

Pay farmers to save threatened species: expert

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Farmers banned from clearing their land should be reimbursed and society must pay to save native plants and animals on private property, says the top environmental economist heading a shake-up of NSW's biodiversity laws.

In an interview with Fairfax Media, Neil Byron, who is leading the independent review, has given the first indication of potential changes to contentious rules governing land clearing and threatened species protection.

Senior Nationals MPs have been heavily criticised for linking land clearing laws to [the death of NSW environment compliance officer Glen Turner](#), who was killed while carrying out his work near Moree in July.

Dr Byron backed comments by Nationals MP Kevin Humphries that if the community wants farmers to set aside productive land "they should be paying for it".

"If we as a public want these things saved, we ... have to pay at least part of the costs," Dr Byron said, adding farmers should be encouraged to maintain land, not just set it aside.

"What frequently happens is having identified something of high importance, we then ignore it and let it degrade."

He said such reimbursement need not be "extraordinarily expensive to taxpayers" and might involve expanding biodiversity offset schemes, in which impacts from development on threatened species are offset by restoring equivalent biodiversity elsewhere.

It might also involve a reduction in council rates, or greater government payments to landholders who set aside land.

The review followed a push by the Nationals and the Shooters and Fishers Party for greater landowner rights when it comes to bush clearing.

Conservationists fear the review will strip back environmental protections and remove the requirement for landholders to maintain soil and native vegetation, and prevent salinity and water pollution.

Dr Byron supported a "carrot and stick" approach to protection, saying some laws established to protect biodiversity might be "having the opposite effect".

He said some farmers may avoid telling authorities about the discovery of rare plants and animals on their land, for fear "it will just create problems".

"We rely on the people who are on the ground ... you want them onside rather than offside," he said.

The panel is examining options for self regulation, and Dr Byron said the panel had identified several areas where red tape could be reduced.

He cited wildlife management, saying volunteers who care for injured animals should be properly trained, but need not be regulated "as if they were potential criminals".

Dr Byron said the public response to the review, which attracted more than 400 submissions, was "overwhelming".

NSW Farmers' president Fiona Simson said "stewardship payments" would be a useful tool if farmers were expected to conserve and manage native vegetation on their land.

Total Environment Centre director Jeff Angel also supported such a system.

But he cautioned that farmers did not have a legal right to compensation, and "if we can't pay [them] that's not an excuse to eliminate the land clearing laws, because they provide enormous benefits to the entire community".

The panel's interim report is due on October 16, and the review will conclude in December.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/nsw/pay-farmers-to-save-threatened-species-expert-20141002-10nv7h.html>