

Please find below my submission to the Queensland Parliament Agriculture and Environment Committee inquiry into the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill

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Dear Chair and Committee Members, and my local MP.

I am writing in support of the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (VMROLA Bill) currently under consideration by the committee.

Queensland plays hosts to the richest and most complex ecosystems filled with threatened and endangered species and communities and vitally connected habitats ranging from the Great Barrier Reef to natural bushland. The VMROLA Bill has the potential to endorse the relationship between the different habitats as by controlling clearing in the Great Barrier Reef catchments, which according to the Queensland Auditor General has “increased by 299 per cent, from 31 000 ha per year in 2008–09 to 102 000 ha per year in 2013–14.” This leaves the catchment and the Reef at risk of soil erosion and greater sediment runoff from land clearing.

In light of the shocking coral bleaching crisis caused by excessive emissions which fuels climate change and ocean acidification, it should be the Queensland government highest priority to protect the Reef by securing the health of all connected natural habitats such as the bushlands. Especially since the current Queensland government promised UNESCO that they will reinstate effective land clearing controls in order to defer an “in danger” listing for the Great Barrier Reef last year.

This Bill reverses damaging changes to the Vegetation Management Act or VMA made by the previous government in 2013 who have reversed key provision. As a result of changes to codes and administration, the Act no longer fulfils its purpose with land clearing rates increasing rapidly after a long period of decline. WWF reports that over 200,000 ha of habitat for threatened species has been cleared in the period 2012-14. Clearing of remnant bushland nearly doubled in the year after the changes of 2013.

Additionally, greenhouse emissions have risen to more than 6% of Australia’s total emissions. This is counter to the purposes of the Act to conserve remnant vegetation, prevent the loss of biodiversity, prevent land degradation and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

I care strongly about Australian native wildlife who lose their habitat and their lives due to escalating land clearing. The natural bushlands provide an array of benefits to the native plants and wildlife that take refuge in it against climate change, as well as playing a vital role in soaking up greenhouse pollution, slowing climate change and providing clean air and water. The Reef deserves a fighting chance against the effects of climate change, and by controlling land clearing; hopefully less water pollution and greenhouse gas emissions will damaged the sensitive ecosystem.

The VMROLA bill restores regulation of clearing of high value regrowth on freehold land, removed by the previous government. The regrowth losing protection was more than 20 years old, and contained endangered ecosystems, essential habitat for threatened species, watercourse and wetland protection buffers and slopes vulnerable to erosion. Such important bushland should be protected regardless of land tenure. Restoration of regulation of high value regrowth is critically important to the Act's purpose to prevent the loss of biodiversity, prevent land and water degradation and reduce greenhouse emissions.

The VMROLA bill restores the 2006 ban on broadscale clearing, which was reversed by the previous government for so-called High Value Agriculture. The reversal of this ban saw over 112,000 ha of remnant bushland approved to be cleared, which would end up polluting waterways and nearshore marine habitats including the Great Barrier Reef. Nearly all of this now condemned bushland is habitat for threatened species. The high value agriculture provision goes against the Act's purpose to conserve remnant vegetation, prevent loss of biodiversity and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The VMROLA bill restores the capacity of the government to prosecute illegal clearing. The Department of Natural Resources attributed some of the recent resurgence of land clearing to the reduction in enforcement under the previous government. Effective laws need effective capacity to prosecute those that break them.

The VMROLA bill restores the requirement for a permit under the Water Act to clear trees within the stream bed, also removed by the previous government. VMROLA bill also expands regulation of clearing of regrowth in 50m buffer zones around watercourses to all Great Barrier Reef catchments. Land clearing particularly around or in watercourses is rightly recognised by the Auditor General and Reef scientists as a major negative impact on water quality and the Great Barrier Reef. These provisions of the Bill are is critically important to the Act's purpose to prevent the loss of biodiversity, and prevent land and water degradation.

This Bill substantially delivers on that promise to the world to protect the Reef, therefore I support each of these particular changes proposed in this Bill. I support the Bill because I believe it will

restore stronger controls over land clearing, and so prevent further harm to the Reef and to native wildlife.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Randini Dissanayake

