

LEASE OF LAND FOR COMMERCIAL WILDFLOWER CULTIVATION

The sale of cut flowers, seed and potted plants of native flora is now recognised as a multimillion dollar industry. A lucrative international market is serviced by local cut flower and seed merchants, and these dealers (particularly in the cut flower trade) compete with businesses in Hawaii, Israel and South Africa who grow Western Australian plants in cultivation.

Available evidence suggests that most stock picked locally comes from wild plant populations. This places the local businesses at a disadvantage to their international competitors for a number of reasons:

- i) additional transport costs associated with travelling to good stands of desired species each year;
- ii) stock is subject to climatic vagaries as well as uncontrollable attack by predators and pathogens;
- iii) the wild plant populations accessible for legal picking are diminishing with agricultural clearing, development of public utilities, recurrent fuel reduction burns on Crown lands, acquisition of nature reserves and national parks, etc.

The combination of these factors has led to several dealers considering the lease of vacant Crown land for commercial wildflower cultivation.

Applications for leases

Formal applications for leases have been made to the Under Secretary for Lands by at least four businesses in the wildflower trade over the past three years. The proposed leases cover areas of 1400 to c. 10 000 ha, and are situated in species rich heathlands and low *Banksia* woodlands on the south coast (areas east of Hopetoun and east of Esperance) and on the west coast (areas at Kalbarri, south of Jurien Bay and near Gingin).

All applications propose clearing part of the leased area for the cultivation of wildflower species (banksias, kangaroo paws, verticordias, etc.). Additionally, it

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would appear that some businesses have in mind the lease of uncleared land to obtain exclusive rights to pick flowers for sale. Promotion of the wildflower farms as tourist attractions and as private nature reserves are other purposes mentioned in the applications.

Alternative uses of proposed wildflower leases

The vacant Crown lands proposed for lease as wildflower farms occur in areas renowned for their species-rich flora. The south and west near-coastal heathlands have many restricted and rare endemic plants. Their vertebrate fauna is also diverse. Consequently, these areas are well-suited for conservation reserves. Additionally, pressure for their release for agriculture is gaining momentum, even though the predominantly sandy soils are marginal at best for farming.

From the viewpoint of flora and fauna conservation, it would be preferable for as much as possible of the uncleared vacant Crown land in the heathland areas to be incorporated in nature reserves or national parks to ensure adequate protection for rare endemic species. Where this is not possible or desirable, leasing of land for cultivation of wildflowers would be preferable to leasing for traditional agricultural practice because less native flora will be destroyed and some native animals (e.g. honeyeaters, honey possums) may be able to persist in viable populations on wildflower farms.

It would be desirable to ensure that each area proposed for a wildflower cultivation lease is first surveyed to assess its potential as a nature reserve. The survey should emphasise rare flora and might result in conditions being placed on the lease, e.g. for no clearing of some areas, or in some areas being reserved for nature conservation. Provided the number of lease applications are not large, I could probably carry out the required surveys.

To reduce competition for vacant Crown lands, wildflower farmers should be encouraged to purchase privately owned lands (uncleared or cleared) where possible. One company (A.L. & T.B. Woolcocks Pty Ltd.) has already done so for properties near Eneabba and Gingin.

Other matters

Where leases are granted for wildflower cultivation, this purpose should be specified as a condition of the lease to

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prevent the property changing hands and subsequently being cleared of native vegetation for wheat farming or other forms of traditional agriculture.

Until management plans for the exploitation of particular wildflower species are formulated, it would seem appropriate not to allow leasing merely to ensure exclusive rights to a piece of property for picking. However, this subject needs further consideration and discussion before policy decisions are made. If, eventually, it is decided that leases will only be granted for cultivation purposes, it will need to be specified that the lessee must plant species in the ground from seeds or cuttings.



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TO MEMBERS OF THE FLORA COMMITTEE

Dear *SIR*

- (1) I have asked the Secretary of the Flora Committee to place on the Agenda for the next meeting the subject of land lease for the commercial cultivation of wildflowers. For the purpose of the discussion I have invited the Under Secretary for Lands (or his nominee) to be present and also an Officer of the Department of Conservation and Environment.
- (2) Dr. Hopper has prepared a brief background document (Attachment 1) on the subject as a thought starter. However, I would be grateful if all members could give thought to the subject so that we will be able to make considerable progress at the Flora Committee meeting.
- (3) It seems to me that by the end of the meeting we need to be able to provide answers to the following questions (and others too no doubt):-
 - (a) Should areas of Crown Land be leased for wildflower cultivation?
 - (b) If so, should they be conditional purchase leases or special purpose leases?
 - (c) Should guidelines be developed for applications?
 - (d) If so, what form should the guidelines take?
 - (e) Should there be a minimum or maximum area for lease land allowed?

- (f) Should there be a minimum or maximum manipulation of the lease land required or allowed?
- (g) Should proposed lease areas be surveyed for their potential as a nature reserve prior to being further considered for lease.

Yours sincerely,


(B.K. Bowen)
DIRECTOR