

Michelle Fatur

Toowong Qld 4066

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Research Director
Agriculture and Environment Committee
Parliament House
BRISBANE QLD 4000
Email: ym inquiry@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Chair and Committee Members

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

Thank you for providing an opportunity to make a submission about the *Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016* (the Bill). I am ordinary citizen of Queensland who is deeply concerned about the current health of our environment and the status and future of our iconic native animals.

Below I have outlined the reasons that I believe the Bill needs to be passed into law.

The original *Vegetation Management Act 1999* (the Act) contains a number of important '**purposes**' that are currently not being met as a result of the changes that were made to it in 2013. The reinstatement of important protections contained in the Bill will go a long way to ensuring that the Act is actually able to achieve its stated purposes.

Below I have extracted a number of the key '**purposes**' of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* that are critically important to me and, I believe, all citizens of Queensland, and I have outlined why I believe these 'purposes' are not currently being met.

Protection of habitat for native animals, biodiversity and a healthy ecology in Queensland

The purpose of this Act is to regulate the clearing of vegetation in a way that —

- **prevents the loss of biodiversity**
- **maintains ecological processes (clauses 3(1)(d) and (e))**

Since the Act was amended in 2013, it is estimated that clearing has surged more than four times above 2009-10 levels with more than 200,000 hectares of native woodlands, including 40,000 hectares of koala habitat, having been cleared. Conservation scientists have estimated that these native woodlands are home to more than 200 threatened species including iconic Australian animals such as koalas and gliders. In addition, 89 of 1383 regional ecosystems are endangered due to land clearing and 531 are 'of concern' (World Wildlife Fund, 2016).

This level of tree clearing, if allowed to continue, will seriously impact on viability of Queensland's native animal populations, which are already in steep decline as a result of habitat destruction and predation by feral animals. Continued clearing will result in a loss of biodiversity and ecological processes and this means that the Act will not have met its key purposes of 'preventing loss of biodiversity and maintaining ecological processes'.

The protection of habitat for native Australian animals is critically important to me as I know that our native animals are already under immense pressure and decline. At a forum that I recently attended about the Bill, I was completely shocked by the facts reported by ordinary women who are members of environment groups about koalas being found dead on recently cleared land on the Gold Coast and starving koalas crawling out of areas that have been cleared.

I know that wildlife carers across the state are reporting an upsurge in the number of injured and displaced native animals going into care as a direct result of land clearing.

The Bill will reinstate legal controls that will slow down the rate of land clearing in Queensland thus protecting native animals and importantly their habitat through:

- reinstating the protection of high value regrowth on freehold and indigenous land, and
- removing provisions which permit clearing applications for high value agriculture and irrigated agriculture.

I urge the Agriculture and Environment Committee to adopt a position that that the only test to determine whether land can be cleared, should be an ecological impact test.

Environmental impacts of tree clearing

The purpose of this Act is to regulate the clearing of vegetation in a way that —

- **conserves remnant vegetation**
- **ensures the clearing does not cause land degradation**
- **reduces greenhouse gas emissions (clauses 3(1)(a), (c) and (g))**

The environmental impact of tree clearing has been widely studied and no doubt the scientific facts will be detailed for the Committee in other submissions. If the Bill is not passed into law, I believe that the stated purposes of the Act as outlined above (conserving remnant vegetation, preventing land degradation and reducing greenhouse gas emissions) cannot possibly be met with the level of clearing currently occurring in Queensland.

With almost 300,000 hectares of remnant (or original) vegetation being cleared in 2013-14 alone (Wilderness Society, 2016), the Act cannot meet its stated purpose outlined above of 'conserving remnant vegetation'.

Tree clearing has been proven to increase drought. The scientific facts are the more trees we have the more rain we will get. With Queensland frequently in drought, continued tree clearing will only exacerbate this. The Act cannot meet its stated purpose of 'not causing land degradation' if it exacerbates drought.

It is widely understood that tree clearing contributes to climate change as it causes millions of tonnes of CO₂ to be released into the atmosphere. In the current 'climate change crisis' where climate change is accelerating, our reef is dying and governments across the world are agreeing that practical measures must urgently be implemented to mitigate this, Queenslanders cannot continue to clear trees at the current rate. The purpose of the Act to 'reduce greenhouse gas emissions' cannot be met with continued high rates of tree clearing.

Perhaps most importantly at this critical time for our Great Barrier Reef, the Committee must acknowledge that tree clearing near river catchments causes land erosion and that the run-off reduces water quality and increases sediment on the Great Barrier Reef. This places further stress on the reef.

The Queensland Government's own Auditor General's report Managing water quality in Great Barrier Reef catchments Report 20: 2014–15 stated:

- "land cleared in reef catchments increased by 229 per cent, from 31,000ha per year in 2008–09 to 102,000ha per year in 2013–14."

- “The recent relaxation of land clearing rules also increases the risk of adverse consequences from sedimentation run-off.”

At this time when the reef is already in a severely stressed state, it is critically important to reduce other stressors such as agricultural and sediment run-off. The specific provisions contained within the Bill that will reduce other stressors such as agricultural run-off include:

- broadening protection of riparian vegetation, especially in the Great Barrier Reef catchments of Burnett Mary, Eastern Cape York and Fitzroy Great Barrier Reef, and
- reinstating the application of the riverine protection permit framework to the destruction of vegetation in a watercourse, lake or spring.

In addition, I understand that this Government’s promise to restore land-clearing protections is a major reason UNESCO did not list the Great Barrier Reef as endangered.

Recognising the intrinsic value and beauty of trees and their contribution to human health and wellbeing

I urge the Committee to recognise that:

- trees have intrinsic value and beauty that contribute to the quality of our human lives
- immersion in nature and wild places has been proven to be beneficial to human health
- with less trees and native animals and a healthy ecology, not only will the quality of Queenslanders lives suffer but our economy and tourism industries will too.

Landholders

I understand that when broadscale clearing was banned in 2006:

- The Queensland Government provided \$150 million to farmers in enterprise/exit assistance.
- The Queensland Government provided \$8 million to Agforce and Agforce stated that it was “prepared to accept the Act as it is”.
- There was bipartisan support for the ban evidenced through a statement made by JP Langbroek MP, recorded in Hansard, that it is “the best policy for a sustainable triple bottom line” and would deliver a “massive reduction in greenhouse gas emissions”.

While I understand the pressures for landholders, I urge the Committee to acknowledge that we live on a finite planet and must find more innovative ways to use land that has already been cleared to meet our agriculture and housing needs.

The Committee could consider options to provide a training and support package to farmers/industry on best-practice sustainable production measures.

The importance of listening to our scientists

The current crisis unfolding on the Great Barrier Reef should provide a lesson for all of us, including our governments, about the importance of listening to our scientists.

Scientists have assessed the current rates of tree clearing and clearly described the multiple negative impacts on land-based native animals, ecosystem health, the Great Barrier Reef and the flow on effects of climate change on human health and wellbeing. Destruction of Queensland’s natural resources will also have negative impacts on the State’s income from tourism.

I urge the Committee to carefully consider the scientific facts on the impacts of the current rate of land clearing in Queensland.

Other improvements that could be made to the Bill

While I urge the Committee to recommend that the Bill be passed into law, I also recommend that you carefully consider whether the Bill goes far enough.

I understand there are several features that could be improved. One of these is the Self Assessable 'Thinning Code' which allows landholders to use bulldozers to clear as much as 75% of trees in previously intact forests, leaving only a 'thin' remnant of trees behind. The code sets arbitrary thresholds for tree densities that are not based on peer-reviewed science. Eighteen endangered and 55 of-concern ecosystems can be cleared in this way (World Wildlife Fund, 2016).

I urge the Committee to investigate whether the Thinning Code should be revoked and whether there are other aspects of vegetation management laws, codes or practices that should be reviewed to improve outcomes for our environment and the Great Barrier Reef and to preserve a future for our iconic native animals.

I thank you for your consideration of my submission.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Fatur
Concerned citizen of Queensland