

Opening Address

John King

I am very pleased to be invited to open this Friends of Grasslands Workshop which is being sponsored by the NSW Farmers Association, the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Environment ACT (ACT Department of Urban Services), and the World Wide Fund for Nature.

Farmers are often blamed for destroying the natural vegetation. However, past governments required farmers to clear and develop this land and paid them subsidies to do this, to 'improve' pastures and build dams. Farmers are Friends of Grasslands, because they love the land and realise that it is their children's heritage, but also because they have to work with nature to achieve an economic return.

Conservation legislation and regulation are often political decisions designed to make people feel good. However it does not reflect farmers' interests. Farmers are prepared to protect species if they are threatened. However the listing of species as threatened is itself a curious thing. At times species are listed as threatened when they are clearly plentiful.

Weeds on the Monaro are a threat to both rural production and conservation. Conservation legislation such as the Threatened Species and Native Vegetation Acts can often hinder weed control. This is an area where farmers need to sit down with all those involved in the conservation debate, especially those who can influence government and who are in a position to alter or re-interpret legislation. We have a mutual interest. However, it should be made clear that any requirement to conserve threatened grassland or species on private land for the public good must be fully compensated.

This process I suggest will get farmers on side but prescriptive legislation and prescriptive community consultation will not. We need to build mutual trust but we start a long way behind the eightball.

I hope this workshop will begin to build a bridge between farming and conservation, and I am pleased to declare it open.