

21st April 2016

Research Director
Agriculture and Environment Committee
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Tablelands Futures Corporation welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Agriculture and Environment Committee in relation the proposed changes in the Vegetation Management (reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016.

About Tablelands Futures Corporation

Tablelands Futures Corporation (TFC) is the peak development agency for the Atherton Tablelands, the region within the boundaries of Mareeba Shire Council and Tablelands Regional Council in Far North Queensland. TFC is a not-for-profit organisation supported by Tablelands Regional Council and Mareeba Shire Council. Our Board is drawn from industry and local government and our Strategic Goal is that 'the Atherton Tablelands has a thriving and sustainable economy.' For more information, please refer www.tablelandsfutures.com.



Location of the Atherton Tablelands, Far North Queensland (map courtesy of Savannah Way)

Current Status of Tablelands Economy

The Atherton Tablelands was the initial driver of the Far North Queensland economy, as coastal ports and rail infrastructure were developed to service the Atherton Tablelands mining industry. By the early 1900s the focus of the Atherton Tablelands economy had shifted to forestry and agriculture. Agriculture remains the mainstay of the Atherton Tablelands economy, supported by mining and resources, construction and tourism.

The Atherton Tablelands has existing connections with Asia both through industry (exports & investment) and history (Chinese workers in mining & agricultural industries).

The Atherton Tablelands region currently lags against state and national averages on key economic statistics¹, including:

- personal weekly income
- worker productivity (though similar to other northern agricultural areas)
- high unemployment and low education levels
- rapidly ageing population.

It is also important to note that the Tablelands is built on small business, with almost 95% of the region's 4,807 businesses employing less than 20 staff. Only 4% of our businesses turnover more than \$2 million annually.

Development Potential & Vision

The Atherton Tablelands region has some fundamental strengths for economic growth:

- its diverse microclimates and abundant water resources provide a range of agricultural opportunities
- the region has an established 'clean and green' production capacity
- the region provides safety and stability including a lower risk of natural disasters
- there is a range of natural resources including in the agricultural, renewable energy and mining sectors
- the region is well placed to service east coast markets as well as Asian and global markets
- it hosts a high-value tropical environment with strong lifestyle and tourism attractions.

Recommendations

1. Removing High Value Agriculture and Irrigated High Value Agriculture from the Vegetation Management Framework

The removal of High Value Agriculture (HVA) and irrigated HVA (IHVA) will negatively impact farmers across the Atherton Tablelands. Throughout north Queensland, energy and protein become limiting in cattle diets during the dry season and this can cause farmers issues with stock survival and welfare through periods of drought. HVA and IHVA permits provide farmers in north Queensland with the opportunity to be self-sufficient by growing fodder and grain for supplementing in the dry season and finishing off stock for market.

The removal of HVA and IHVA is in direct conflict with the Australian Government White Paper on the Development of Northern Australia. A current example of this is \$220 million being spent to upgrade roads to communities across Cape York, but Queensland State Government Vegetation Management Framework is preventing indigenous and non-indigenous land holders from developing agriculture projects.

Sustainable clearing for relatively small pockets of high value agriculture enable agricultural production to improve continuity of supply to food processors and meet the increasing requirements of international markets and Australia's Free Trade Agreements.

¹ All statistics taken from Our Economy, Our Future, Tablelands Futures Corporation, 2013. This document provides a regional economic snapshot and industry profile

2. Re-introducing Reverse Onus-of-Proof

The inclusion of Reverse Onus of Proof in Queensland Government's Vegetation Management Framework is a direct affront to the rights and liberties of farmers. Reverse Onus relegates farmers clearing vegetation to a level below that of criminals, where they are denied common justice under Section 24 of the Criminal Code: Mistake of fact. In Queensland not only are farmers presumed guilty until they are proven innocent, but they are refused the possibility of making a mistake.

3. That no compensation will be payable to HVA, IHVA and Property Map of Assessable Vegetation (PMAV) applicants during transitional arrangements

With the cessation of broad scale land-clearing, compensation for landholders to offset opportunity cost, lost development potential and decreased property value has been a critical omission from the Vegetation Management Regulatory Framework. The issue of compensation has been debated heavily by federal and state legislators, however a precedent was set by the Beattie Government in 2004 with provision of \$150 million over 5 years to offset landholder losses due to the removal of their rights to clear. This however was a copout with the funds unable to provide effective recompense for opportunity costs incurred, despite prior assessment undertaken for the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry in 2003. In 2004, there was no doubt considerable rejoicing by the Queensland Government who boasted of compensating carbon dioxide abatement for less than \$1 a tonne!

In the 2016 Bill transition period the situation is quite different to what it was in 2004. The threat to remove HVA and IHVA from farmers' potential to develop property provides considerable grounds for compensation, particularly for those that have structured investments and farm management activities to take advantage of HVA/IHVA in the near future. Also HVA/IHVA has attracted far greater interest in northern Queensland, with large swathes of marginal beef production areas provided the opportunity of growing supplementary feed to overcome the protein drought in the dry season.

The 2003 Commonwealth study mentioned above did not include north or west Queensland Local Government Areas and consequently grossly underestimated the areas to be considered for compensation. Another change since 2004 is the free market recognition of the value of carbon abatement with the recent auction of the Emissions Reduction Fund selling carbon at \$12.25 per tonne. The Queensland State Government needs to recognise the fact that they are robbing the rights of farmers to develop productive HVA/IHVA land sustainably and that the area for development and value for carbon are much greater than they were in 2004.

4. Including High Value Regrowth as an additional layer of regulation under the Vegetation Management Framework on leasehold, freehold and indigenous land

The re-inclusion of High Value Regrowth (HVR) as an additional layer of regulation on leasehold, freehold and indigenous land is an overt grab by Queensland Government in search of targets for meeting international treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol and more recently the 2015 Paris Climate Deal. In 2009 when initially introduced, this HVR layer was prepared hastily in a 'desk-top' mapping exercise with associated errors including areas of non-native vegetation (such as orchards) and bare earth. In preliminary investigations of several properties it appears that the accuracy of the 2016 HVR is no better than that in 2009.

5. Increasing Category R vegetation to include the Burdekin, Mackay, Whitsunday and Wet Tropics Great Barrier Reef catchments and additional catchments Burnett Mary, Eastern Cape York and Fitzroy.

This increase in Category R provisions is a further restriction on development in Northern Queensland, which is in stark contrast to the development imperatives contained with the White Paper on Developing Northern Australia.

The science is completely unproven on the necessity to include ≥ 50 metre buffers along streamlines. In fact, a study conducted in Queensland and published in 2016 shows that grass is a far better assimilator for nitrogen to prevent leaching into waterways. The current bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef is not caused by high nutrient runoff from agricultural lands.

6. Other matters relevant to the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 that the review committee should consider appropriate and worth some consideration
 - Most of the proposed development to new agriculture clearing has NOT been in reef catchments - but in the Gulf Plains.

If you require any additional information or would like to discuss this further, please contact our office on (07) 4096 7407 or admin@tablelandsfutures.com; alternatively myself [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully,

[REDACTED]

Michael Lawrence
Chairman