



29 April, 2016

**Logan and Albert Conservation Association (LACA) submission to the Queensland Parliamentary Agriculture and Environment Committee on the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016**

The Logan and Albert Conservation Association (LACA) believes that the Newman vegetation management laws were all about deregulation. Nowhere is deregulation more destructive than in its treatment of the natural world. LACA contends that Queensland was being left behind under the Newman vegetation management laws, not by accident or negligence, but by design. The Newman Government actively encouraged old formulas, essentially providing for a return to primitive slash and burn agricultural practices which have no place in an advanced 21st century economy. Prior to the introduction of the Newman vegetation management laws, previous vegetation laws, at a basic level, recognised and enforced the critical need for broad biodiversity protection. The previous laws marked the beginning of a recognition that we had long passed the point of 'balance' in the way we treated the landscape.

**LACA supports the current Government's Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 which seeks to restore tree-clearing laws to where they were immediately before the Newman laws took effect.**

**LACA supports this Bill for the following reasons:**

**1. The Newman vegetation Management Laws were a serious threat to habitat. The new Bill is aimed at rectifying this.**

1.1 Habitat loss is seen as the primary threat to at-risk species. Australia has the highest loss of mammal species anywhere in the world and is in the top 10 in the world for endangered and threatened species with a total of 1,764 Australian species listed by the federal government as being threatened to some degree.

**1.2** Halting extinction rates in this country was outside the intent of the Newman government's vegetation management laws, which instead gave a green light to massive destruction of habitats across nearly 300,000 hectares of Qld, including an estimated 40,000 hectares of Koala habitat.

**1.3** Critically, the current Labor Government's Vegetation Management Bill, if passed, will halt broad scale clearing and habitat loss by removing landholders' ability to easily obtain permits to clear for 'high value' agriculture. The Bill also restores protection for ecologically significant high value regrowth on freehold and Aboriginal land and, very importantly, reinstates protection of riparian corridors. Through these measures, the Bill, if passed, will help repair the damage done by the Newman government legislation, and put Queensland back on a more sensible path to sustainability.

**1.4** The Newman legislation contained some truly vaudevillian provisions which the new Bill necessarily removes. These include the farcical, kangaroo court defence around 'mistaken belief', which reversed the onus of proof for tree clearing offenses, and the emphasis on self-assessable 'environmental clearing', which converted every landholder, into an expert ecologist/hydrologist/engineer, whenever he or she felt the need to clear and divert a river bed.

**1.5** LACA members are very concerned that, under the Newman Government Vegetation Management Act, triggers for clearing without permit on peri urban acreage properties rose from 2000 square metres to 5000 square metres. This combined with the loss of high value regrowth under the Newman legislation and aggressive broad scale clearing in Priority Development Areas across the Logan Upper Catchment, has led to a potentially disastrous decline in habitat for key listed species such as the Koala, the Quoll and the Powerful Owl, to name a few. LACA believes the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 will go some way towards halting these losses, but more needs to be done, particularly to bring broad scale clearing in PDAs into line with the general intent of the new Bill, which is to halt excessive clearing and protect important vegetation, habitats and water quality across the whole State.

## **2. The Newman vegetation management laws damage the Reef: The new Bill is aimed at rectifying this.**

**2.1** Studies have shown that under the Newman veg management laws, clearing in catchments that drain onto the Great Barrier Reef increased dramatically and constituted 35 per cent of total clearing across Queensland in 2013-14. LACA believes that this is unsustainable. The loss of native vegetation cover in such regions, resulting in increased erosion and sediment run-off, is one of the major drivers of deteriorating water quality in the reef's lagoon, threatening seagrass, coral reefs, other marine ecosystems, and Queensland's tourism industry. LACA supports the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 because it will halt massive tree-clearing and reinstate protection of riparian corridors including those across all Great Barrier Reef catchments.

**2.2** LACA members support the Government's Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 because they are also concerned that any continuance of the Newman legislation will deliver further uncontrolled clearing of large areas of high value regrowth vegetation and riparian areas in the upper catchment of the Logan and Albert Rivers. This will ultimately threaten the water quality in Moreton Bay, affecting the bay's coral and fish populations. Moreton Bay and associated outer reefs have 180 species of coral – almost a third of the number found on the Great Barrier Reef. Moreton Bay will act as an important refuge for coral species in the future as the effects of climate change drive species south.

### **3. The Newman vegetation management laws have added significantly to Australia's greenhouse gas emissions. The new Bill is aimed at rectifying this.**

**3.1** Today's rate of change in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is unprecedented in climate archives. It outpaces the carbon release during the most extreme abrupt warming events in the past 66 million years by at least an order of magnitude. LACA members support strong climate change action by Queensland and supports the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 as a significant element of Queensland's emissions mitigation responsibility.

**3.2** Increased carbon dioxide levels are causing weather extremes, ocean acidification, and coral bleaching. Fauna species adapted to wetter, cooler elevations in Queensland will run out of survival opportunities. The Newman vegetation management laws have been estimated to have resulted in enough Greenhouse gas emissions in the last two years to neutralise the current Federal Government's emissions reductions scheme. Queensland must do better than this. LACA supports the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 because it will halt the massive broad scale land clearing that has contributed to our appalling level of greenhouse gas emissions over the past two years.

### **4. An alternative environment and agriculture vision: this does not have to come down to a choice between environment/habitat and agriculture. We can have both if we are smarter. LACA contends that the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 is a starting point to a process that must go much further.**

**4.1** According to a recent CSIRO study, Australia can prosper and protect the environment at the same time: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/australia-can-prosper-and-protect-the-environment-at-the-same-time-csiro-20151104-gkq9xt.html>

LACA members believe the unsustainable Newman vegetation management laws exposed the limits to our ambition, the combative nature of our policy debate, and the limits to our

imagination when it comes to making mature, sustainable decisions about the environmental and agricultural future of this State.

New modelling by the CSIRO has found Australia can enjoy strong economic growth without damaging the environment, provided new technology and policies are embraced. The research, published in the prestigious journal *Nature*, presented 20 scenarios involving economic growth and environmental change in Australia. "Economically, Australia can achieve strong economic growth to 2050 indicated by rising gross domestic product and gross national income per capita, in scenarios where environmental pressures fall or are stable," the report says

**4.2** With a long history of habitat destruction combined with the emerging threats of climate change, Queensland is now facing biodiversity tipping points across all landscapes. Accordingly, LACA calls for smarter agricultural solutions, stronger vegetation and habitat protection legislation and a bi-partisan approach in the future to this critical survival issue.

**4.3** Indicative of such thinking, but by no means the only such solution, is the South Australian based project **Sundrop Farms**. Sundrop Farms <http://www.sundropfarms.com/> is a leader in sustainable horticulture for the arid world, growing high-value crops using seawater and sunlight. Sundrop uses solar power to desalinate sea water, cool its greenhouses in summer and heat them in winter. This is the farmer's dream – free energy to irrigate with an unlimited water supply in a dry landscape – all settings able to be controlled by a smart phone. Sundrop Farms have recently set about expanding and will provide work for up to 300. This is one vision of a smarter future.



Finally, LACA members strongly support the new Bill for making much of the prospective legislation retrospective to 17 March, to deter panic clearing and panic applications.

**Barry Fitzpatrick (LACA spokesperson for the northern catchment)**



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