

Submission No. 554

From: Scott Gordon

West End, QLD 4101

To:

Research Director
Agriculture and Environment Committee
Parliament House
BRISBANE QLD 4000

28th April, 2016

Re: Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016

Please consider this to be an official submission to the Committee regarding the above Bill, which is under consideration by Parliament (I believe currently via your Committee).

I fully support this bill and call for it to be passed by Parliament, and take effect, as soon as possible and with no amendments which weaken its effect. While they are far from perfect, the changes are long overdue, needed to halt some of the rampant land clearing resulting from changes to legislation by the previous Parliament, and to prevent inappropriate clearing in future.

My motivation :

The consequences of allowing clearing to continue far outweigh the (tiny and probably illusory) benefits from it.

I care deeply about environmental protection, and am frankly appalled by the rampant and irresponsible clearing of native vegetation facilitated by the drastic weakening, and willful non-enforcement, of Queensland environmental law, by the Newman Government in the previous Parliament.

Queensland's (and more widely Australia's) native vegetation and the fragile ecosystems which depend on it, are already in a perilous state after c. 200 years of uncontrolled clearing which has destroyed close to 97% of original forests and woodlands. It is way past the point where further clearing is ecologically sustainable or justifiable on any reasonable economic or moral basis. It simply has to stop.

Clearing is also doing massive damage to Australia's greenhouse emissions, and if allowed to continue, basically eliminates our chances of meeting national emission reduction targets, with dire consequences for climate, the living environment, and Australia's international reputation.

Why the Bill is good :

1. It sends a clear message that broad-scale or uncontrolled land-clearing in Queensland is not acceptable; and tips the balance in favour of environmental preservation when it comes to any future regulation, permits, or legal action.
2. It removes the ability to claim a permit for clearing for 'High Value Agriculture'.
This was a massive problem (essentially a loop-hole) which was deliberately placed into the previous land-clearing laws with a vague to non-existent definition of 'High Value' deliberately allowing almost any clearing at all to qualify. Large scale clearing under this guise in extremely soil-impooverished areas with almost no economic potential or dubious economic claims to justify it (and likely no future use except low-yield sparse grazing), has demonstrated that the 'High Value' exemption is a complete farce.
Given that the high value of some agricultural activity does nothing to reduce its environmental impact, it is also difficult to see why a 'High Value' provision should ever exist.
This travesty of an exemption should be permanently abolished, as this bill does.
3. It removes the ability to avoid prosecution for supposedly 'mistaken' land clearing.
This removes a 'get out of jail' clause with no legitimate function and of no public benefit.
Anyone owning forested land in Queensland knows that clearing of native vegetation is (will be) tightly controlled, and requires a government permit. There is no way that it can occur by mistake; and it is up to the land-owner to obtain a permit, not up to the government to prove that they knew that a permit was necessary. If you own the land then 'the buck stops with you'.
This is how all other regulation in Australia works. Land clearing should not be an exception.
4. It re-instates protection for 'riparian' (river-bank and nearby) areas and to some more critical water catchment areas, eg. draining to the Great Barrier Reef.
These areas are highly sensitive, both for their ecological significance and because vegetation there limits erosion and hence the loss of nearby soil, levels of sediment in the river/stream, and sediment depositing downstream including in reef areas.
Protecting these relatively small areas pays particularly large environmental benefits without greatly hindering any legitimate activity which is making reasonable efforts to be environmentally responsible. It should be taken as a given.
5. It reintroduces protections against clearing certain re-growing woodlands/forests which are unusually ecologically significant.
Past land-clearing was highly excessive (essentially a free-for-all) which has tilted the balance way in the direction of over-clearing, and caused massive damage to fragile ecosystems.
Areas where past clearing was particularly ecologically inappropriate need to be allowed to return to their natural condition, to allow this damage to repair over time.
This can't happen as long as past over-clearing is 'locked in' by allowing the regrowth to itself be cleared.

6. It includes provisions to prevent 'panic clearing' in anticipation of the Bill passing.

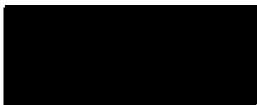
On most occasions in Australia when a tightening of land-clearing controls was imminent, land-owners have responded with 'panic clearing' – clearing large areas before it becomes illegal, even if the clearing is currently unneeded. This deliberate circumvention of future laws is not acceptable and has to be stopped.

This Bill tries to reduce the 'panic clearing' problem by retrospectively applying controls to some clearing occurring after the Bill was announced (and hence when landowners became aware of the new rules). This is reasonable and appropriate : what land can be cleared should not depend on how long a Bill is debated by a Parliamentary committee, or on how busy Parliament is.

Thank you for consideration of my thoughts and opinions, and of this submission. I am available for contact if the Committee so desires.

Please endorse the current Bill and do whatever possible to further its passage through Parliament and timely implementation.

Yours sincerely



Scott Gordon