

27<sup>th</sup> April, 2016

Research Director  
Agriculture & Environment Committee  
Parliament House  
George Street  
Brisbane QLD 4000  
Via email [vminquiry@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:vminquiry@parliament.qld.gov.au)

**RE: Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016**

The Wide Bay Burnett Environment Council (WBBEC) would like to take this opportunity to thank the Agriculture and Environment Committee for the opportunity to provide feedback relating to the abovementioned Bill that was introduced to Parliament on the 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 by Hon Jacklyn Trad.

The main function of our organisation is to advocate on behalf of the environment in the Wide Bay Region and to ensure the protection of the biodiversity in this unique part of Queensland.

The WBBEC wholeheartedly support the reinstatement of stronger land clearing laws which aim to bring about the following positive changes:

- Removal of the provisions introduced in 2013 that enabled exemptions for clearing for 'High Value Agriculture' and 'Irrigated High Value Agriculture'
- The Amendment Bill provides retrospectivity from 17<sup>th</sup> March 2016 which will hopefully deter panic clearing and panic applications from landholders.
- Restoration of protection for trees next to riverbanks (riparian zones) and extends provisions to all Great Barrier Reef (GBR) catchments
- Restores protection for High Value Regrowth (HVR) on freehold and Aboriginal land.
- Restoration of the principle that a landowner is solely responsible for land clearing on their property, with the removal of the claimed "mistaken clearing" defence.

- The removal of the term 'significant' from the definition of a 'Significant Residual Impact' in the Environmental Offsets Act 2014 will improve environmental outcomes via Offsets because any 'residual impact' (as opposed to only a 'significant residual impact') to a Matter of Environmental Significance, will trigger the Act.

These changes help to strengthen the primary purpose of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* (VMA) which is to protect remnant vegetation; prevent land degradation; protect biodiversity and ecological processes; and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) released a report in early 2016 titled "Bushland Destruction rapidly increasing in Queensland" <sup>1</sup> which mapped out Queensland's land clearing during 2012-2014. The Wide Bay Region lost almost 11,555 hectares of forest during this time with a total of 5,222 hectares of koala habitat lost which is of significant concern to our organisation.

One of WBBEC's key concerns relating to the removal of regrowth vegetation (including riparian regrowth) and clearing for High Value and Irrigated High Value Agriculture is the increased sediment and nutrient loads into the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) via the Burnett and Mary Catchments. While the Burnett and Mary River Catchments flow into the ocean further south of the most southern boundary of the GBR, these nutrient and sediment loads are delivered to the GBR via the East Australian Current (EAC) which is a western continental boundary current that is shallow and fast moving, driven by the South Pacific Gyre.

In 2013 the Queensland Government extended their Great Barrier Reef Catchment Loads Monitoring Program into the Mary Catchment. The 2013/14 Catchment Loads Technical Report<sup>2</sup> identifies that the Mary/Burnett Catchments contributed approximately 6.66% of the Total Suspended Solids (93 kilotonnes), 8.16% of Total Nitrogen (750 tonnes) and 6.08% of Total Phosphorous (106 tonnes) of the total monitored loads to the GBR during the 2013/14 period.

It is our understanding that there is currently over 4,000 hectares of USL located at Colton and Granville in the Wide Bay region that is being considering for conversion to agriculture/ethanol production. WBBEC along with World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have successfully mapped over 4,000 hectares of degraded, pre-cleared land that would be suitable for agricultural expansion. There is no need to clear more forest to make way for more sugar cane. If an extra 4,000ha of forest is cleared to make way for unsustainable agriculture, WBBEC estimates that nutrient and sediments exports from the Mary Catchment to the GBR could increase by up to 40%. Furthermore, the Fraser Coast would lose what WBBEC believe to be the largest untouched parcel of environmentally valuable land left in this region which would spell disaster for the flora and fauna of the Wide Bay region.

<sup>1</sup>[http://awsassets.wwf.org.au/downloads/f1024\\_bushland\\_destruction\\_rapidly\\_increasing\\_in\\_queensland\\_16sep15.pdf](http://awsassets.wwf.org.au/downloads/f1024_bushland_destruction_rapidly_increasing_in_queensland_16sep15.pdf)


<sup>2</sup> <http://reefplan.qld.gov.au/measuring-success/paddock-to-reef/assets/2013-2014-gbr-catchment-loads-technical-report.pdf>

WBBEC were provided with photography via a local Landcare group of broad scale land clearing carried out by a landholder at Coonarr Beach near Bundaberg Lot 31/CK1155 & 54/CK232. WBBEC were able to ascertain that there was no permit issued for this clearing and the land was mapped as remnant vegetation, therefore it is considered illegal clearing. It can be surmised that if no permit has been obtained, the landholder may have used the self-assessable codes available to guide the clearing. This is an example of the inadequacies of the self-assessable codes that were brought into the *Vegetation Management Act 1999*. I have been involved in the Environmental Sector for over five years and after researching these codes I was left feeling confused. The codes are complex, difficult to follow, some of which are upwards of 40 pages long. WBBEC believe it to be a fair assumption that the average landholder would not have the adequate capacity to interpret and correctly follow the guidelines set out in these codes, leaving huge room for error. In fact, the idea of self-assessment in relation to land clearing seems flippant when weighed up against what is potentially at stake here- the loss of key habitat, bio-corridors and biodiversity. WBBEC does not believe that self-assessment codes are workable and should be removed entirely from the overall process.

The WBBEC strongly urge the Agriculture and Environment Parliamentary Committee to pass this Bill as quickly as possible to allow Queensland's forests the protection they desperately need to prevent further irreparable damage to our environment, our climate and the Great Barrier Reef.

Regards,

  
  
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