

ACT BIOSPHERE

Submission by ACT Rural Landholders' Association

**Reference: A. ACT Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee on Planning
and Environment Inquiry into the
ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere
Reserve**

B. ACT Government Media Release

Introduction

1. At Reference A the ACT Government flagged its intention to have the whole of the ACT nominated as a UNESCO biosphere reserve, subject to relevant studies being undertaken including an examination by the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Planning and Environment. This submission is made in response to the Committee's invitation to contribute to that Inquiry.

Background

2. It is our Association's understanding that the idea of the ACT being declared a UNESCO Biosphere was advanced by the Chief Minister in October 2005 in a wide-ranging speech centred on the broad concepts of sustainability. These concepts have been developed, we understand, by the ACT Sustainability Expert Reference Group. Recognising that some 24 per cent of the ACT is land managed by ACT rural landholders, it should be a matter of concern that no landholders have been invited to join the Group. Rural landholders manage a range of land that adjoins government-controlled areas such as nature parks, forests, river corridors and national parks. In fact some 15 farms adjoin the Namadgi National Park – and still there is no landholder representation on the Park Board which, to do its job properly, need to address common land management issues such as feral animal and plant control, fire management, and boundary integrity.
3. In respect of the biosphere proposal, the concept envisages “a model program for managing land and water...” To this end an ACT Biosphere Plan cannot have relevance unless landholders are brought into the planning process at the earliest stage. Noting that the proposal seeks the status of UNESCO endorsement, it is appropriate to ask the extent to which UNESCO (and UN officials) will be involved in the management and planning of the Biosphere if it goes ahead.
4. Supporting the biosphere idea, the Chief Minister in his statement refers to the broad land divisions within the ACT such as water catchments, national parks, national reserves and urban areas. His statement however overlooks, whether intentionally or otherwise, rural land and landholders.

5. It is this background, namely the continuing attitude of government officials, members of the Legislative Assembly and Ministers in ignoring ACT landholders in Territory developments, that the Association finds particularly galling. Many ACT farmers have great knowledge of the ACT land and its landscape as well as unsurpassed corporate knowledge. Many are volunteer firefighters and understand the issues of land management in detail. Many feel threatened by the Biosphere proposal and wonder whether their farms will be economically non-viable if the Biosphere concept brings in its wake so-called conservation measures which will impact on farming operations to their detriment.
6. Landholders now execute a Land Management Agreement with the Government which is a mutually-agreed document outlining the general land management practices applicable to each farm. It is appropriate therefore to question whether these LMAs will now have to be redrafted to reflect the Biosphere concept, the extent to which this may impact on the productivity of each farm, and whether compensation will be payable in respect of affected farms.
7. These are pressing issues in the area of land management and farming viability which we consider the Committee must address and which it needs to seek answers to.
8. Noting that Australian iconic reserves such as Kakadu, Uluru and Kosciuszko have understandably been given UNESCO status, it is difficult to understand the basis for nominating the ACT as a biosphere since its integrity is already guaranteed by the National Capital Plan and the Territory Plan, supplemented by the Canberra Plan and the Spatial Plan.

Other Issues

9. The biosphere proposal brings in its wake a number of important issues which our Association considers need to be addressed and answers provided. These do not appear to be within the scope of the Committee's terms of reference, except that which is covered by "other relevant matters." Specially it is suggested that the Committee needs to ascertain:
 - Whether the Federal Government supports the proposal: indeed whether the Federal Government's views have been sought having regard to the fact that it retains overall responsibility for planning for the Territory as a whole.
 - The extent to which the biosphere proposal will impact on the National Capital Plan.
 - The extent to which it will impact on the ACT Government's Territory Plan.
 - The extent to which it will impact on the ACT Government's Canberra Plan and ACT Government's Spatial Plan.
 - Whether the much-needed population policy foreshadowed by the Chief Minister will be an element in the biosphere proposal.

- The extent to which fire protection measures, particularly in non-urban areas, will be affected by the Biosphere proposal. It is particularly relevant to bear in mind that in 2003 four people lost their lives and a number were very seriously injured, together with wholesale destruction of flora, fauna, habitat, farms, livestock, houses and livelihoods.
- The extent to which Government-sponsored projects which currently contravene the principles contained in the Spatial Plan, such as rural villages and hobby farms, will be allowed under the Biosphere proposal.
- Whether the government's proposal for a dragway is consistent with a Biosphere.
- The cost to the community of the Biosphere proposal.
- The real benefits to the community arising from an ACT Biosphere.
- The extent to which UNESCO will be directly involved in the proposal, both in the planning and management.

Summary and Conclusions

10. In our submission it is appropriate to invite the Committee to enquire as to the extent to which farming in the ACT is likely to be affected by this proposal: unless such guarantees are forthcoming this Association has difficulty in supporting the general proposal. This position is adopted when one takes into account the extent to which ACT landholders as an important sector of the ACT community continue to be ignored by the ACT Government in a range of important policy areas, impacting on land management as outlined in paragraphs 2 to 7 above.

In this regard it is relevant to point out that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) guidelines refer specifically to "respect for rural communities and their accumulated wisdom". It would be appropriate for the Committee to stress this point in their report and recommend that ACT landholders be closely involved with all aspects of policy relating to land management in the ACT whether the biosphere proposal proceeds or not.

11. The need to identify the Biosphere management structure in terms of the resources required for the development of the proposal, its implementation and ongoing management. This needs to be expressed in terms of manpower and resources.
12. For the Biosphere proposal to proceed it is recommended that the Committee point out the need for the ACT Government to address a range of questions such as those set out at paragraph 8 above. These are all important areas which our Association believes require answers before the proposal can proceed. Unless these can be satisfactorily answered the Biosphere proposal has to be seen as a threat to the long-term viability of farming and agriculture in the ACT.