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PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
"OUR LAND" STATEMENT
ALBURY, 24 JANUARY 1996**

***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *****

First, let me thank Professor Blake, the Vice-Chancellor of Charles Sturt University, and Professor Cullen, the Director of the Cooperative Research Centre for Freshwater Ecology, for their invitation to open this research facility for the Murray Darling Freshwater Research Centre.

There is great work being done in Australian research, and I sincerely hope that this event will help to advertise that fact.

Research of the kind being done here is essential because it seeks solutions to the problems of living on this continent which we simply must solve. It adds to our body of knowledge, and thus contributes vitally to Australia's future.

The work here is unique, but there are parallels across the country. We are doing a great deal in the field of environmental research, we are doing a great deal to restore and protect the environment, and each year we do more.

Since 1988/89 the Commonwealth has spent nearly \$350 million on vegetation-related projects alone. Nearly 700,000 hectares have benefited. Nearly 200,000 Australians have been involved.

Or, to quote another example, since 1989 the Commonwealth together with State Governments have spent over \$300 million to address the damage to our greatest river system, the Murray-Darling Basin - and this investment has leveraged an even greater contribution from the community and private sector.

I am continually impressed by the quality of the people involved in the hands-on environmental effort in Australia.

It is easy enough to be passionate about the environment, and we need people to be passionate. But to succeed we need to be wise and passionate. We need to be practical. And, because we won't repair the damage of two centuries and we won't create a sustainable Australia overnight, we need to be dedicated.

No one should imagine this is a task for the short term, any more than they imagine that governments and dollars alone are the solutions. Success requires a sustained national effort - a communal, generalised effort.

If after all the expenditure of money and energy and expertise in recent years, we feel daunted by the task that still lies ahead, there are only two remedies.

The first is - broaden the effort: involve more people and communities, more companies, more landowners - make it a more coordinated nationwide drive, make it inseparable from the nation's progress, build the energy of private interest into the public environmental good. That's the first remedy.

The second is more of a spiritual cure. Go to Daintree, go to the Franklin River or Kakadu, or Shoalwater Bay or Jervis Bay. Go to the places which have been saved. Go to the environment itself. Go to the places up the Murray from here which Greening Australia and the local communities are making a corridor of green; or walk along the Hawkesbury or the Yarra which unemployed people with local communities are renovating under REEP schemes financed through Working Nation; or go to any of the thousands of Australian farms where Landcare has made a visible difference.

As works in progress go, this is more rewarding than most: the evidence of each step we take is so gratifying. This huge continent throws up a huge challenge, and at times it will look like we are not making progress - but we are. And as a nation it would be disastrous if we were to lose our nerve.

Today we take some more steps - big steps. And most importantly, we pull all the elements of the national effort, into step.

This is a very big policy initiative. All up, it involves expenditure in the region of almost half a billion dollars.

It is also very good policy: it goes to the heart of the problem, it builds on proven programs, and in the longer term it will produce far more savings and far more national wealth than we intend to spend.

In a real sense it will be the test: when these programs are fully implemented, we will have a very clear idea of whether the concept of sustainable Australia can be made a reality.

If it can, the rewards will be immense: for our prosperity, for our quality of life, for our relationship with this land, for our farmers, for our children.

It is a statement in two interrelated parts: the first concerns the task of creating a sustainable rural Australia; the second is directed at meeting our responsibility to conserve our natural environment. It is a statement about the relationship between our natural riches and the economic wealth that we create from it. It constitutes by far the most dramatic single response any Australian government has ever made to the challenge of protecting the land.

Australia is an environmentally rich nation.

We have diverse biological capital: numerous species that are not found anywhere else; ecosystems in coral reefs, rainforests, wetlands and deserts which are things of wonder for the whole world.

We also have huge and diverse areas of farmland which provide high quality produce over long seasons. Over the years, this has helped us build considerable national wealth through the export of our commodities.

But Australia is also environmentally fragile.

Recent assessments have shown us just how fragile - and how difficult is the task of repair.

In Singapore recently, I drew attention to the environmental challenges facing a rapidly growing Asia. Many of these challenges are shared by Australia. Soil erosion, salinity, water pollution and loss of biodiversity are all too well known to us.

The challenge of protecting our land is inextricably linked to our economic well being. The two go hand in hand. That is sustainable development. The links are obvious, but always worth re-stating.

Our farms must be profitable if we are to maintain the capacity to invest in the conservation of our environmental assets. To be profitable, we must add maximum value to our produce and link producers and processors closely with consumer demands.

Maximum value can only be added over the long haul if our produce is clean, as our consumers will demand, and if our resource base remains productive.

Our resource base can only remain productive if ecological processes and biological diversity are maintained. And that demands a strategic network of nature reserves joined with conservation measures on and off farms.

And so the circle is closed. With this Statement we enlarge the circle - hugely.

Today, we make another very significant down payment on securing the future of our land - a major investment in our capacity to profit economically from the land and protect the diverse life the land itself supports.

Some 60 per cent of the land is managed by our farming families. Last year a great many of these families depended on us to survive the drought. The much more common reality is, of course, that Australia depends on them.

At present our agricultural industries are finely balanced. They face substantial opportunities for growth and prosperity. But they also face significant environmental challenges if they are to remain productive.

Farming families are already seeing an increasing proportion of their produce being processed in Australia, or being packed and exported quickly and reliably to premium price foreign markets. That is the way they will improve profitability and so be well placed to manage our natural resources in a sustainable manner.

In turn, sustainable farming is essential if our products are to find favour with the burgeoning consumer classes across Asia. By the year 2000, spending on food in Asia will have increased by around \$US160 billion per annum from the 1990 level.

Asian consumers will increasingly demand quality, and increasingly be subject to fashion and market presentation.

For Australian suppliers, continued product innovation, market development and reliable distribution will be essential to increased market share.

The success of the rural sector in adjusting to change is demonstrated by the record of exports of high value added food products. In 1991-92, the year before the commencement of the Government's Agri-Food Strategy, these exports totalled \$2.5 billion. We set an ambitious target of \$7 billion of exports by the year 2000. Last year our high value exports had risen by 50 per cent to over \$3.7 billion, and we are clearly on track to meet and exceed our Year 2000 target.

The Government will build on the success to date by pulling together the threads of natural resource management, on-farm performance, product development, market identification, transport, distribution, and consumer servicing.

Industry leaders have suggested to me that the next phase of development should cement Australia as a major food exporter to Asia. I have agreed that the Government will join with and support strong private sector leadership in this endeavour.

As part of this, we will energise the Agri-Food Council to develop and drive an Asia Food 2000 Strategy. The Council will report to me and I will chair at least one meeting a year.

Further details of these reforms will be announced on Friday. For now I can say that the Council's general aims will be to improve linkages across the full production, processing, marketing and transport chain with the objective of promoting high value food exports.

Yet the greatest imperative in the long run is sustainability.

By the early 1990s around 6 per cent or \$1.5 billion of annual agricultural production was being lost to natural resource degradation. This is the legacy we are tackling in partnership with rural Australia at the level of individual farms, local communities and broader regions. It is only through such a comprehensive strategy that we can succeed.

The Government cannot solve these major environmental problems in isolation. What is more, to attempt to do so, is to squander by far the largest source of energy and inspiration at our disposal. I mean communities, the people of Australia.

Community involvement is a theme of this Statement - the Government can set the policy goals and framework and provide the bulk of the funds, but the maximum return depends on how well we engage the community.

The massive investment we are making today will help us arrest and begin to reverse the equally massive land and water degradation our land has suffered over the last 200 years.

It will not mean the end of the problem. Only that we are not daunted by it.

Unfortunately, much of the burden of turning this situation around has fallen to the current generation of farming families. In November 1994, I established the Land Management Task Force to investigate ways to improve land management in rural Australia. It reported that property management planning is an effective and essential tool in improving the financial and natural resource management performance of Australian farms.

The National Property Management Planning Campaign we initiated in 1992 has laid the foundations for a major expansion of more strategic farm planning practices.

Property management planning helps farming families manage farms in an integrated manner, as both businesses and environmental assets. Through it they identify their goals, assess the productive capacity of their farms, create business plans for their properties, and allow for normal contingencies such as commodity cycles or drought.

In response to the Task Force's recommendations, the Government will extend the National Property Management Planning Campaign for four years from 1996-97 at a cost of \$35 million.

In addition, the implementation of property planning on farms will be supported through the Rural Adjustment Scheme, which will be strengthened with the introduction of a new sustainable farming component costing \$12 million dollars over 4 years.

Planning at the individual property level by farming families will be most effective if it is supported at the community level in a broader geographical context. And that is where Landcare comes in.

Landcare is a particularly successful, innovative and, I think, uniquely Australian approach to sustainable resource management. The concept was relatively new when the Government announced in 1989 that \$320 million would be allocated to Landcare over the next decade.

We said we hoped to have 1000 Landcare groups across the country by the year 2000. Today we have 2500 groups. Thirty per cent of broadacre farm families are involved. Awareness of Landcare in rural Australia grew from 40 per cent in 1991 to 85 per cent in 1994, and in urban Australia from 10 per cent to more than 60 per cent. What Landcare did - the genius of it - was to tap the resilience of Australian farmers, their passion for the land and their determination to stay on it, and turn these qualities to the goal of environmental sustainability.

Landcare has been one of Australia's most spectacular national successes. With the new spending in this Statement, total expenditure on Landcare since 1989 will exceed \$1.1 billion - more than three times our original commitment.

Today's announcement not only substantially increases the Government's support for Landcare, it also directs more of those resources to community Landcare groups. The rapid embrace of Landcare has seen the funds often spread too thinly and many worthwhile projects inadequately supported.

Importantly, the Government will provide \$128 million to assist with the development and implementation of catchment plans by local communities.

Changes will be made to the Regional Environmental Employment Program to improve linkages with Landcare activities and address national environmental priorities. We will appoint 10 environmental employment coordinators to increase the take-up of REEP.

The REEP initiatives are just part of the Government's efforts to increase the positive environmental impacts of labour market programs. The Government has allocated more than \$1 billion, through Working Nation programs, towards the development of green jobs. In 1994-95 there were approximately 25,000 placements in Landcare, environment, conservation and cultural heritage projects at a cost of \$252m. In the following three years these will increase by 90,000 placements at a cost of \$936m.

While many issues need a regional focus, some of the environmental challenges must be addressed across several States.

Most notably, the Murray Darling Basin is Australia's largest and most important agricultural area. It contains 26 per cent of all Australian agricultural land, almost 75 per cent of irrigated agricultural land and accounts for over 40 per cent of Australian agricultural production by value. The value of agricultural exports from the Basin is around \$6 billion per annum.

In 1988 the Government, together with the relevant state governments, established the Murray-Darling Basin Commission, and the combination of significant funding, science and community effort has led to substantial progress in many areas. Witness the growth of the wine industry in Sunraysia or the dairy industry in the Goulburn Valley.

However, it is all too clear that the Murray-Darling is still in trouble. It is sufficient to note that we have lost 500,000 hectares of land to salinity. Unless decisive action is taken now, around 1,500,000 hectares, much of it prime agricultural land, will be under threat by around 2040.

The scale of the problem clearly requires a national response, and the Government is prepared to meet that responsibility.

The Government, in partnership with the relevant States through the Murray Darling Basin Council, has commenced a comprehensive natural resource management and rehabilitation program of the Murray Darling Basin. To reinvigorate this we will provide an additional \$98 million over the next four years as part of the Murray-Darling Basin Sustainability Initiative. We will expect matched funding from the States.

Comprehensive priority action will be taken on reducing waterway pollution arising from towns and cities, increasing salinity control, addressing land degradation and erosion, reducing the effect of agricultural run-off on waterways and protecting native animal habitat and remnant vegetation.

For example, we estimate that through this and other initiatives we can reduce the amount of nutrients entering the river systems by a massive 40 per cent. Over 1,600 kms of the most sensitive riparian zones on the major rivers will be rehabilitated. Dry land salinity will be tackled on a catchment basis including through extensive farm forestry.

Let me now turn to the broader issues of nature conservation. In our largest program for this ever for the protection of biodiversity both on or off reserves, the Government will provide a \$175 million program to expand the National Reserve System and to ensure that conservation is a priority outside that Reserve System.

To this end, the Government will provide \$70 million to maintain and extend the range of Landcare programs which have nature conservation as their primary objective. These programs, such as Save the Bush, National Corridors of Green and Waterwatch, have galvanised community action to protect our environment. Some 1200 grants have been made to community groups under Save the Bush. And more than 30 000 people have participated in Waterwatch.

Funding for Save the Bush will be doubled and targeted to four key areas; namely, support for community activities, training Landcare facilitators, research into techniques of regeneration and conservation of grasslands.

Funding for Waterwatch will be increased by 50 per cent and the program will be extended through to the year 2000. A priority will be community monitoring in the catchments of Australia's Ramsar Wetlands.

The River Murray Corridor of Green program has deployed 90,000 hours of community labour to protect or re-establish over 4000 hectares of vegetation. We will provide \$8.1 million to establish a National Corridors of Green program for similar projects in all States and Territories. The program will assist communities to enlarge and connect remaining patches of bushland and link these with new plantings - establishing a biodiverse "web of life".

The driving force will be communities, and the advantages will flow to them as well as to the environment. They will flow particularly to young people.

These programs have a multiplying effect; they raise understanding and awareness of environmental issues as they go, and that in itself is a substantial guarantee that future generations will not make the mistakes made by previous generations - including ours.

We have only recently become fully aware of the rate at which we are losing our native vegetation. That rate is ecologically unsustainable and has been a primary cause of many of our most difficult problems, including salinity, soil erosion and the lost of species.

Fortunately, State and Territory governments are now addressing this important issue. To provide additional national momentum and a regional focus, I will convene a National Native Vegetation Conservation and Management Forum.

This will bring together all governments, the farming, scientific and conservation communities and other relevant parties in a series of national and regional meetings and consultative processes around the country.

The objective will be to seek a consensus on effective native vegetation management strategies.

We will also increase our efforts to combat feral pests and weeds with the provision of an additional \$13 million to create a comprehensive framework for the management of invasive species.

This audience more than most will recognise the importance of our wetlands and waterways as the lifeblood of the system and as indicators of its health.

We will allocate \$15.3 million to establish a new National River Health program to create a scientific basis for understanding the flow requirements of our river systems. This work will feed into the reform agenda being pursued by the Council of Australian Governments.

In March Australia will host the largest international environment conference ever held in this country. Representatives from around 100 countries will gather in Brisbane for the Ramsar Conference on Wetlands of International Importance.

Wetlands are one of our most important ecosystems. To improve their management and conservation, we will expand the National Wetlands Program with extra funding of \$6 million.

The Government accepts that management of land, including parks and reserves, is primarily a State responsibility. But in the case of World Heritage areas, there is obviously a role for the Commonwealth.

\$10 million will be provided to improve management of priority areas, including Fraser Island, the Willandra Lakes, the Central East Coast Rainforest Reserves, Lord Howe Island and Shark Bay.

While our World Heritage areas are the jewels in our crown, protecting the most rare and vulnerable species and examples of our major ecosystems, demands a comprehensive network of representative nature reserves.

Through the National Reserves Program we started in 1992, the Government is working with the States and Territories, Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, and the wider community to create this network.

There have been some major acquisitions including areas like the Starke and Silver Plains properties in North Queensland and the Anglesea heathlands in Victoria. But the main focus of the first phase has been on planning and identification of ecological priorities.

The Government will now provide \$80 million to fund the second phase of establishing the National Reserves System. With matching contributions from the States, this should provide the momentum to develop by the turn of the century a system of parks and reserves second to none in the world.

The objective is to protect prime examples of our major ecosystems and the most important representative areas of biological diversity and wilderness. Protection of these areas will create havens for a range of endangered species.

The Government recognises that we will need a range of measures to fully protect our biological diversity.

In order to identify these strategies, I will propose that the Council of Australian Governments institute a major review process associated with the National Reserves System with the aim of removing unnecessary impediments to best practice in biological diversity conservation.

It should also develop innovative means to complete the National Reserves System and increase the conservation effort off reserves. The review could cover the regulatory framework, economic instruments and voluntary measures.

We will also establish, as part of the National Reserves Program, a \$10 million revolving Australian Nature Conservation Trust Fund for innovative and cooperative initiatives which may involve States, private sector and community contributions. For example, this will provide opportunities to place conservation covenants on land which the Fund may purchase and on-sell.

If it is true, and it surely is, that conservation of the environment represents a challenge for all Australians, this fund represents an opportunity for all Australians to respond. It is an opportunity for communities and individuals. It is an opportunity for private companies - both big and small - to play their part. It is not unreasonable to entertain the hope that the Government's \$10 million will be the seed of something much bigger.

Of course some 15 per cent of Australia is currently owned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Government will consult with the land owners, as part of the National Reserves System Program, to develop an Indigenous Protected Areas Initiative. This will aim to establish reserve-level nature conservation management in areas of high conservation value, while maintaining indigenous ownership and control.

The National Reserve Program will protect the habitats of many endangered species and ecological communities but attention needs to be given to individual species and particular communities.

More than eighty per cent of Australian endangered and vulnerable species do not yet have a completed recovery plan in place. To respond to this need the Government will provide an additional \$13.4 million to tackle the threats facing the most critically endangered species, both inside and outside the reserve system.

So there it is.

A sweep of integrated measures, with new funding totalling \$463 million, from the pure nature conservation of a world class National Reserves System, through Landcare and property management planning, to export market access for premium food products. Integrated, because the policy problems we are facing can only be properly understood by making these connections.

This is the substance which underpins the concept of ecologically sustainable development.

Historically we have not been kind to our environment. Nor have we observed the connection between the environment and production. Over the last decade, however, we have begun to see how thoroughly they are interwoven - and, once we see them, we begin to see how urgent it is to repair the broken threads.

Our economic health and environmental well-being cannot be separated. Treated apart, we are bound to fall short of success in both causes. Treated together, we have a chance of succeeding - a chance to repair the damage done in the last two centuries and give to the Australians of the next century their birthright, a flourishing, natural Australian environment.

At the same time, it will do them no harm to have flourishing rural industries and a rural culture and communities. Among other things, that will mean Australia is realising its unique potential.

And it will mean that we have done the right thing by the future.

We can be the generation which turned the tide. We have to be - and I am certain that we want to be.

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