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Submission to the Queensland Agriculture and Environment Committee Inquiry into the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016.

Dear Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016.

Greenpeace Australia Pacific supports the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016. Greenpeace Australia Pacific is the Australia/Pacific branch of the global environmental organisation Greenpeace whose goal is to ensure the ability of the earth to nurture life in all its diversity. We have over 300,000 supporters and over 85,000 regular financial contributors in Australia. We are currently campaigning for a safe climate, to protect the Great Barrier Reef, and to protect and restore forests in the region. We support this proposed legislation as an important measure for protecting the Great Barrier Reef, Queensland's native forests and woodlands, and our climate from the devastating impacts of broadscale clearing.

Under the current regulatory regime, land clearing in Queensland is increasing at an alarming rate, destroying established and endangered ecosystems, producing major emissions and contributing to sedimentary run off which is harming the Great Barrier Reef (GBR). The establishment of greater protections for remnant and high value regrowth vegetation areas, the cessation of 'high value agriculture' approvals, and the restriction of land clearing in GBR catchment areas, would all be significant steps in addressing these issues. However, while Greenpeace Australia Pacific supports the proposed legislation, we believe it does not go far enough to addressing these issues.

The extent of the land clearing problem.

Since colonisation, Australia has lost nearly 40% of its forests and native vegetation, and much of what remains is highly fragmented.[1] Trees that stood for centuries have been pulled down, and bushland that endured fire, floods and drought has been flattened.

Comparing national land clearing rates[2] with the data included in the recent Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) report[3], it is clear that Queensland is currently the greatest contributor to ongoing vegetation loss in Australia. For most years on record, the level of tree clearing in Queensland is greater than all the other states and territories combined. In 1999 2000, a staggering 700 000 hectares of land was cleared in Queensland. This amount would have placed Queensland alone among the top 5 countries contributing to deforestation according to the average rates included in the United Nations Forest Resources Assessment.[4/5]

Realising the magnitude of this problem, the Queensland government enacted the Vegetation Management ACT 1999 and brought in a number of additional restrictive measures over the ensuing decade designed to curtail Queensland's extreme rate of deforestation. These policies proved successful, as annual clearing rates dropped successively throughout this period.[6] But in 2013, many of these measures were discarded by the Newman Government. Since then, land clearing has rapidly increased. The most recent SLATS data indicates that 296 000 hectares of bushland were cleared in 2013 14; three times as much as in 2009 10 under the former vegetation management framework.[7] This is an unacceptable rate of tree destruction, particularly in a context where such a high proportion of Australia's native vegetation has already been lost.

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[1] Bradshaw, C. 2012. Little left to lose: Deforestation and forest degradation in Australia since European colonization. *Journal of Plant Ecology*. Vol. 5, pp.109–20.

[2] Australian Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency. Drivers of land clearing in Australia. Figure 2. http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/pages/63b569ff-ae63-4d7b-be54-16f2e79900e0/files/nga-factsheet3.pdf

[3] Queensland Department of Science, Information Technology and Innovation. 2015. Land cover change in Queensland 2012–13 and 2013–14: a Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) report. DSITI. Brisbane. Table 4, p. 34. https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/8d2f982c-7a5b-41fa-935e-5f0ea4f65f9a/resource/db43b755-0a44-4b50-8d76-51c5c55da357/download/slatsreport201214.pdf

[4] United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. 2001. Forest Resources Assessment 2000. UNFAO. ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/003/y1997e/fra%202000%20main%20report.pdf

[5] Australian Conservation Foundation. 2001. Australian Land Clearing, A Global Perspective: Latest Facts & Figures. ACF. Melbourne: Table 2, p. 4. https://www.acfonline.org.au/sites/default/files/resources/au_land_clearing.pdf

[6] Queensland Department of Science, Information Technology and Innovation. 2015. Land cover change in Queensland 2012–13 and 2013–14: a Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) report. DSITI. Brisbane. Table 4, p. 34. https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/8d2f982c-7a5b-41fa-935e-5f0ea4f65f9a/resource/db43b755-0a44-4b50-8d76-51c5c55da357/download/slatsreport201214.pdf

[7] Ibid.

Unrestricted land clearing is decimating established and endangered ecosystems.

The 2013 14 vegetation losses included 103,000 hectares of old growth habitat and 28 000 hectares of high value regrowth.[8] Given the high proportion of Australia's native forests and woodlands that are degraded, it is essential that we protect the native forests that remain. Land clearing in Queensland has profound impacts on native wildlife. It is estimated that between 2012 and 2014, 40 000 hectares of koala habitat was destroyed.[9] Not surprisingly, recent surveys indicate severe declines in koala population.[10/11] It is forecast that at this rate, koalas will disappear from some parts of the state within a decade.[12] Devastatingly, the koala case is not unique. WWF's Dr Martin Taylor identified over 200 other threatened species which have been impacted by large scale land clearing in Queensland.[13]

The federal government devotes extensive resources to programs aimed at regeneration of native vegetation. The National Landcare Programme, for example, aims to replace 20 million trees by 2020 at a cost of over $40 million.[14] However, in the last year alone, land clearing in Queensland would have brought down more trees than will be planted throughout this entire program. Endangered species will not recover if their habitat is being destroyed faster than it is being restored. Moreover, it will take decades for new plantings to provide the same environmental benefits as mature vegetation. Prevention must be the primary focus.

Queensland land clearing is a major source of Australia's emissions, driving climate change.

When cleared vegetation is burned or left to decay, carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are released. Before being cleared, this vegetation was sequestering carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Thus, land clearing has a two fold effect in increasing net emissions. Whilst many Australian states and territories are

[8] Ibid. Table 8, p. 41.
[9] WWF Australia. 2016. More than 40,000 hectares of koala habitat cleared after Qld land clearing controls weakened. 17 February. Accessed 25 April 2016. http://www.wwf.org.au/
[10] Threatened Species Scientific Committee. 2012. Commonwealth Conservation Advice on Phascolarctos cinerus (combined population in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australia Capital Territory.) http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicspecies.pl?taxon_id=85104
[11] Koala Policy and Operations, Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management. 2012. Koala Coast: Koala Population Report 2010. DERM, Brisbane. http://www.koalatracker.com.au/_literature_117598/Koala_Coast_Koala_Population_Report_2010.
[12] Maron, M et al. The Conversation. 2015. Land clearing in Queensland triples after policy ping pong. 18 March. Accessed 25 April 2016. https://theconversation.com/land-clearing-in-queensland-triples-after-policy-ping-pong-38279
[13] WWF. Nationally listed threatened species with more than 2ha of habitat lost due to clearing in Queensland 2012-2014. https://www.google.com/fusiontables/data?docid=1OFKZHkd74eEmma0X6-aUsaUQ1YuKgeEKGJWVaFk0#map:id=3
[14] National Landcare Programme. 20 Million Trees. http://www.nrm.gov.au/national/20-million-trees

regenerating vegetation at a rate faster than clearing, Queensland continues to experience massive net vegetation losses.

The Vegetation Management Act of 1999 and successive measures proved effective in reducing the unbridled rates of land clearing that were occurring at the time. By 2012, Queensland's land sector emissions had dropped to a level of 15 million tonnes per annum.[15] However, as a result of the 2013 deregulation, according to the Queensland Government's recent calculations, annual emissions are now estimated to have climbed to 38 million tonnes carbon dioxide equivalent (Mt CO2 e) in 2015 and are forecast to increase further still.[16]

Ceasing land clearing for 'high value agricultural' would be a substantial step in reducing emissions. WWF has calculated that about 112 403 hectares of remnant vegetation has been pre approved for this purpose, of which about 11 000 hectares have so far been cleared to date.[17] Clearing the remainder would produce carbon dioxide emissions of at least 11.7 million tonnes,[18] negating approximately 25% of the carbon abatements the Federal government purchased under the Emissions Reductions Funds at a cost of $660 million.[19] Based on recent data, the Wilderness Society has calculated that Emissions from tree clearing in Queensland in 2013–14 were 36 Mt CO_2e. At this rate, it will take just 18 months for tree clearing in Queensland alone to negate the entire LULUCF abatement achieved to date by the ERF.[20] If Australia is to reduce its emissions rapidly, in order to make its contribution to global emission reduction efforts, then stopping the clearing of native forests and trees is a critical part of that effort.

Land clearing in catchment areas is damaging the Great Barrier Reef.

The former government's retraction of the Water Act's riverine protection framework has resulted in a proliferation of clearing in catchment areas. Of the 296 000 hectares of vegetation destroyed in 2013 14, 105 000 were located in Reef catchment areas; up

[15] Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Protection. 2016. Carbon Pollution Projections: Queensland's baseline greenhouse gas emissions projections to 2030. Brisbane. Appendix 1, p. 8. http://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/assets/documents/climate/carbon-pollution-projections.pdf
[16] Ibid.
[17] Taylor, M. 2015. Bushland destruction rapidly increasing in Queensland. WWF Australia, Sydney: p. 15. http://awsassets.wwf.org.au/downloads/fl024_bushland_destruction_rapidly_increasing_in_queensland_16sep15.pdf
[18] Ibid.
[19] Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2015. Fact Sheet: Emissions Reduction Fund. DPMC. Canberra. https://www.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Emissions%20Reduction%20Fund.pdf
[20] Climate Change and Australia's Tree Clearing Crisis (2016) https://www.wilderness.org.au/dozers-need-stop#sthash.nb2K2kK4.dpuf

from 31 000 hectares in 2008–09.[21] Riparian vegetation prevents soil erosion and reduces the amount of sediment runoff entering waterways. Thus, clearing along rivers and channels significantly deteriorates water quality. The 2015 Great Barrier Reef Water Science Outlook identified land based run off as the most immediate danger to the condition of the Reef. Alluvial water inhibits the penetration of light to coral and sea grass and nutrients and pesticides originating from cleared catchment areas pose a toxic threat to many marine organisms.

The federal government has committed hundreds of millions of dollars to improve Reef water quality. Ongoing clearing of catchment vegetation will undermine advancements these programs aim to achieve. Under the current regime, three priority catchment areas have been protected (Burdekin, Mackay Whitsunday and the Wet Tropics). Meanwhile two major catchments in the South have not (Burnett Mary and Fitzroy). Tellingly, the 2014 Reef Outlook highlights that it is in the southern part of the reef that water deterioration is most prominent.[22] The Reef 2050 Long Term Sustainability Plan articulates the necessity to halt land clearing in all catchment areas. The Queensland government has made a commitment to this plan.[23] This commitment must be upheld, and every effort must be made to ensure the vitality of the Great Barrier Reef.

While beyond the scope of this Bill, Greenpeace also wishes to repeat its long held position that if the Queensland Government holds the objectives of (1) reducing emissions for which the State of Queensland is responsible and (2) arresting the declining health of the GBR, then it should cancel the approval of the Carmichael mega coal mine.

<u>The current framework has significant shortcomings.</u>

The government commissioned independent inquiry into the Olive Vale Fairview Station application to clear 33 000 hectares concluded that it failed to meet the land suitability and financial criteria to qualify as high value agriculture, and subsequently,

[21] Queensland Department of Science, Information Technology and Innovation. 2015. Land cover change in Queensland 2012–13 and 2013–14: a Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) report. DSITI, Brisbane: Table 17, p. 67. https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/8d2f982c-7a5b-41fa-935e-5f0ea4f65f9a/resource/db43b755-0a44-4b50-8d76-51c5c55da357/download/slatsreport201214.pdf

[22] The Great Barrier Reef Water Science Taskforce. 2015. Current Situation Analysis - July 2015. Government of Queensland. p. 9. http://www.gbr.qld.gov.au/documents/taskforce-situation-analysis-july2015.pdf

[23] Miles, S, Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection and Minister for National Parks and the Great Barrier Reef. March 24 2016 Media Statement - One Year Anniversary of Reef 2050 Plan. http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2016/3/24/one-year-anniversary-of-reef-2050-plan

should not have been approved.[24] The independent assessor also raised the concern that there are no checks to confirm the sowing of crops actually takes place on cleared land. Of similar concern, is that the current thinning code sets seemingly arbitrary thresholds for vegetation density. This allows for intact forests and endangered ecosystems to be cleared down accordingly. Under this code, some bushland areas have been cleared down to 25% of their original extent.[25]

Conclusion and recommendations.

In summary, Greenpeace Australia Pacific supports this legislation because it will reduce the amount of clearing of Queensland's declining forests and bushlands; ensure greater protection for established and endangered ecosystems; reduce Australia's greenhouse gas emissions; and reduce clearing in GBR catchments, which will reduce sedimentary run off that is harming the Great Barrier Reef. Whilst welcoming the provisions in this bill, Greenpeace Australia Pacific believes there must be greater scientific rigour in the determination of the thinning code clearing threshold; and clearing not covered by this Bill will need to be addressed.

While beyond the scope of this Bill, Greenpeace also wishes to repeat that if the Queensland Government holds the objectives of (1) reducing emissions for which the State of Queensland is responsible and (2) arresting the declining health of the GBR, then it should cancel the approval of the Carmichael coal mine.

Yours sincerely

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[24] Thompson, W.P. 2015. Olive Vale Fairview Station Natural Resource Review for the Queensland Department of State Development.
http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/documents/tableOffice/TabledPapers/2015/5515T567.pdf

[25] Taylor, M. 2015. Bushland destruction rapidly increasing in Queensland. WWF Australia, Sydney: p. 25.
http://awsassets.wwf.org.au/downloads/fl024_bushland_destruction_rapidly_increasing_in_queensland_16sep15.pdf