

# RURAL SUBDIVISION - WHAT IS THE REAL PROBLEM?

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The Minister for the Environment, Simon Upton made a challenging speech at the NZPI Conference in May on the problems of rural subdivision. The Minister identified the real problems with rural subdivision as those associated with urban expansion, and the continued growth of the "10 acre blockdom" - the lifestylers. He was critical of policy and plans being produced under the Resource Management Act which:

"make the same sort of decision that would have been made under the Town & Country Planning Act and then look to see how it can be justified under the new Act."

He was critical of the imposition of restrictive policies which may serve to limit opportunities for the conditions under which rural subdivision can proceed, and suggests that the focus of the development of policy should be on the management of the adverse effects of subdivision, and not on whether a subdivision of land will result in the "best use of land." The Planning Tribunal is singled out for criticism in his statement:

"The Tribunal has interpreted the reasonably foreseeable needs of future generations to include the need to protect land for the production of food, the need to maintain lot sizes that are big enough to permit the sustained independent production and the need to avoid sporadic subdivision. These sound to me suspiciously like the matters of national importance contained in the old Town & Country Planning Act. With respect, I think this application of Part II and in particular section 5 is wide of the mark."

The Minister's speech shows a wide and comprehensive appreciation of the real rural subdivision issues. In general I think his criticisms are well made, and pick up some of the reluctance to change from traditional "planning approaches" to rural subdivision. On the other hand the Minister identifies

the paucity, throughout New Zealand, of monitoring of the effects of rural subdivision

It is no wonder then, that Councils faced with the new requirements of promoting the sustainable management of resources, focusing on the management of effects, are adopting less than "laissez faire" approaches to rural subdivision.

For whatever reason, there is little research into the effects of existing levels of intensive and lifestyle subdivision, or indeed other types of rural subdivision. Until such research is widely available (the Minister referred to one initiative - there are several others) a cautionary approach to opening the door to "market rules" is consistent with the purpose and principles of the Act.

## POTENTIAL TO UNDERMINE

The demand for lifestyle countryside living, if unconstrained, could have the potential to severely undermine the sustainable use of land in many parts of the country - if it hasn't already. Our forebears sensibly chose to locate many urban areas close to, or on land of easy contour and high productivity, easily developed, with food sources close by - considerations that were more relevant in the past than today. But the legacy of these early settlement decisions means that urban areas such as Auckland, Tauranga, Hamilton, Napier and Hastings, Nelson/Richmond and Christchurch have some of the best and most versatile land in the country on their doorsteps. The seemingly insatiable demand for countryside living could threaten the long term sustainability of much of this rural land. To my knowledge there is no recent completed research, which evaluates the effects of intensive subdivision on the sustainability of the resource. We cannot afford to be casual about these effects, as the subdivision

of rural land, in high demand areas, is to all intents and purposes an irreversible process.

## UNCONSTRAINED POLICIES

There are areas of New Zealand where lifestyle and other relatively unconstrained policies have "governed" rural subdivision for some years, in areas of high demand. There are other areas where the conservative approaches referred to in the Minister's speech are the order of the day. In other words, there are real life "laboratories" where research, monitoring and analysis could be carried out.

The Minister suggests sophisticated approaches which better value the impacts (and costs) of intensive rural subdivision, resulting in less distorted values of rural land by comparison with urban land. Again there is a great paucity of research which could identify what the true impacts and costs of rural subdivision are, and the manner in which some of those costs could be captured as part of the subdivision process.

Bold new initiatives in unleashing controls on rural subdivision can only FOLLOW analysis of research and monitoring of the environmental and wider effects of the intensification and gentrification of rural land.

## BETTER INFORMATION WILL FOCUS AND DIRECT

The real problem with rural subdivision is too little monitoring and research for too long. Better information will focus and direct policies prepared under the Act, to be based on the real effects of rural subdivision and not on the prejudices of the past.

*Speakers Corner provides an opportunity for RMLA members to debate any subject relating to resource management in New Zealand. Contributions are welcome and may be published unsigned by arrangement with the editor.*