


SUBMISSION TO:**Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation
Amendment Bill 2016****SUBMISSION COVER SHEET****Closing date for submissions is 25 April 2016.**

Please complete and submit this form with your submission to:

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SUBMISSION

I provide my submission in support of the continuation of the Current Vegetation Management Act 1999 and rejection of the changes proposed in the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016 ("the Bill").

The continuing issue of political stunts that aim to win the "Green" or urban votes, such as this Bill, which is just another variation to the Vegetation Management Framework, affects the ability of every hardworking landowner to get on with the job of good land management. The agriculture sector accounts for the management of land over the majority of the state, and as such we should have greater certainty and support from our Politicians and fellow Queenslanders in the important role that we play. By and large, we are responsible land managers that put great importance in the maintenance of well-functioning ecosystems, through the control and eradication of weeds and pest animals, maintenance of woodland and grassland balance, wildfire hazard reduction and erosion reduction and soil health maintenance. The continual change of legislation requirements from one election to the next means that there is no ability for Land managers to put into place solid long-term property management decisions. Ecological processes work over long timeframes, and hence a longer timeframe approach from a management point of view is required to permit good land and environment outcomes, which we cannot do given the see-sawing effect of these Legislation changes. I am totally opposed to the introduction, or rather re-introduction of The Bill which will continue the uncertainty and fear that will affect the health of our country and the long term viability of my business, and that of my fellow farmers.

Here in Central Western Queensland, where we have been in the grip of a particularly long drought, these changes proposed by the Palaszczuk Government is yet another kick in the teeth, and goes to show that Labour has no interest in rural communities and the agriculture sector, which has been the backbone of this Great State of Queensland for so long.

Changes that are proposed in The Bill that I am concerned may culminate in several issues for us here in The Central West. The issue of woody thickening in naturally open grassland communities (such as the iconic Mitchell Grass Downs) has been a major one for the last 40 years. When the drought does break, the recruitment of seedlings in these grassland communities is likely to be high and with little or no stock or wildlife left in many areas due to the drought, they will flourish. This will compromise these special grassland communities, and without the ability to manage it, land managers will bear the cost of this encroachment for years to come. This in turn will lead to poor soil health through the reduction in grass and ground cover, the reduced ability to access and control woody weed species such as Parkinsonia, Prickly Acacia and Mesquite, and will facilitate the increase in feral and pest animals such as pigs and goats through increased woody cover and habitat. We are concerned by these proposed changes under the Bill that the ability for us to maintain any previously cleared country may be compromised, or lead to changes in the future (although we currently have a PMAV) which may affect the viability of our business in the long term, through reduced grass growth and therefore reducing the number of stock we can effectively carry.

In providing this submission I refer directly to the key provisions of the legislation which the 2016 Bill intends to amend.

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

The inability of the Government to see that select small areas of development in certain areas of the State, will lead to great outcomes for the Queensland Economy is mind boggling. Through these HVA and IHVA areas, landholders are provided with the ability to drought-proof their businesses and provide some production stability in a time of highly variable climatic and Market conditions within the Agriculture sector. It provides better Market access through allowing farmers to finish livestock on fodder crops and meet Market specifications rather than flooding the saleyards in dry times with unfinished stock. It enables farmers to grow and conserve fodder to feed in dry times rather than selling everything, or going broke trying to freight the feed in for perishing stock. It would enable Indigenous landholders with options for better beef production, cropping and horticulture, and hence better employment and self-sufficiency within their communities.

The lack of the ability for farm businesses to further sustainably develop their land and businesses in all parts of the state has no doubt been an issue for many a farm that has suffered financially, or indeed been foreclosed. Banks will not lend money to companies and family businesses alike where they cannot see a financial return from their investment, regardless of the environmental and “feel good” outcomes.

Providing landholders with the ability to develop small select areas for irrigation and more intensive development (such as those permits under the HVA and IHVA guidelines) was a great boon to Agriculture and the Queensland economy, and showed an investment in the future of farming in our Great State by our Political leaders. And whilst it was not available to all, It went some small way to providing some assurance to a farm’s future, and hence some confidence in the Agriculture sector, and providing a “shot in the arm” investment for Rural Communities through new employment and new industry.

2. Re-introducing Reverse Onus-of-Proof

The compliance provisions recommended to be reinstated have been the cause for many a landholder to go through lengthy and costly legal battles, over things that at times have been outright ridiculous and the result of incorrect mapping and heavy handed-ness from a Government that appears to have little idea of good land management policy.

The inaccuracy of the mapping has been a concern for a long time (since the Vegetation Management Bill was introduced in 1999). The ability of landholders to get access to up-to-date and accurate maps and information is impeded by the lack of on ground staffing and support from DNRM in regional areas. The reliance is on on-line access to mapping and information, which is not always easily accessible due to data and Internet restrictions in the bush. When the maps are deemed to be inaccurate, the process that is required to correct them is time consuming and at times costly, as the DNRM has limited resources to assist landholders on the ground. The services that were provided by the AgForward arm of AgForce from 2005 to 2012, and for whom I worked for 5 of those years within the Vegetation Management team, was much more helpful, but still did not get to help everyone, and due to a lack of funding was wound back. Now, when wishing to amend maps to truly reflect the situation on the ground, nearly all of the costs of providing this

information (usually through aerial photography or satellite imagery) now expected to be borne by the landholders.

Treating landholders like common criminals does nothing to promote good land management outcomes, and leads to an environment of distrust and angst in the agricultural community towards the Policy makers.

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

That no compensation will be provided shows a lack of investment in the rural communities that would have benefitted from those properties with HVA & IHVA development. Without the ability to conduct clearing for the purpose of development in HVA & IHVA areas, producers are losing the potential of future development, new industries, and perhaps may even decrease the value of the agricultural land, issues that has a flow on effects across the Queensland economy. It would greatly increase the value of our farms and beef business, and would have given us better self-sufficiency and drought proofing if we had been able to apply for HVA or IHVA. Now under the new Bill, we will never have that opportunity.

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

As I have previously mentioned, the inaccuracy of the mapping has been a concern for a long time (since the Vegetation Management Bill was introduced in 1999). On maps that I have seen, including some of our own maps in the past, many of the areas that have been deemed High Value regrowth have been areas that have been continuously maintained since the 1980s, areas that have been cleared and where no regrowth has occurred, that is, still cleared. Or even areas where the vegetation that has grown back has been woody and invasive species such as prickly acacia and Chinee Apple.

Re-introducing this layer of HVR seems only to be a “soft target” for the Government, something that will give them options for meeting targets like Kyoto protocol, without actually having to work with land managers to achieve anything. When it was introduced the first time it was hastily “desk top” mapped, and had many issues with accuracy, and I doubt that any ground truthing would have been conducted between then and now to improve it.

Reintroducing this layer of regulation will be a nightmare for land managers in the increase in red tape allowing them to conduct weed control, erosion control, thinning of thickened ecosystems and maintaining a profitable, production farm.

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.

Careful and wise land management is called for in streamline zones to prevent issues such as weeds, erosion and woody thickening, and I believe that selective thinning and mechanical removal of weeds has proven to be a great tool (following guidelines under the Water Act & Current VMA). These proposed regulations will strip Landholders of their ability to manage their streams and creek areas well, and I believe may even lead to detrimental effects on the Great Barrier Reef's health.

Whilst it is important to preserve some trees in riverine and stream areas for soil stability and habitat, the inability of landholders to control woody thickening in streamline areas will result in severe consequences in relation to weed and pest animal control. Leaving an untouchable buffer zone of at least 50m from any mapped stream is a very large area, and provides the perfect environment for weed species such as Parkinsonia, Rubber vine, Lantana and Chinese Apple to thrive. When these weeds become dense stands, mechanical intervention can be a most successful tool to assist in their eradication, where chemical means alone is not having the desired outcome.

Woody thickening of native species also occurs when the ability to control them is suddenly removed, resulting in less grass and ground cover, which then results in higher erosion, as it is the grass which is holding the topsoil, not the tree roots. These dense stands of vegetation become havens for pest species such as pigs, which are in themselves a danger to the stream health due to their rooting and wallowing behaviours.

On our farm in the Central Highlands, the reintroduction of High Value regrowth mapping Category C and broader Category R will lead to a decreased ability to manage and eradicate weeds which is a poor land management outcome. It will also lead to a decreased potential for future development, which may reduce the value of the farm.

The introduction of these broader guidelines for Category R appear to be a blatant "Band-Aid" fix. I believe that the Government would be better involved by investing more time and money in assisting with better land management practices through the BMP programs that are being developed and implemented by many of the industry groups such as Cotton, Cane, Beef & Horticulture, and that look to better address Reef outcomes rather than simply "locking up" the waterways.

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

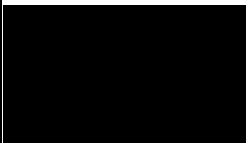

The big concern that I have as a Landowner, and someone who previously worked for an industry body assisting Landowners to correct their maps and apply for clearing permits under the VMA, is that the Palaszczuk Government is more concerned with "grabbing" votes where they can, the Greens and Urban vote particularly, than they are with promoting the adoption of good land management practices. The rural sector and Agriculture particularly, will be hardest hit by the Re-introduction of these regulations, and as the ones at the forefront of most of our environmental issues (weeds, pest animals, erosion, extreme bushfire events and water quality issues), the Government should rather be encouraging and supporting of the important Land management

and Protection services that we provide to the greater Australian Community, and Economy, all the while trying to maintain productive and profitable farm businesses.

Here on our farm we have fenced out areas that are deemed to be of high environmental importance (Natural springs) in order to protect the areas and provide better water quality for our stock by pumping and piping from those Springs. We invest a very significant amount of time, labour and money spraying weeds (Prickly Acacia, Parkinsonia and Rubber vine) to the enhancement of our environment here in the Cooper Creek Catchment. We carefully manage our stock numbers in accordance with our seasonal conditions, and still have retained relatively good land condition and pasture recovery after small rainfall events, even despite this horrendously drawn-out drought we are currently experiencing. We carefully manage encroaching woody vegetation in our grassland communities, and control pest animal species. We spend a significant amount of money trucking in weed-seed free fodder to feed to our stock in dry times, but believe that if we were able to develop a small area to carefully managed irrigation of our own fodder crops, that this would be a better outcome for us financially, and the environment. That it would be drought-proofing our business and adding value to our farm. The current self-assessable codes have been easy to use and practical to follow, and are a good example of how the Government should be working with Landholders to address woody vegetation issues.

If the Bill gets passed in 2016, I am afraid that it will become a gateway for the re-introduction of the Draconian VMA legislation introduced by the former Labour government. That the practical and workable guidelines (including the self-assessable codes which allow for the thinning of thickened ecosystems and clearing of encroachment in grassland communities, two major issues here in the Central West of Qld) will be thrown out the window, and we will again be burdened with the red tape of permits, and little or no help to assist landholders to do the right thing provided by government agencies.

Good land management should be rewarded and encouraged, not penalised as it will be through the re-instatement of this Bill.

Signed:	 Genevieve Hawkins
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