

2004

Integrating good quality agricultural land management into regional NRM plans



Introduction

Farming and rural industries play a vital role in Queensland. Not only are they important for our economic and social well being, they are a part of the Australian identity. However, the land best suited to agricultural production is limited. There is increasing pressure to develop these lands where they lie in close proximity to urban areas. The Queensland Government recognises that good quality agricultural land (GQAL) is a finite resource. Measures that can be applied to conserve these lands and facilitate agriculture on good quality agricultural land are outlined in the State Planning Policy (SPP) 1/92 *Development and Conservation of Good Quality Agricultural Land*.

State Planning Policies outline State interest in development-related matters, with the purpose of shaping local government planning schemes and decisions on development applications to incorporate State requirements.

The Government recognises its responsibility as outlined in the position statement from the SPP 1/92:

“The Queensland Government considers that good quality agricultural land is a finite national and State resource that must be conserved and managed for the longer term. As a general aim, the exercise of planning powers should be used to protect such land from those developments that lead to its alienation or diminished productivity”.

Good quality agricultural land is generally at least of regional significance, and its protection may require regional coordination.

What is good quality agricultural land?

Agricultural land is defined as land used for cropping and grazing but does not include land used for intensive animal husbandry such as aquaculture, feedlots, piggeries, poultry farms and plant nurseries. Agricultural land considered to be of good quality would be:

- Suitable for, and capable of, sustainable agricultural use;
- Important for agricultural activities of State or regional significance; and
- Available for agricultural use.

The definition is explained in the published Guideline *The Identification of Good Quality Agricultural Land*, which supports the policy.

Role of regional bodies in managing good quality agricultural land

The SPP 1/92 outlines restrictions relevant to all those involved in development approval under the *Integrated Planning Act 1997*, administered largely by local governments. Regional NRM bodies have no defined role under the policy, and their primary role in ongoing management of resources lies outside IPA. Regional bodies, however, do have a role in protecting good quality agricultural land.

First, they will from time to time be providing advice and submissions to local governments. Second, they will advise landholders on best practice and this may include advice on managing their good quality land assets. Third, they will advise State departments and all other stakeholders about conditions and issues in their areas. These issues may include threats to good quality agricultural land together with potential remedies. Finally, although the policy legally has effect only through IPA, as a statement of official policy it can be given effect through a wide range of statutory and non-statutory mechanisms.

For example, NRM bodies may wish to promote community awareness and education on the importance of conserving good quality agricultural land. NRM bodies can act as a 'watch dog' by lodging submissions on development applications.

Regional bodies should be aware that:

- Some agricultural lands will be defined as good quality and are protected under the SPP; and
- The location of GQAL in the region may have significance for some regional NRM plans and the setting of targets under NAP and NHT2. An example of a target may be 'no further loss of GQAL to development'. At the very least, a regional NRM plan should not include provisions that contradict SPP 1/92.

Resource Planning Guideline G100 *Implementing NRM Plans* explains actions that regional bodies may take to give effect to policies embedded in various plans.

The importance of conserving Good Quality Agricultural Land

Australia has a limited supply of good quality agricultural land, with only 1-2% of land supporting highly productive agriculture. Environmental impacts from farming in these lands are easier to manage than in other areas, as the soil, topographic and climatic conditions are more favourable. Like any limited and non-renewable resource, it is important to conserve this land. Thus land that is suitable for agricultural production should be maintained for that purpose. Good quality agricultural land is the land most suitable for farming. It is essential for:

- Food production, both domestic and international;
- Local and regional economic prosperity;
- Valuable export earnings;
- Preserving the social fabric of rural communities; and
- Growth of secondary industries.

Although the SPP 1/92 was enacted ten years ago, the issues associated with developing on quality agricultural lands are even more relevant today. At the local level urban development pressures are currently a major contributor to the alienation and reduced productivity of rural lands. This problem is not limited to South-east Queensland, but also occurs around regional centres. Developing rural land for other uses, including subdivision into rural residential 'lifestyle' blocks, results in the irreversible loss of agricultural production on the land. It also induces several other key problems:

Conflict between land uses

Residential development may not be compatible with agricultural land uses. Conflict may arise due to redirection of water flows, transport routes near dwellings, odour, noise and chemical problems from farming practices. This conflict may extend to misgivings between rural residential landholders, hobby farmers and traditional farmers. Rural residential development can also increase property values in the rural area, increasing pressure to develop the land for urban purposes, making it more attractive for the farmer to sell or casting doubts about the advisability of new farm investment.

Fragmentation of farming land

Subdivision of rural lots may mean loss of prime agricultural opportunities and the 'economies of scale' that sustains some forms of agricultural production (e.g. sugar cane). Agricultural land lost to residential development is not easily restored. This may push agricultural production on to more marginal, lower quality land at a greater environmental and economic cost.

Principles of the GQAL Policy

SPP 1/92 outlines 8 principles. These and related issues are outlined below:

- 1. Good quality agricultural land should not be developed for non-cropping purposes unless there is an overriding need in terms of public benefit and no other site is suitable.**

'Public benefit' broadly refers to the community's social and economic wellbeing. Each proposal must be assessed on its merits to determine 'overriding need' on a case-by-case basis. For example, an extractive industry could provide public benefit through diversifying the area's economic base.

- 2. The alienation of some productive agricultural land will inevitably occur, but the Government will not support such alienation when equally viable alternatives exist, particularly where developments that do not have very specific location requirements (for example, 'rural residential') are involved.**

Not only does the development's public benefit need to be considered, but also the existence of any alternative sites that are not designated good quality agricultural land.

- 3. When preparing, reviewing or amending planning schemes, local governments are to include provisions for conserving good quality agricultural land.**

Short-term fluctuations in commodity prices are not sufficient reason to forgo the long-term agricultural potential of the land.

- 4. Strategic plans should include an evaluation of alternative forms of development, and significant weight should be given to strategies that minimise the impacts on GQAL.**

If development is proposed on GQAL, then a detailed assessment (e.g. impact assessment) is appropriate.

- 5. Due consideration should be given to the conservation of GQAL when applications for development approval are being determined.**

A proposal that would not permanently alienate land from agriculture, for example a horse riding school with a low level of capital improvements, is likely to be acceptable under the policy.

- 6. Where a draft planning scheme that is submitted to the Minister for Local Government and Planning does not contain adequate agricultural land conservation provisions, the Government will be guided by the principles set out in this Policy.**

The policy does not support the creation of smaller allotments on GQAL. Thus subdividing for any purpose, including 'family excisions' is not preferred. Where subdivision can be justified on the ground that it is to facilitate agricultural production, the dwelling should be sited on poorer quality land. 'Estate planning' is a personal factor and is not sufficient reason for a family excision.

- 7. The fact that existing farm units and smallholdings are not agriculturally viable does not in itself justify their further subdivision or rezoning for non-agricultural purposes.**

Even though an individual farm may become unviable, the land is still part of that area's production system. The local government is encouraged to provide incentives to amalgamate titles should a farm be smaller than desirable for the nature of production in the locality.

NRM&E publishes farm size guidelines to indicate the approximate size that a farm needs to be to allow it to adjust crops to take advantage of market conditions. If a

property is smaller, it may still be viable for some crops so agriculture need not be abandoned; but its capacity to adjust is less.

8. Local government planning schemes should aim to minimise the potential for locating incompatible uses adjacent to agricultural operations in a manner that inhibits or constrains normal farming practice.

The published guideline *Separating Agricultural and Residential Land Uses* outlines protective measures for farmland and conflicting land uses. The favoured mechanism is to set aside an area of land (a buffer) within the new development to minimise conflict such as odour, noise and chemical spray drift. A buffer should be the minimum width required to substantially ameliorate the impacts of the particular agricultural practices that are likely to apply.

Checklist

After reading this training module you should:

- Know what is meant by 'good quality agricultural land';
- Have an understanding of key issues involved in the development of good quality agricultural land;
- Be aware of the principles of the SPP 1/92; and
- Understand the consideration to be given to the planning of GQAL in the development of the regional NRM plan.

References

- State Planning Policy 1/92 was developed in the early 1990s jointly by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning and the Queensland Department of Primary Industries. NRM&E is now the lead agent for the ongoing application of State Planning Policy 1/92.
- See the Department's web page: www.nrm.qld.gov.au/land/planning/planning_policy.html

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