

# Curb land clearance, SA urged

By Conservation Writer KYM TILBROOK

Slowing SA's rate of land clearance is urgently needed, according to a State Government report issued yesterday.

Issuing the report, the Minister for the Environment (Mr. Simmons) said that about 73 p.c. of the State inside the 250-millimetre rainfall line had been cleared for agriculture.

Of the remaining 26 p.c., 5 p.c. was in national parks, he said.

It would have been a good idea if the report had been set up 10 or 20 years ago, he said.

The report says uncleared vegetation is a finite and "constantly declining resource" which will continue to be needed for community needs.

It says principles of sound land use and management should be applied.

The report was commissioned by the Cabinet in July, 1974, because of concern at the rate of land clearance.

The study, "Vegetation-Clearance in SA," makes 14 recommendations which it hopes will slow clearance.

It discusses financial incentives for keeping natural vegetation, and compensation for potential production loss.

The report suggests a Heritage Agreements Act under which a landowner

could contract with an independent body, typically the Government, to use his land in an agreed way.

The agreement would not be varied without the consent of both parties and would remain as an encumbrance, covering any subsequent owners.

The report says the Crown Solicitor should be asked to draft a model agreement which would allow natural vegetation to be kept on private land in perpetuity and also ensure that a chosen form of incentive was not abused.

The 57-page report recommends:

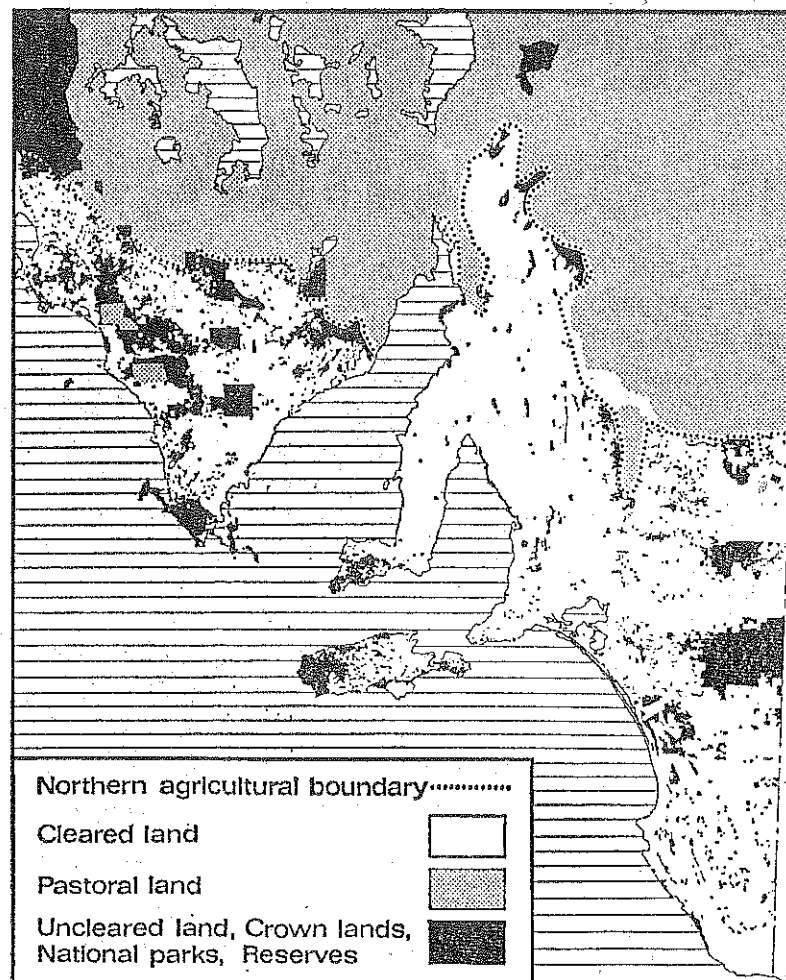
- Immediate moves to decide reasonable and fair incentives to encourage landholders to keep native vegetation.
- Attention should first be directed towards varying State and local government rates and taxes.
- All possible incentive schemes should be costed and evaluated.

It says many existing State and Commonwealth rates and taxes are a disincentive to retain natural vegetation.

"Some measure of relief from their provisions would probably encourage land owners to retain natural vegetation," the report says.

It suggests the Income Tax Assessment Act could be amended to allow the deduction of land clearing costs only for approved clearance proposals.

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## Cut SA land clearing — report

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An amendment could also allow deductions for the cost of maintaining uncleared land.

The report says pressures from land tax to clear land are considerable and some relief appears needed.

"At present, land used for primary production receives a statutory exemption of \$40,000, but land held for conservation purposes receives no relief," it says.

The report says local government rates vary from district to district but are highest near urban areas.

This does not benefit the landowner who wishes to remain on the land and often forces premature subdivision and/or clearance, it says.

"Local government rates are generally higher than land tax and remissions or exemptions from them may be a more decisive incentive for the retention of vegetation."

Compensation for potential production loss would be extremely expensive and difficult to administer, the report says.

The committee proposed that in the interim applications for land clearance should be scrutinised by the Department for the Environment.

However, it is well aware that if liaison is not established with rural interests first, this measure could provoke a hostile reaction.

It says it is important when considering introducing the interim measure "that the farmers should not be inconvenienced or delayed by administrative procedures."

It recommends that the move be handled by the director of the Department for the Environment, assisted by an advisory committee on vegetation clearance.

The measure would be monitored and, if necessary, reviewed after three years.

The report says the logical long-term answer must be the establishment of a land use authority supported by statute.

But short-term control is necessary.

The committee also found that:

- SA's older settled regions have been almost totally cleared of natural vegetation.
- The rise in vegetation clearance since World War II was caused by the physical environment and a variety of economic factors. Government policies, and technological developments in land utilisation and management.
- Clearance has dropped in recent years, but a future demand for increased rural production may cause clearance and development of more land in existing agricultural regions.
- Vegetation clearance in the future should require more justification.

Mr. Simmons said yesterday afternoon the Government was looking at the recommendations to see to "what extent they should be followed."

Wide comment from the public was wanted because action was "urgently necessary."

The report was prepared by officers from the Department for the Environment, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Lands Department and the Woods and Forests Department.

The committee chairman was Mr. C. Harris of the Department for the Environment.