

Notes for ACT Farmers for Assembly Enquiry into Planning Bill 7th Dec 2022

Issue: what is in the Bill that we want modified and why, and what is missing that we want to be included. [Planning Bill 2022 | Bills \(act.gov.au\)](#)

- These reforms are welcome, and we respect and understand the importance of land use planning, so thank you for the opportunity to speak to this Assembly enquiry today.
- The ACT's Association of Farmers has existed in different forms for 110 years to serve the interests of farmers in negotiations with Government.
- Farmers own or manage over 15% of the Territory (the city is currently 17%). Farmers are custodians of the lands that are the landscape setting for the National Capital, the managers of natural resources and conservers of nature, and businesses producing food and fibre.
- Farmlands surround the city, and our actions can enhance liveability and well-being for the citizens of Canberra and also protect people and property from harm by managing fire and flood as best we can. Farms are the buffer between the city and the bush.
- Yes, understandably, we have been the 'land bank' for urban development of Canberra, but with the Territory's finite boundaries, this has to stop somewhere, and we seek a level of certainty about this.
- We all eat – many times a day. Security of food supply for a growing population is increasingly important, particularly as where we get our foods from is affected by climate change disasters. This is why the Australian Government has an enquiry into food security. And it is why we welcome and are collaborating with the ACT Government to develop its new agriculture policy, the *Capital Food and Fibre Strategy*.

The key points about the Planning Bill that the ACT Association of Farmers wish to draw your attention to are:

In relation to the five key principles of the reforms:

1. Easy to use – yes, this seems to be achieved with the new structure as set out, in particular, we welcome the focus on farmland zoning changes.
2. Certainty – not for farmers at all. Addressing fair warning and fair compensation of rural land. Land acquisitions should be communicated with several years' notice to allow rural landholders to mentally, physically and financially prepare for the sale of land.
3. Flexibility – not clear what the outcomes are for rural lands, so this is a worry
4. transparency – “reflected through engagement”, so not for farmers, and the language of the planning system reform does not include current land use or food and tourism opportunities.
5. Outcomes focussed – not described for non-urban lands.

The concepts stated as essential to increase “liveability, prosperity and well-being” as guidance for planning decisions are fine, but they don't address the following:

- a) risk and security - to the people or the environment of the Territory
- b) only skim intergenerational equity in “a sustainable and resilient environment” and do not address fairness and a just transition in the process of change.

These missing topics are major failings in the underlying basic thinking of the planners and administrators of the leasehold system. These are flaws in the claims about “good planning”.

The Association broadly supports the intent of the Planning Bill 2022. However, we believe further work is required to:



- Identify and protect rural and agricultural land, including urban growth boundaries
- Provide longer lease tenure for rural landholders
- Rural landholders should have the same rights as other leases
- Adequately value rural land and agricultural land, a similar rate to properties outside the ACT
- Consider all land in the ACT District strategies should be developed for all of the ACT

District Strategies are where 'the rubber hits the road' in the new system and are a desirable planning mechanism if done correctly. A number of the current 9 Districts contain rural land, but there has yet to be consultation with farmers, certainly none with our Association.

We accept that the District Strategies's strong focus must be on the growth of urban areas, employment opportunities and transport corridors. But this does not mean farmland and food should be ignored. On the contrary, a thriving agricultural sector would support these outcomes.

Nor does it mean that the outdated and discredited policy of locking up the land to conserve nature is the way to continue into the future. But this is precisely what the current District Strategies for Tuggeranong, Belconnen and Canberra East have, with vague terms like 'consideration of current uses'. As a result, agricultural land is overlooked even at the most fundamental level. The value must be communicated with current land use identified in the 'open space' areas and 'change areas'.

The Association seeks to have District Strategies decisively address non-urban lands not just for industrial ribbon development but for food and fibre production, farm tourism, and ag innovation. This is how the ACT's liveability, prosperity and well-being will be enhanced.

And we seek openness and transparency about the areas outside these Districts, for example, the Western Edge Investigation Area and west of the Murrumbidgee River.

Business needs certainty, and farmers need it too. To actively manage and care for the land while producing food needs time, skills, knowledge and money. None of this is possible without the certainty of a lease and a realistic lease length.

This was the finding of the Glenn Report back in 1999; subsequently, long-term leases were offered to some farmers, but not all. The Association calls for the basic conditions provided to residents and businesses in the Territory to be given to all farmers. Anything else is unfair and undermines agricultural and biodiversity prospects for our city and the broader Capital region.

Finally, development assessment and approval issues need to be addressed. Without clarity of land use intent and the application of a key principle for land use planning, "best use of land", determinations about what should or should not happen on rural lands cannot be adequately made. There are examples now of poor administration of leases and illegal uses of farming land.

The Association is concerned that there needs to be a cohesive rural lands policy and recognition of the need for food to be produced or the risks to be managed. Unfortunately, the lessons from the past and even the present circumstances are not being applied in the nation's capital.

If we truly wish to become a vibrant, liveable and sustainable city – then agriculture and rural land management must be central to our thinking, inform future policies and guide decision-making in the ACT. The issue is not whether farmland will be lost in the ACT to accommodate population growth and urban sprawl, but how much and with what impacts?

The Planning Bill alone cannot solve all these issues, but legislation for the new Territory Plan, with its parts, need to recognise and fix the entrenched inequity and unfairness for lands currently outside the city.