

Submission to the Agriculture and Environment Committee
Regarding the
Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill
2016

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- The uncertainty that continual changes in vegetation management law bring to the agricultural sector are damaging to the financial and environmental sustainability of farming enterprises. Land management is a long term process and sustainable development programs have no chance of being developed within a consistently changing framework.
- The emotive language used by the Hon JA Trad in her explanatory speech, including phrases like, “slash and burn mentality”, “trashed”, “letting the bulldozers run free” is a clear illustration of the divide and mistrust that is cultivated by politically motivated vegetation debate. The cultivation of this mistrust between farmers and our consumers in the public arena, undermines the value of our agricultural produce, in particular our hard fought standing as some of the greenest food producers on the face of the earth. The use of vegetation management as a political football is detrimental to the value of our produce in domestic and international markets. It also puts us at a competitive disadvantage to other states who are not entering into the constant debate.
- In the early 1990’s the then Lands Department were still conducting inspections on our properties threatening landholders with forced sale of leases if not enough trees had been cleared. Our family purchased [REDACTED] because the previous owner was forced to sell by the Government of the day for not clearing enough trees. Government has, since that point, inferred that producers have acted as “environmental vandals”. If the general public were aware of the governments own actions in forcing landholders to have cleared vegetation in recent history would they have the same credibility in pursuing the current debate.
- Encroachment and thickening are genuine issues, with producers actively seeking to mitigate fires that historically naturally thinned timber on an annual basis, alternative means are required to maintain the current level of productivity of agricultural land in the state. Please see attached photos of encroachment and thickening on our lot [REDACTED]. We have paddocks that have been reduced to almost nil productivity from encroaching brigalow in virgin country. From the perspective of green house abatement there appears no motivation from the government to measure the significant amount of vegetation that continues to increase through thickening or encroachment each year. In the transcript of the

departmental briefing of the Committee a question was asked of an increase in tree cover in Qld of approximately 400 000 hectares. The response was that “woody vegetation extent cannot be directly compared to estimates prior to 2004 due to changes in methodology.” The transcript went on to reiterate, “It is important to note that clearing figures cannot be derived from comparing wooded extent from year to year”. As landholders, we would hope that equal effort has been placed in the interpretation of the SLAT’s data in calculating increases in woody vegetation as has been placed on clearing calculations. We would hope that the methodology utilised to analyse the satellite images has not been developed with a one sided view or a certain political motivation.

- Regrowth management is an important element of vegetation management, without it Qld’s agricultural productivity would be decimated. It is also important to reiterate that government forced many landholders to clear virgin scrubs and the right to then manage that regrowth should be maintained and quite rightly has been maintained to a large extent in the amended legislation. Routine clearing of regrowth should not be included in the reporting of vegetation clearing from the SLATs data. Likewise Mulga should not be reported, it is a renewable resource that has been successfully and actively managed as an asset by graziers in the Mulga region for decades. The inclusion of both Mulga and routine regrowth clearing in the SLATS interpretation put forward for political motivation is misleading to the general public.
- Taking away the right for proponents to apply for clearing for the purpose of developing high value agricultural projects is discriminatory and in direct contrast to a national mandate around development of Northern Australia. 112 400 hectares of development permits have been granted since the amendment in 2013, just 37 466 hectares per year for the last three years. Clearing for the purposes of other “high value” projects is often granted and in the case of mining and extractive industries is exempt. To put this into perspective the proposed Adani mine covers a footprint of approx. 29 000 hectares and is exempt from vegetation management laws. The proposed amendment will also discriminate against family owned farmers, large corporate agriculture and foreign investors will still have the capability to take significant projects to the coordinator general for determination, it would be very unlikely that a family owned farm would have the ability to seek a determination in this manner. The laws in their current state afford equal opportunity to family farmers and billionaires.
- The bill will regulate the clearing of 1.18 million hectares of high value regrowth. This is 1.18 million hectares of land that has been cleared for agricultural production that is now a compulsorily acquired offset. The Emissions Reduction Fund recognises the regeneration of regrowth as a registrable project. In taking this regrowth from producers with no-compensation the State Government is in effect “stealing” the rights of a landholder (and in particular a freehold landholder) to earn an income from his land. The State Government could in theory receive the money from the Emissions Reduction Fund for the 1.18 million hectares of high value regrowth. The Hon JA Trad sensationally compared the current

clearing in Qld to a 3km strip from Brisbane to the NSW border – the proposed high value regrowth “grab” would be the equivalent of a 2.7 km wide strip extending from Brisbane to Perth.

- Whilst I believe in the importance of retention of trees for both habitat and aesthetic purposes on water courses, there is no scientific evidence that has been put forward that illustrates any reduction in sediment to the Great Barrier Reef from well grassed stream banks as opposed to banks with strong woody growth and no understory of grasses, to hold soil together. In fact the opposite is likely to be true. The NQ Dry Tropics NRM group illustrated “markedly improved pasture composition, improved water quality and stopped gully erosion” in a trial utilising high density cattle stocking and holistic land management. The 570 000 hectares of riparian areas that will be locked up under Category R (the equivalent of extending that 3km strip from Brisbane to Adelaide) represents another large grab of landholder’s future income with no compensation offered. Many of the trees located on watercourses were in fact paid for by landholders in the freeholding of their leases. It begs the question if a landholder has physically been charged a commercial amount of money for the purchase of an asset, how then can seller of that asset take away the rights to that same asset without provision of compensation.
- The Hon JA Trad, in her explanatory speech, mentioned the importance of the outcomes of the Paris 2015 Climate Summit. One of the key outcomes of the Paris summit was the important role that agriculture has to play in the mitigation of carbon. The French Agriculture Minister launched a program called “4 per 1000” during the climate talks in Paris. The commitment said that a 0.4 percent annual growth rate of soil carbon stock would negate all of the carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Importantly increasing soil carbon levels allows us to grow more food, creating more jobs and more wealth for Qld. Increasing soil carbon also significantly increases the water holding capacity of the soil and is therefore a key drought mitigation strategy. Qld suffers from a highly variable climate, drought is an ongoing presence in Qld and soil carbon sequestration is a vital tool in managing drought going forward. Locking carbon in tree trunks is one way of temporarily storing carbon. Research by Australian and British scientists published last year in the journal *Plant and Soil* illustrated the potential of deep rooted perennial grasses to secure carbon at depth. In our opinion this debate should not be Agriculture vs The Environment. The solution to improved outcomes for our carbon footprint and our reef lie not only in the trees above us but in the soil beneath our feet. If we can implement policy that encourages soil carbon sequestration and water quality enhancement, Queensland can lead the world in illustrating that improved food production and a healthier environment actually work hand in hand.



Image 1 & 2 : Encroachment of Brigalow onto open grassland – note the lack of mature brigalow trees





Image 3 & 4: Exposed ground and retarded grass growth in areas affected by encroachment and thickening, resulting in significant production loss and reduced water quality and higher sediment run off to the reef.





Images 5&6 : Mature trees that have been killed by uncontrolled thickening and encroachment, turning this from a productive open treed grassland into impenetrable woody undergrowth with no grass cover.

