

George Muirhead

[REDACTED]

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25<sup>th</sup> April 2016

Research Director

Agriculture and Environment Committee

Parliament House

Brisbane QLD 4000

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25<sup>th</sup> April 2016

Dear sir

Re Change to clearing laws as proposed by the Palaszczuk Government

***Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislative Amendment Bill 2016***

Background: [REDACTED]

We would like to raise a number of concerns using our property [REDACTED] in the north western Cape as an example of some of the issues and how this change of legislation would damage prospects for the Cape:

[REDACTED] application for High Value Agriculture was put in on 11 December to the DNRM for a 22A, usually a relatively short process, especially given the situation there where a lot of the usual environmental problems do not come into play. For example

1. ***No potential damage to the reef*** –as on the western side of the Cape. The application leaves buffers between water drainage areas. Area is very flat and unlikely to be affected by heavy erosion particularly with the intention to retain ground cover in the wet season.
2. ***No rare or endangered species of trees or animals***
  - a. The vegetation is listed as “not of concern”
  - b. Discussions with officers from National Parks and wildlife in prior conversations pointed out there were no issues with flora or fauna in this area. In particular they stated that the rare birds usually raised as issues in the north do not live in the area as, due to the

long history of wildfires which have meant that the grass species forming their diet do not survive there.

- c. In a pre lodgement meeting before the application was put in ( 3 DNRM officers attended) it was pointed out that there were no issues with flora and fauna in that area.
- d. A quoll study for which we recently received the results ( study done in the area for which the application has been made) noted there were no quolls sighted in the [REDACTED] area studied using 30 cameras but that all they saw were a lot of dingoes, wild pigs and some feral cats. The feral pigs and cats I understand are animals the wilderness groups want reduced or eliminated, impossible as the country is currently.

### **3. The soils are within one of the few areas of the Cape suited to agriculture**

- a. Area for which the clearing licence is requested lies within the area listed in the CYPLUS study as suitable for agriculture for **summer** crops and on the KOOL soils . ( refer to green areas on the maps-[REDACTED] boundary is marked)The key states:"suitable for peanuts, sorghum and maize..."
- b. Soil tests also showed a better phosphate level than most Cape soils.
- c. These Kandosol soils are ideal for summer crops as they are trafficable and don't get waterlogged ( unlike the Vertosols which are the preferred soils for Central Queensland farming), important due to the good rainfall in the Cape in summer and is quite the reverse of soil suitability in Central Queensland where kandosols are much less suited to dryland farming due to lower moisture holding capacity to carry a crop through the dry spells. It should be noted that much of the southern wheat belt is on similar red massive earths and production is effective there for **winter** crops as that is when those areas get their rainfall rather than the summer as does the Cape. The Cape and the southern wheat belt are the reverse of each other for rainfall and hence both suit well their specific crops in reverse seasons.This year the rainfall since November was above 1500mm and ideal for growing crops such as sorghum and corn through the summer. Whereas the properties to the east of KRS received lower rainfall. We understand from one of the long earlier owners put in a small area of sorghum crops, which he stated grew well,though not on the more suited soils we are seeking to use. He stated it performed well
- d. Of the 239,000 hectares of these soils identified in the CYPLUS study almost 100,000 of which are on KRS, we have only **requested a licence for a relatively small area of 7512 hectares** to enable more efficient use of the property for reason discussed below. We could have gone for very extensive areas which are also suitable. However this size we would have thought would be prudent and in keeping with the Federal Government initiative to develop the north, still being of an economically viable size for production, whilst still allowing time to prove up crop production on a moderate scale. As indicated on the map, very few areas in the Cape are suited to dryland grain production just from a soil type perspective.

- e. The application has been “sat on” ever since with recently a continuous round of new information requests just to get the 22A . Having done a clearing licence for a small area on another property in the Mackay area in late 2014 which itself was considered unreasonably difficult at the time compared to others being put through, I am aware that by comparison it was “a walk in the park”. What is being done now seems obvious and I would have thought appears an abuse of process such that we have sought a determination by the Court. The implication that this is the case and an intentional erection of road blocks to new applications despite legislation, is alluded to in a letter dated Dec 2 2015 from WWF ACF and WS to Jackie Trad, page 3 (2) which notes “administrative and procedural changes put into place by the Department of Natural Resources in July -September 2015” under the section of methods of stopping new applications for HVA and IHVA permits. In our pre-lodgement meeting in September 29,2015 we had requested a clear outline of the “hoops” we had to jump through before starting as we did not want any surprises nor the expense of outlays on a futile process. We were given the go ahead as there were no apparent objections from the soil suitability, the flora or fauna. All issues were identified and the criteria as discussed appeared to be met in the application sent in , but new hurdles have been applied to delay the process of getting the 22A as bureaucracy has the capacity and resources to do when up against individuals.
4. ***The CYPLUS study in the 90’s identified only about 7% of the Cape as being suitable soil types for high Value agriculture and therefore the impact of clearing these areas is insignificant in environmental terms but has highly significant benefits to the overall production levels of the Cape.*** Also, the property KRS is one of the very few areas of soil designated class A. THE INCREASE IN PRODUCTIVITY is particularly so in relation to the cattle industry as every year the Cape experiences a significant dry season where protein levels and pasture availability is diminished to being virtually valueless causing the cattle to drop dramatically in condition, reducing the likelihood of having saleable stock. Often the cows are too stressed to cycle, dramatically affecting calving rates. With the benefit of being able to clear some of the choice soils that do exist for forage and grain crops which can be stored and fed out during the dry season ( or sold locally) this would enable cattle to be in marketable condition for the export market which could be developed out of Weipa. There is a dramatic difference in the number of cattle that can be run and management strategies when there is a secure feed source through the inevitable annual drought. The cost of freight is so high that there is a heavy penalty for Cape cattlemen when cattle are in poor condition at the wrong time of year and it is cost prohibitive to bring in large amounts of feed which would be required to keep condition on the cattle in these periods. Further a feedlot in the area using locally produced grain or silage would provide an additional opportunity to surrounding producers to custom feed thus increasing the market options, similar to their southern counterparts so that they are not held to ransom in the seasonal deficit periods and this would help develop reliable export markets. High quality and quantity of feed produced off a relatively small area of land locally, provided it is selected well and managed, can make a very significant difference to the economic viability of the Cape properties and development in the north
  5. The additional benefits include
    - a) ***Economy of scale*** to get sufficient and consistent numbers to ensure the export trade reliability and a consistent market. This could include development of export facilities for

export markets for grain and other crops as well as timber. Potential for indigenous employment and training opportunities. Reduction in reliance on government handouts.

- b) **Flow on effect of better infrastructure** including roads and service industries that would develop in line with expansion and consistency of output. This also means reduction in freight rates.

6. **Need for substantial fire breaks/roads:**

- a. In the case of KRS we want to put in place additional management practices to overcome some of the problems that exist in this particular area- stringy bark tableland where timber is very tall ( up to about 40 metres) making retention of fencing impossible **unless wide enough access roads and firebreaks can be put in place to prevent trees falling across fencing and roads** as happens regularly. Unless you can **clear to a width exceeding the height of the tallest tree on both sides of the fenceline** it is a futile exercise to put up a fence or a road. In the past many kilometres of good fencing have been rendered useless due to tree fall.
- b. Further there are very important **safety issues** involved in :
  - i. **Fighting wildfires**-Aside from the fact that in the tall timber a firebreak to a maximum of 10m is almost the same as none at all, being confronted with narrow roads and downed timber across them can represent a very high risk to men and machines in attempting to stop fires and could easily result in them being trapped and loss of life. We had major fires through last year around October/ November just prior to taking over the property, and know how difficult it is to control them without a network of roads and firebreaks giving effective and safe access and allowing for effective back burning.
  - ii. **Cattle handling**-
    - a. Wider cleared breaks along fence lines and roads, aside from the benefit of enabling fences to stay in tact, allows cattle handling with a much decreased risk of severe injury for people on horses or bikes having to go through heavy timber strewn with fallen large trees. In this remote area if injuries occur the ability to get medical attention quickly is not an option. Safety in the work environment is a paramount concern.
    - b. Also the ability to decrease economic loss through calves being left behind to perish during the mustering of the timbered country.
    - iii. As light planes and helicopters are an efficient method of transport and management practices, reasonable roads offer further benefits in the event that emergency landing is required. At present there are few opportunities.
- c. **Savannah burning** projects- Many of the producers in the Cape are involved with Savannah burning. The ability to economically manage fires without access and firebreaks is almost impossible. Wildfires are inevitable due to lightning strikes or other causes. However when country can be made accessible through a planned network of

effective firebreaks and roads then fires can be cost effectively and safely managed rather than the high cost of incendiaries from helicopters with potentially unintended consequences without on ground control if a fire gets away. If a coordinated effort between neighbours is possible through good access and firebreaks the whole Cape could then be effectively managed to decrease wasted effort and risk to man and machines in fighting wildfires in areas without good access. If green groups are worried about wildlife then they should be promoting wide firebreaks so that the extensive devastation is reduced, including to native habitat and wildlife if there is much left now after years of uncontrolled wild fires in the late dry season.

- d. Good access and the ability to permanently fence areas would make available larger areas for grazing which currently cannot be fenced with permanent fencing that won't suffer damage with tree fall. This would increase the carrying capacity of these properties and reduce ongoing maintenance of hundreds of kilometres of fence lines currently subject to ongoing damage. Good management practices would then be possible in turn putting less pressure on more limited areas.
7. The **Northern Development Plan** is not relevant to agriculture if you cannot clear any land. All the hype and talk of developing the north would be rendered only lip service and a nonsense if no clearing is allowed.
8. **Opportunity for horticultural and other crops** which could be grown to overcome the high freight costs on produce from the south: This could then supply communities with locally grown produce and local employment opportunities. This industry could expand as trucks going south usually have limited back loading opportunities and this transport resource is currently wasted. As in similar areas in the NT, back-loading could be utilised to transport locally grown produce out of season making both the properties and the transport industry more economic.

**TO include other Areas of concern.....**

9. As the new laws as envisaged in the legislation are so all inclusive so as to **encompass** so called endangered species **regrowth such as Brigalow** ,which is prolific in those designated areas, there should be a huge backlash from the highly productive Central and Southern Qld Brigalow belt producers who now face declining production through inability to control regrowth which is prolific in those areas. This approach defies all good management practices. People who let their country go were once considered poor managers but now even the best will be forced into the same situation. Left long enough the scrub will dominate and those areas will become valueless for food production, as they were prior to clearing. Will consumers in the cities enjoy paying more for their food? What about export earnings?
10. Strange that there was a strong “food for fuel” debate against biofuels on productive land meaning food supplies would be jeopardised and prices rise even though this was a method of decreasing greenhouse gases through use of biofuels instead of petro diesel. Yet here is a similar thing- legislation taking out land for valuable food production but with no commercial offsetting gain.
11. **Guilty until proven innocent?** The reverse onus of proof- This allows for gross injustices and places clearing errors on a level as far worse than rape, paedophilia, theft, or murder. It belongs

to some overseas regimes which have been decried in the past by Australians as heinous in their injustices. We celebrate Anzac day whilst contemplating the introduction of laws that are totally contrary to the freedoms and rights for which our soldiers have fought and died, many of them from farming communities. Quite an insult to their memory.

12. ***Queensland farmers and graziers were made, by the locking up of the land, to pay the penalty to meet the Nations emissions targets by being robbed of the right to use their land and without any compensation. This lost production*** would be hard to calculate due to world population expansion and the increased demand for food in the future. The Carbon issue has been continually featured in comments by various government and other parties making it very obvious that this penalisation of farmers is an effort to cover the National emission targets at their expense. Examples showing the emphasis

- a. Dr Tim Seelig, Wilderness Society , Queensland Country Life: Opinion page 15 Talking about the change in legislation by the Newman Government “ But the legacy has been a rapid rise in clearing rates and associated emissions...” -
- b. The Guardian last week “A study for the Wilderness Society has shown carbon emissions from renewed tree clearing in Queensland, [\\*\\*Australia’s biggest carbon polluter](#), were enough to wipe out gains under \$670m federal programs in tree preservation and planting”.
  - i. **\*\*demonstrates the distortion of facts:** Coal industry produces roughly 500million tonnes of coal per year and when burned produces approx. 2.86 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per tonne of coal. This equates to 1.43 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> annually. Then there is natural gas and petroleum products which add to world wide emissions.
- c. Article by Des Houghton Courier Mail 5 March 2016 references comments that the law change under Newman had lead to 36 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> being released and that an area was cleared of “360,000 football fields **each** year”. If 296000 hectares is the total area of new clearing , that would have to be 121.62 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per hectare ? Darwin CRC project study by Dr Lindsay Hutley(CDU), Associate Professor School of Environment and Life Sciences, and Dick Williams(CSIRO) found Savannah Woodlands in that high rainfall (1500mm+) region ( **including roots and all**) ranged between 45-55 tonnes per hectare. In the Wildman River region of the NT it was 70 to 80 tonnes. Very dense thickets on water courses were up to 150 t/hectare. But these are certainly not representative of many of the areas where broad scale clearing had been done in the 800 to 900mm zones where it is likely to be closer to 20 t to 30 tonne per hectare or less. In fact a considerable amount of the area referred to is clearing regrowth which has much less Carbon release from lower tonnages from immature trees. This may be as low as 5 to 10 tonnes/hectare. The breakup of the regrowth vs virgin was not noted for the 296000 hectares quoted. There have been 2 large projects for new clearing the size of which may not be repeated. By far the largest of these completed is Strathmore Station of 60,000 hectares approximately. At an estimated 30 tonnes per hectare (or less) this amounts to 1.8 million tonnes. Olive Vale has only cleared a small amount of the permitted area to date( permit of around 30,000 hectares) Where is all the rest of the 36 million tonnes coming from? Further, this is an emotive statement to make it sound

huge for those who have no concept of the practical areas involved which are miniscule when compared to the vast amount of Savannah Woodland left untouched, and a lot of which no-one would want to clear for economic reasons. Any farmer only wants to “pick the eyes” out of the country where they know they can make some money as the costs to clear and farm are so high. However favoured good soils have the capacity to produce vast amounts of food long term. Thus facts are distorted to suit the emotional impact and give shock value. Perhaps a map showing the pixels of newly cleared land (broken down into regrowth and virgin) compared to that still carrying native tree cover and that which has regrown would be fairer for the general populace to see an accurate representation. No reference is given to land that has regrown in many comments ( or how many football fields that represents to keep the comparison consistent), nor the high carbon uptake by growing crops or pastures ongoing in relatively rapid growth phases which replace those woodlands. Standing mature forests are almost Carbon neutral as the rotting material vs new growth almost cancel each other out.

- d. Country Hour Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2014 ( Lydia Burton ) had reported that more than 22million hectares of Prickly acacia had invaded large areas of QLD. This would be all on previously open Downs country causing major issues for property owners but simultaneously sequestering carbon.

13. ***The condoned lawless behaviour of green groups targeting landholders*** e.g the harassment at Olive Vale targeted by Green groups who seem intent on preventing all forms of broad scale clearing of native vegetation: harassment with helicopters and media slander making out people who are working within the law are criminals. Any other groups trying this for other reasons would be quickly silenced. The tactics are another form of the “school yard bully”. It is noted also that many of these organisations are funded in part by tax payer dollars in that the donations are tax deductible by the donor. Why is this the case- not all taxpayers would condone their modus operandi.

14. It seems there is cherry picking of facts which distorts the picture put to the general populace to such an extent that anyone doing any clearing is considered an environmental vandal and a rapist of the pristine wilderness no matter how responsibly it is done. I note also the “map of shame” put out by the Green lobby including any properties with clearing done. This is the demonization of farmers for desiring to make their properties more viable in an ever more competitive world. Who benefits if they do- also the consumer/voter. The government’s own report (Statewide Landcover and Tree Study by Qld Dept of Science) indicated that there has been substantially more land that has gone back to trees (437,000 hectares between 2012 and 2014) than newly cleared land (296,000 hectares). Yet figures quoted to the media only show one side of the story – the cleared land. And why compare it to previous years when there was then a ban on clearing other than in State significant projects such as mining and land clearing for urban developments or highway expansion? This is an emotive and not an evidence based comparison. This is a distortion and many voters do not take the time to look into the details of such stories and may have an innate trust that they are being given the truth.

- a. As an example Statements from the current Minister for Agriculture Leanne Donaldson in the QLD Country Life page 4 Thursday March 24<sup>th</sup> state they are operating on evidence but have obviously omitted the key evidence of the regrowth statistics which more than counters the cleared area. This means in fact that we have a net loss of

cleared area overall of 141,000 hectares in that period. Given all the figures the story is totally different to that portrayed in the media.

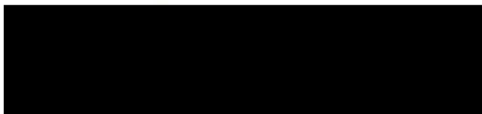
- b. It seems there could be interference with the application of the existing clearing regulations by way of the public service being instructed to frustrate and delay the process by changing the rules on the run to prevent permits being issued before there are changes in the legislation. At the pre-lodgement meeting we asked for a clear outline of the requirements and did not want any surprises as it was to be an expensive process anyway. Others have also experienced this. For example Bair Knuth of Burdekin Downs near Charters Towers has had his application in since early last year and though he had been granted a 22A has been frustrated by changing goal posts and the degree of material that needs to be provided despite this.

I wonder had these criteria been applied to all the land in Australia whether there would be any farming at all as the land with "perfect" conditions is very very limited in Australia.

The legislation is certainly strong enough, even without the additional administrative and procedural blocks put in in July -September, to ensure that reasonable land can be farmed under good practices. The wholesale clearing of the wrong type of land is certainly not an issue. Economics for farming rules it out.

In conclusion we do hope the committee will look at the facts and realise the negative implications, the effects on people's livelihoods and the flow on effects that will be felt by future generations if this land is held back by such regressive legislation. There is more than just the Carbon impact to be considered (which growing crops can sequester anyway) versus the loss of prosperity, jobs and opportunity for the future generations able to have a secure food supply. It is hard to imagine that we could be so irresponsible to future generations by the loss of the opportunity for sensible development.

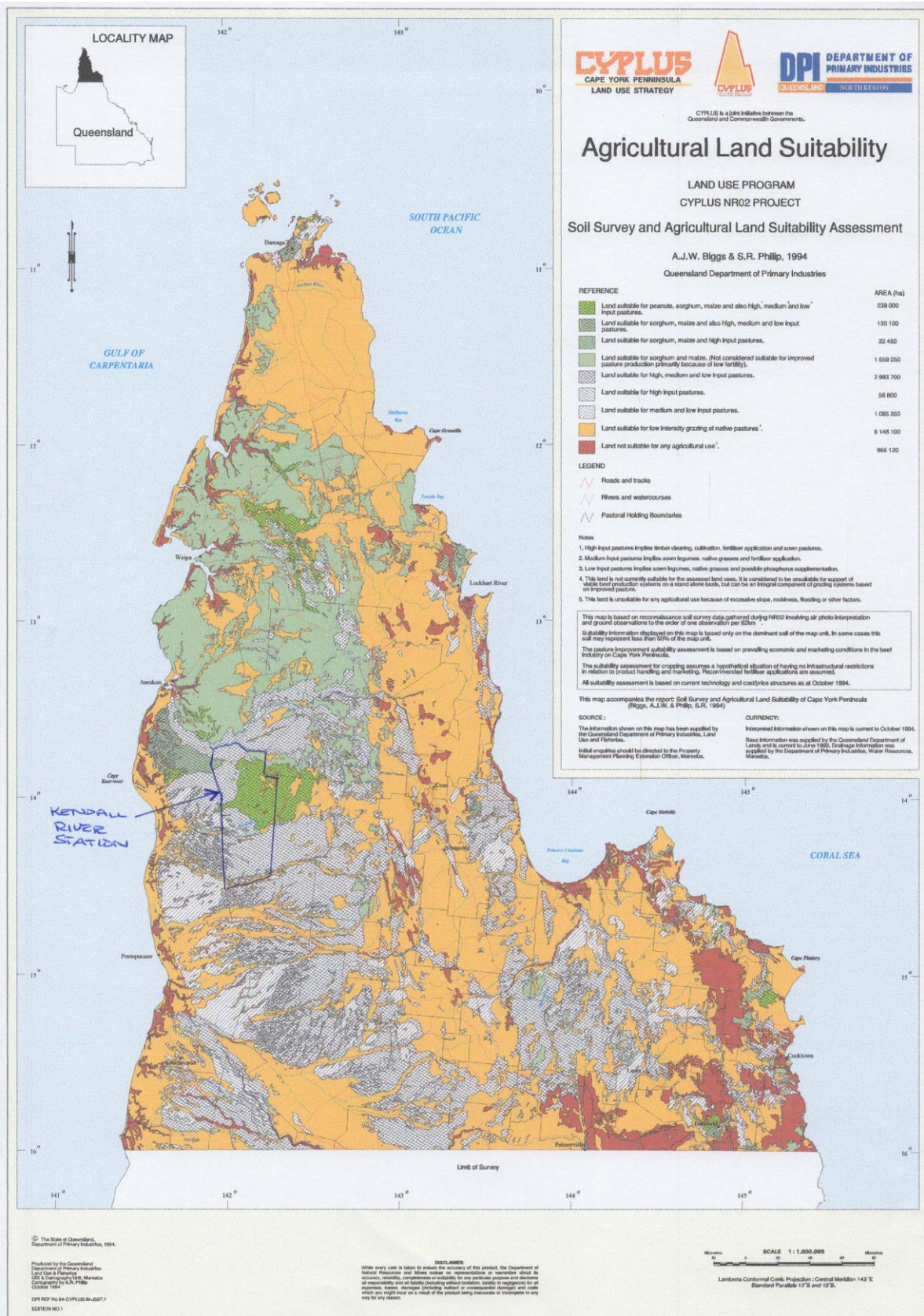
Sincerely

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of George Muirhead.

George Muirhead

(Kendall River Station )









Additional comments re the submission of 27 April to the committee by George Muirhead

Addition to sections

12 c. The figures used also assume all the timber is burned. This timber can be a good resource for salvage logs for sale. This would mean a substantial decrease in emissions and the locking up or sequestration of this amount of timber. Harvesting of timber in the cleared areas is a good option for making use of an available timber resource for timber sales either within Australia or for export, in some cases, such as is the case at KRS

What should also be looked at by the Committee, is that it may be possible to pelletise or woodchip biomass from clearing to be exported, and /or used to co-fire power stations locally or overseas, used in a gasifier to generate electricity or as a feedstock through a biomass to liquid fuel system which are now practical technologies. This effectively negates or much diminishes the carbon emissions concerns, being a direct replacement for fossil fuels

The land may also, in the future provide an opportunity to grow new trees with a commercial value on the same land for either timber for construction, as a renewable biomass source, or tree crops for biofuels. As CO<sub>2</sub> uptake is very significant in a newly rapidly growing tree plantation/forest compared to the almost GHG neutral status of a mature forest, this would increase opportunities for further sequestration at an increased and ongoing rate.

It should also be noted that grass cover in mature forests is often very low to non-existent, particularly in dry climate conditions or drought, even without any livestock grazing. With drought breaking rains often these bare soils are exposed to severe erosion whereas with a significant body of grass, even under livestock grazing, erosion is prevented or significantly reduced by the root binding effect of the grasses. Further, the grass acts as a filter for the runoff ensuring that the water into the watercourses is relatively clean. Ultimately this means less sedimentation of the reef in the easterly draining watercourses.

Sincerely

George Muirhead