

Research Director
Agriculture and Environment Committee
Parliament House
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Sir or Madam

SUBJECT: Letter in support of the *Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016*.

I am John van Grieken of Wondecla in Far North Queensland, and have a reasonably good understanding of natural area management and ecology. The last eleven years prior to my retirement in 2009 I was employed with the Cairns Regional Council as Senior Environmental Officer. In the City Development Department my responsibility was to assess the environmental reports submitted to Council as part of Development Applications and to provide recommendations to the Planners and Councillors. I have an Associate Degree in Parks, Recreation and Heritage Management from Charles Sturt University.

Ever since 2013 when the Queensland Government changed the original *Vegetation Management Act (1999)* to weaken its control on clearing of native vegetation I have been greatly concerned about the potential loss of habitat and possibly species that are of significant value. Areas could have been cleared without substantial understanding of their biodiversity and ecological values. Such losses are often irreversible and need to be prevented by ecological study and documentation; assessment of the potential impacts of any proposed clearing; and by provision of substantial disincentives for illegal clearing.

My concern is that the existing *Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Act (2013)*, which allows for a large degree of uncontrolled clearing of vegetation, does not provide adequate protection for valuable and significant vegetation. The biggest 'loophole' that exists is the self-assessable permit to clear for "high-value agriculture". This can, and no doubt has, resulted in large-scale clearing that should have first been assessed for the significance of that vegetation and the local and regional impacts of this vegetation loss. Without the professional assessment of an application for such clearing, relatively small areas of valuable vegetation may be lost. Losses may include remnant ecosystems and regrowth of significant vegetation that will not be discovered, but lost irreversibly.

Therefore, the main reasons for my support of this proposed *Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016* are as follows.

1. The proposed legislation should prevent self-assessment for large-scale clearing which could result in the loss of significant habitat, simply through ignorance or accident. This legislation will provide disincentive for clearing, in blatant arrogance, of areas where self-assessment is now permitted. Current legislation naively relies on trust and honesty of the property manager. The risk of losing significantly important vegetation is too high.
2. The proposed legislation will allow protection of native vegetation to be implemented strategically avoiding impacts on rare or endangered ecosystems.

The proposed legislation provides that any permit for clearing must specify appropriate conditions of approval to prevent edge effects, potential erosion and soil loss. For example, a buffer zone of intact vegetation must be retained around any vegetation of significant value. Riparian vegetation must also be protected from damage and indirect impacts.

Therefore, a Property Vegetation Management Plan (PVMP) must be produced by the property manager and presented to the Department for assessment as part of the permit application. The PVMP must include property site maps showing:

- existing regional ecosystem vegetation types and their condition;
- vegetation areas to be cleared and to be retained;
- areas already cleared and their uses, including developments and infrastructure;
- current contours, watercourses and drainage patterns, ponds, dams and bores;
- areas of vegetation that are crucial as buffers and to prevent soil erosion;
- remedial works, such as erosion control and consolidating a buffer, to compensate for the impact of permitted clearing;
- connectivity of vegetation and watercourses with neighbouring properties and in the context of this bioregion.

The PVMP must also include a written plan and strategy outlining the clearing method and how areas of significant vegetation will be protected from short and long-term damage. The PVMP must be written by a suitably qualified ecologist who is independent from the applicant and is approved by the government department. The property manager must include a signed statement of explaining a valid purpose for clearing and how the proposed use of the cleared land will be viable for its intended purpose.

In summary, if this legislation is to be 'outcomes-based', then there are two main criteria for any permit to clear.

- a) That all areas of significant vegetation value which need to be protected are not compromised or lost.
- b) That the stated purpose for this vegetation clearing can be achieved in order to develop the property and viability of the business.

With respect, my request is that you consider the issues stated in this letter and that as a committee you recommend the 'restrengthening' of Queensland's vegetation management laws with the passage/adoption of the proposed legislation through Parliament.

Yours sincerely

John van Grieken

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