## EDITORIAL

# Choked by a bloated bureaucracy

Our economic prosperity over recent decades has unfortunately funded a profusion of bureaucracy that is now a serious impediment to almost any productive activity.

Fifteen years ago, a caravan park in Cairns required six permits to operate. Today it must have over 100. No new van parks have been built in years and it costs more to park a caravan overnight than to stay in a motel.

In particular, dubious environmental concerns, combined with the precautionary principle, have provided a bloated, out of control bureaucracy with a blank cheque for ever more regulation. Any productive activity that involves natural resources or the environment has been hit hard. All across the nation, farmers, graziers, fishermen, miners, developers and just ordinary property owners are finding themselves thwarted by complex, ill-conceived environmental regulations enforced by an aggressive uncooperative bureaucracy wielding broad and arbitrary power.

The fishing industry has been especially impacted, but too divided and afraid to do anything effective. Worse yet, fishermen have often been willing to actively support more regulation when someone else was being blamed or when it appeared there might be some personal gain. At this point, I don't see much hope of the industry doing anything but complain and decline, while the most profitable fisheries end up being owned by a few larger operators who buy up the licenses and quotas.

However, the situation is not without hope. Ultimately it is ordinary consumers who have to bear the costs. If voters begin to realise the real reason they can't afford to have a home or enjoy the proven health benefits of seafood, politicians will be falling over themselves to do something about it. In the end, votes are all that counts in politics. With this in mind, I am now working toward a series of articles tailored for the wider media on how the public is paying for environmental mismanagement and over-regulation with their health, happiness and pocketbooks.

At the moment the global economy seems teetering on the edge of a credit crunch and likely slowdown. Growth in oil consumption is also pressing the limits of supply and significant further price increases are likely over the next few years. An energy crunch seems inevitable as well. Australia has the smallest manufacturing sector and largest per capita foreign debt of any developed nation. The economy is overwhelmingly resource-based and resource mismanagement is the one thing we cannot afford. Commodity prices are notoriously sensitive to supply and demand. Any slowdown in the world economy would have exaggerated impact on our own. Meeting a huge and growing foreign debt obligation under such circumstances would be doubtful.

While all this might seem unduly pessimistic, the details of the circumstances outlined are all too real. Despite these negatives I am actually optimistic. The fundamentals of our situation remain excellent. Having a whole continent, mild climate, wealth of resources, minimal poverty, no immediate neighbours and not too many people is an unequalled economic advantage.

The problems we face are all of our own making and easily within our ability to correct. A recession, even a severe one, would not be a disaster but simply a spur to make some necessary corrections. Extended periods of prosperity always result in proliferation of government and some degree of decadence. Reform does not take place until necessity demands it.

Right now it is difficult to get people to seriously consider such problems or even acknowledge they exist, but given a recession they begin looking for answers. When it comes to dealing with tough circumstances Aussies are at their best. It's too much good times when they lose the plot.

By Walter Starck



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### FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE NEWS

#### What the future (really) holds!

In the September issue of Ausmarine, an article with the above title (minus the insert) presented the responses of the Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to a series of questions on the condition of commonwealth fisheries.

Taken at face value the impression a reader would receive was that of a well-managed healthy industry with an excellent outlook for the future. Without personal knowledge to the contrary, such a view is readily accepted by the overwhelming majority.

Unfortunately, the real world situation presents a very different picture. With few exceptions, the catch, profitability and participation in our fisheries is in decline. Our overall harvest rate, already the lowest in the world, is declining. It averages less than half of a kilogramme per hectare per year – an absurdly low rate to even consider any credible prospect of widespread over-fishing.

The overwhelming reason for the decline in the industry is not a lack of fish but gross over-regulation. The restrictions, fees and bureaucratic demands imposed on our fishermen have increased immensely over recent years and our regulators have now achieved what is undoubtedly the most restrictively and expensively managed fishery of any nation. Amazingly, the world's most lightly harvested fishery has become the most intensely regulated.

When urban voters find they can no longer afford fuel, food and house payments perhaps they might begin to consider how much "pristine environment" we can really afford and government facing large deficits will have to reconsider the value of bureaucratic management that delivers lower and lower productivity at ever increasing cost.