large rural allotments are sold as hobby farms. There is need for a determination to be made about the most desirable size for hobby farms, which provide optimum social and natural resource management outcomes.

If productive rural land is divided the threat is that the smaller holdings become too small to sustain viable commercial primary production on the land. An alternative rural land use though is the country living lifestyle blocks or “hobby farms” which are owned by people who depend on another source of income for their livelihood but who conduct some farming activities on the land holding as a “hobby”. The farming practices on these holdings are not subject to the same commercial pressures and so the production is generally less efficient. As the size of hobby farms increase so does the risk of environmental damage due to proliferation of weeds, rabbits and other pests, and of increased fire danger because the time available to the owners is not sufficient to meet the increased demands of the management of the larger hobby farms. The Development Plan policies of the State Government and Councils work against the cause of good natural resource management in the region when primary production becomes un-viable and large rural allotments are sold as hobby farms. There is need for a determination to be made about the most desirable size for hobby farms, which provide optimum social and natural resource management outcomes.

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In considering the issues raised above, the members of the Group wish to act to protect our natural resources, and in particular agricultural land, by:

- Participating in all community consultations and contributing in a positive manner to ensure due diligence from planners and Local Government in considering community aspirations and concerns in relation to sustainable development,
- Remaining informed of the current state of play surrounding planning on development in the Mt Barker Region, and
- Keeping up-to-date regarding the state government’s investigations into further growth for the region to identify the issues and priorities.

To achieve these common goals we will:

Maintain an open forum on the BBCG website to encourage community awareness raising and input,

Maintain links with other community groups who have similar concerns,

Seek to keep the community informed as planning progresses, and

Advocate to ensure that sustainability issues are considered in planning development in the region.