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Agriculture and Environment Committee
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Dear Chair and Committee Members

Submission to Committee on Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016

I wish to congratulate the Palaszczuk government in meeting their election commitment to introduce the above legislation.

In general I support the proposed above legislation and below please find my reasons. However, I am also concerned that the bill has some major shortcomings in providing adequate vegetation management protection, and therefore I have also outlined these concerns below with identification where additional improvements could be made.

Why the proposed legislation should be supported

There are numerous reasons why it is important to have effective vegetation management legislation. They include:

- to ensure the protection of habitat for threatened species;
- To ensure the protection of remnant vegetation communities
- To minimize the impact of tree clearing on increasing drought in our already drought stricken state. UQ research shows a strong correlation between loss of tree cover and regional drought incidence and severity
- To minimize the impact of tree clearing on climate change – tree clearing causes millions of tonnes of CO2 to be released into our atmosphere thus making it harder for Australia to meet its climate target;
- Tree clearing near catchments can cause land erosion and run off into our river catchments - the erosion and run off caused by clearing along the Great Barrier Reef catchment banks is a leading cause of impacts to our Reef. The Government promise to restore land clearing protections was a major reason UNESCO did not list the GBR as endangered. With the Great Barrier Reef already under pressure from coral bleaching, it is imperative to ensure minimal impact from sediment run-off.

Elements of reinstatement which I support

Below are some of the elements of reinstatement which I support:

- It reinstates the protection of high value regrowth on freehold and indigenous land;
- It removes provisions which permit clearing applications for high value agriculture and irrigated agriculture;

- It broadens protection of riparian vegetation, especially in the Great Barrier Reef, catchments of Burnett Mary, Eastern Cape York and Fitzroy Great Barrier Reef. (This is particularly important given the findings of the Auditor General's report Managing water quality in Great Barrier Reef catchments Report 20: 2014–15 "The recent relaxation of land clearing rules also increases the risk of adverse consequences from sedimentation run-off" "land cleared in reef catchments increased by 229 per cent, from 31 000 ha per year in 2008–09 to 102 000 ha per year in 2013–14." "The 113.4 per cent increase from 2010–11 to 2012–13 coincided with the policy change to reduce compliance activities.")
- It reinstates the application of the riverine protection permit framework to the destruction of vegetation in a watercourse, lake or spring; and
- It reinstates a broader requirement for environmental offsets to be required for any residual impact, not just 'significant' impacts as is currently provided for in offsets legislation (and has led to only 1 offset being registered for vegetation impacts since 2014).
- It reinstates prosecution powers for illegal clearing that had been suspended by the Newman government.

Areas where there is a need for additional protection in the legislation

- There are still significant problems with the Self assessable codes (SACs) . They are not capped or constrained in any way to keep ecological risk within boundaries. Unlimited areas can be "thinned" with bulldozers, a major broadscale clearing loophole. SACs should only apply if clearing is on a very modest scale (eg lesser of 50ha or 1% of property area) and only if no threatened species, ecosystems or land degradation risks. Moreover, constraints need to be in the Act not left to the codes.
- The Bill still has too many exemptions based on purpose. Purpose tests should be replaced by ecological impact tests. Exemptions should only be allowed if clearing very small scale (<.1 ha per property) and only if outside of areas with threatened species, ecosystems or land degradation risks
- The definition of High Value Regrowth using fixed year 1989 baseline fails to keep up with advancing age regrowth now 20+ years old

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the legislation.

Yours sincerely

Vivien Griffin