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Research Director
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To the Committee Chair

**Submission to the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation
Amendment Bill.**

Wildlife Queensland (Townsville Branch) Inc was established in 1968 and is one of a network of branches around the state. Our parent organisation, the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, is the oldest nature conservation group in the state and one of the most respected.

The Townsville Branch has a long history of involvement in environmental matters including the protection of coastal woodlands, wetlands and waterways, rainforests and the reef. We are advocates for sound, science-based conservation management of all wildlife species, with particular emphasis on threatened species in our region; these include the dugong, snubfin dolphin, mahogany glider, black-throated finch and cassowary. We represent over 60 fully financial members with another 150 supporters with whom we communicate regularly and many of who assist us in a variety of ways. We try to achieve our aims through advocacy, public education, field surveys and cooperative work with all levels of government and landholders.

Knowing the history of land clearance in Queensland we were deeply disturbed by the changes to the VMA made by the previous government in 2013. Of course much of that very early clearing was done when “the bush” seemed limitless and we knew too little about it or the impacts our actions would have – but it certainly continued more or less unchecked even long after we all knew, or should have known, what damage was being done. Thankfully, with the introduction of regulations in the first decade of this century, we finally began to manage and care for our land, its soils, fauna and flora as if they really mattered.

In 2013, the winding back of measures, which we believe had won widespread acceptance, and the refusal by the then Government to take action against those who breached even those regulations that had been retained, represented a giant step backwards and a grave dereliction of the duty of care towards our natural heritage.

Benefits of controlling vegetation loss:

We believe the benefits of reducing and regulating the extent and type of clearing have been well researched and are by now quite well understood in the community. They are surely well known by this committee. Nonetheless, we summarise them below.

Retention and regrowth of native vegetation has the following benefits:

- protects wildlife and native flora
- allows natural carbon sequestration and storage to occur and reduces emissions
- reduces/prevents soil erosion and salinization
- reduces/prevents sedimentation and agricultural run-off into creeks and rivers, inshore waters and the reef lagoon
- allows natural ecological processes to occur
- allows nutrients to be retained in the soil, increasing its fertility
- controls invasive plants and insects
- reduces the risk of fire and mitigates drought
- protects and promotes biodiversity
- helps to protect the health of the GBR and build its resilience by improving water quality
- helps to mitigate the damage to the GBR caused by climate change (ie coral bleaching from extreme heat, coral loss from ocean acidification)

It follows that the reverse is true and that to allow clearing to continue at its current rate would have devastating impacts on our environment, wildlife, biodiversity and economy.

It is important to point out that many of the positive impacts that will result from tighter control of vegetation clearing will be of direct benefit to farmers – notably with regard to soil quality and stability, control of weeds and pests, and reduction in the incidence of fire and drought. Fishers in particular will benefit from the impact of improved water quality on fisheries, while *all of us* benefit from the protection of biodiversity, reduction in carbon emissions, and improvement in the health and resilience of the Great Barrier Reef.

Wildlife:

Land clearing between 2012 and 2014 in Queensland is estimated to have wiped out more than 40,000 hectares of koala habitat, as well as habitat for over 200 other threatened species. Ass.Prof. Martine Maron, Prof. Bill Laurance, Prof. Bob Pressey et al. February 2016.

As a wildlife conservation organization we are dismayed at the harm that has been caused to wildlife species since the 2013 weakening of this legislation and, to be frank, are horrified at the threat to the survival of those species already listed as vulnerable to extinction if this Bill is not enacted. In our region those species include birds as tiny as the Black-throated finch and as large as the Southern cassowary – both of which have seen their habitats destroyed or greatly fragmented. One of the rarest of our mammals, the mahogany glider, inhabits a narrow band of coastal woodlands just to our north while habitat is slashed and burned

around it. We have ourselves witnessed unauthorized clearing of remnant vegetation, in an area identified as habitat for all three of the above-named species, about which the previous government declined to investigate or take action.

We are aware of the recently reported dramatic rise in the numbers of native animals being brought into the care of RSPCA and volunteer wildlife care groups, a rise which the highly respected RSPCA directly linked to the increased rate of clearing. This then is not just a wildlife conservation issue but an animal welfare issue. When habitat is cleared, animals suffer and animals die. The 'lucky' ones are those that are found in time to be cared for and treated or humanely euthanased. When clearing takes place in more remote areas these victims may be out of sight but should never be out of mind. The more and the faster that this clearing continues more wildlife will die, and more will sustain injuries and suffering – from starvation, predation, vehicle strike, dog attack, barbed wire entanglement and so on.

Carbon emissions:

Carbon emissions linked to land use have jumped 79% in the past three years, driven largely by land clearing practices in Queensland. New federal emissions figures showed the amount of land-sector carbon emissions rose from about 13 million tonnes in 2012 to 23 million tonnes in 2015. News report, March 2016.

It is a shocking fact that an estimated 90% of Australia's carbon emissions arising from land use are generated in Queensland – and that the bulk of this comes from land clearing. This is a completely unacceptable situation. It must be understood that clearing vegetation has a double impact on emissions. Firstly, trees are storers of carbon – so by reducing the number of trees by the thousands, or millions, we are slashing their capacity to capture and store carbon away from the atmosphere. Secondly, when trees are felled they release their stored carbon back into the atmosphere. A simple, but deadly, combination – less carbon stored, more carbon released. Unless we are so foolhardy as to have no interest whatsoever in reducing the extent and the impacts of climate change *we must take control of such a significant cause of carbon emissions and we must do it now.*

Agriculture, and those employed in it, will be among the big losers from lax tree-clearing laws. We have already pointed out the consequences of keeping the status quo in relation to soil quality and stability, and increased risks from fire, drought, weeds and pests. The contribution that land-clearing makes to carbon emissions and thus to the global crisis of climate change is of even greater significance. These impacts are already being felt by the farming community and will certainly hit farmers as hard as, if not harder than anyone else as the climate crisis deepens.

Great Barrier Reef:

Decline in the quality of water runoff into the GBR lagoon is documented as a major threatening process for marine ecosystems both as a direct impact and as one which lowers the resilience of ecosystems to climate change.

(State of Region Report 2013 reefcatchments.com.au. Chapter 1.3 Great Barrier Reef Lagoon)

Our Branch is located right in the middle of the Great Barrier Reef coast. The first major concern of our parent organization, the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, was protection of the GBR from the threats of quarrying, mining and drilling in the 1960s and

1970s. It is shocking to realize that that struggle and the efforts of so many in the community, including governments and politicians of all colours – which culminated in the declaration of the Reef as a World Heritage Area and the establishment of a blue ribbon management structure – may all be for nothing if we do not get serious about what we are doing on land.

Our city is a base for research into all aspects of the Reef. We know the scientists, we read their research, we listen to their warnings. We meet many of the thousands of tourists who come to our region from around the world just to have the chance to visit the Reef. We cannot help but be aware of the huge importance of the GBR to our city, our region, our state, our nation and to the world. This importance is environmental, economic, recreational, social and cultural. We cannot help but be aware of its iconic status within Australia and world-wide.

Yet, while the recent shocking news of a severe bleaching event is still resounding in the media, the weakened laws are allowing a double assault to be made on the Reef's health and resilience. Unregulated clearing of vegetation in the Reef catchment up and down the coast allows excess sediments, nutrients and toxins to flow into our creeks and rivers and from there into the Reef lagoon. Water quality plummets, the health not only of corals but of all the diverse life-forms that inhabit these waters is diminished. Resilience – that much-vaunted ability of the reef to “bounce back” – is not inexhaustible and is now indisputably being seriously weakened.

Is it not then a tragic and twisted irony that while our weakened laws allow this resilience to be undermined, the same weakened laws are fuelling the fire of climate change by making a very significant contribution to an increase in carbon emissions? WWF reports that land cleared in reef catchments rose from 31,000ha per annum in 2008-2009 to 102,000ha per annum in 2013-14.

If there were no other reason to restore the strength of the Vegetation Management Act the single one of protecting the Reef and building its resilience would surely be sufficient – because not a single one of us can afford to lose it.

Proposed measures supported:

Regarding the specific measures proposed in the Bill, we fully support the following:

- *Removal of permits allowing clearing for “high-value agriculture” (Clause 8(1))*
This has been the major cause of extensive clearing of the very important remnant forests and woodlands. The most notorious was the permit issued to clear over 30,000 hectares on the Olive Vale property on Cape York, well within the GBR catchment area.
- *Restoration of protection of high-value regrowth vegetation on freehold and Aboriginal lands (Clause 8 (2))*
High-value regrowth vegetation is that which is present on land not cleared since 1989 – in other words it is growth which has had more than a quarter of a century to mature and provide essential wildlife habitat and perform other essential ecological

services: absorbing carbon dioxide, reducing agricultural and other run-off, reducing fire risk, weed and pest invasion and contributing to biodiversity.

- *Restoration of protection for riparian vegetation and its extension to all Great Barrier Reef catchments* (Clause 8 (3))

As indicated above, clearing of vegetation in catchments draining into the GBR showed a dramatic increase after 2013 and *is estimated to make up 35% of the total land-clearing in Queensland*. Our comments on the GBR make it clear that we believe no effort should be spared to protect it from the impacts of clearing in catchment areas. We support the extension of regrowth watercourse protection to include the Eastern Cape York, Fitzroy and Burnett-Mary catchments.

- *Removal of the defence of having cleared “by mistaken belief”* (Clause 6)

We believe, like all citizens, landholders have a responsibility to make sure they are compliant with the law. At the same time we strongly recommend that the Department of Natural Resources and Mines should be adequately resourced to ensure landholders have access to whatever advice, information and assistance is needed to ensure compliance.

- *Restoration of the onus of proof of responsibility on landholders for action taken on their properties* (Clause 6)

It is entirely reasonable to assume that no-one is likely to go to the vast trouble and expense of clearing vegetation on someone else’s property without the express authorisation or request of the landholder. Equally it is unreasonable to expect the state to be able to prove that “person or persons unknown” conducted such unauthorised clearing – especially where it has occurred in a remote location – purely on the basis of a claim by the landholder.

- *Establishment of an interim period from the Bill’s introduction on 17 March 2016 to the final date of assent, during which activities that would become prohibited under the amended Act are also prohibited* (Clause 7)

While we consider the majority of farmers will act responsibly, we believe this measure (and the provisions to require restoration if prohibited activity occurs) is very necessary to prevent the pre-emptive or ‘panic’ clearing that some might otherwise undertake. We believe the Bill shows considerable leniency in not treating such action as an offence.

- We also support *amendments to two additional Acts*. Firstly, we support the amendment to the *Water Act 2000*, which reinstates the application of the riverine protection permit framework to the *destruction of vegetation* in a watercourse, well or spring – in addition to the excavation or filling of same. This will help to reduce nutrient and sediment run-off and enhance other efforts to improve water quality in the GBR lagoon. It is an important and very necessary amendment.

Secondly, we support the amendment to the *Environmental Offsets Act 2014* that will require offsets for *any* residual environmental impacts, not simply ‘significant’ ones. The existing requirements are clearly inadequate, having resulted in only a

single offset registered since 2014, and the qualification of the term “significant” allows for loose interpretation, creating an unfortunate loophole in the legislation. Environmental offset requirements are designed to compensate for what is lost when clearing takes place; they can also act as an inducement to the landholder to avoid unnecessary damage when undertaking such action.

Some reservations:

Despite our approval of the amendments as detailed above, we do have some concerns that the Bill does not go far enough to give our ecosystems, vegetation communities and wildlife the protection that they deserve.

We are concerned with the persistence and broad limits of the **self-assessable codes**. If they are to be retained, we recommend that they apply only to small areas of a property, and which do not contain threatened species, endangered ecosystems or are at risk of degradation.

We are also concerned that much **high-value regrowth**, previously defined as Category X, will remain unprotected if it has been “locked in” by the landholder on their Property Map of Assessable Vegetation (PMAV). In addition to other known values of regrowth, research showing that trees sequester more carbon, and more rapidly, as they age should be encouraging us “to grow as many areas of forest through to being old growth forest as possible.” (Prof. Lindenmayer, ANU, 2014). We also point out that the defining date regarding high-value regrowth (ie not cleared since 1989) remains unchanged. This would appear to leave large areas of valuable regrowth (ie less than 27 years old) without protection. Surely it would be sensible to replace the single defining *date* with a defining *period* (for example, not cleared within the last ~15 years)?

Conclusion:

Despite these reservations we believe that this Bill is an essential and significant step towards bringing a degree of sanity back into the management of our bushlands, soils, wildlife, flora and ecosystems. It is no exaggeration to say that native wildlife in Queensland is at a crisis point, largely as a result of the loss and fragmentation of habitat across the State. This simply cannot go on. We believe the Bill also represents a serious intent to reduce carbon emissions, preserve water quality and help the Great Barrier Reef at a time of real and devastating crisis.

We thank the Committee for considering this submission and urge that it recommend that the Bill be passed.

With regards,



Liz Downes - President
Wildlife Queensland- Townsville Branch Inc.