



Friends of Grasslands

supporting native grassy ecosystems

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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: environment.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment Inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations May 2015

Friends of Grasslands (FOG) is a community group dedicated to the conservation of natural temperate grassy ecosystems in south-eastern Australia. FOG advocates, educates and advises on matters to do with the conservation of grassy ecosystems, and carries out surveys and other on-ground work. FOG is based in Canberra and its members include professional scientists, landowners, land managers and interested members of the public.

FOG is currently applying for DGR status.

We understand the Standing Committee's purpose is to *inquire into administration and transparency of the Register of Environmental Organisations and its effectiveness in supporting communities to take practical action to improve the environment.*

FOG is pleased to provide information to the Inquiry and in particular is delighted about the opportunity to showcase the important practical work we undertake to improve the environment.

FOG does not support any attempt by federal or state Governments to curtail the important work of environment groups by calling into question activities of environment groups that are not 'on the ground' activities. Environmental groups are permitted at law to conduct both 'on the ground' and advocacy activities in pursuit of their charitable purpose to protect and enhance the natural environment.

Both types of activities provide practical ways of delivering tangible improvements to the environment.

FOG is proudly open and transparent with its history of reasoned advocacy - a full listing of submissions since 2007 is publicly available at <http://www.fog.org.au/advocacy.htm>.

Many submissions are responses regarding matters of National Environmental Significance invited by Commonwealth Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation assessments of development proposals impacting on endangered grassy ecosystems.

Others are responses to calls for public comment in drafting of local and regional strategies for land use (e.g. the management of Travelling Stock Reserves), for land management (e.g. ACT Strategic Bushfire Management Plan, listings of threatened species, Heritage Management plans), and for revisions of ecological classifications and policies relevant to grassy ecosystems. As a member group of the Conservation Council of the ACT Region, we seek to influence through this peak body the development of local and regional legislation related to Biodiversity Conservation - the Nature Conservation Act about to come into force in the ACT is a recent example.

Many of the activities listed above involve advocating for outcomes through generating public awareness and debate over an issue and through that, agitating for legislative and/or policy change to *protect the environment*. It is not only on-ground activities that are of major value to conservation; so too is advocacy for large scale systematic changes that better protect the environment. As an example, some years ago FOG advocated for mitigation of construction activities adjacent to conservation sites – now such mitigation is standard in development proposals and generally implemented on the ground.

FOG conducts advocacy as a not-for-profit organisation of volunteers committed to protect and enhance the natural environment.

Environmental organisations rely heavily on donations and in particular on the income of funds that are independent, untied, and free from conditions of government grant contracts. If this Committee is to recommend a restriction on or limit the advocacy activities that environmental organisations listed on the Register are able to conduct, this will result in organisations shrinking or folding. This would threaten freedom of communication in Australian civil society that is a vital part of Australia's political system.

The role played by environment groups and other NGOs is crucial in maintaining the health of democracy in Australia. The advocacy work of environmental organisations enriches public debate in Australia and contributes to good policy-making by both government and business. Environmental organisations are uniquely placed to take a considered long-term approach in formulating policy asks and goals, and this is ultimately in the public interest.

Any reform limiting the advocacy activities of environmental organisations constrains Australia's long-held model of democracy in which many voices contribute to public policy. We urge the Committee to give careful consideration before taking any such action.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Sharp
President

20 May 2015