



## CATHOLIC JUSTICE AND PEACE COMMISSION OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF BRISBANE

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### **Submission on the Vegetation Management (Re-instatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016**

The Catholic Justice & Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Brisbane is a body of over 30 years standing. It is authorised by the Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane to, among other things, advocate for sound public policy including in the area of the protection of the environment.

In that capacity, the Commission strongly supported the introduction of legislation to stop broadscale land clearing in 2004 in Queensland. The annual rate of land clearing at that time was a frightening 450,000 hectares. Major objectives of that legislation were the prevention of land degradation and loss of biodiversity and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

We were horrified to discover that the State wide Land Cover and Tree Study for 2012 to 2015 indicated that the removal of these protections by the Newman Government led to an almost doubling of land clearing in Queensland from 153,638 hectares to almost 300,000 hectares annually. Land clearing rates are climbing to those levels which applied in the time leading up to the 2004 legislation. This is an unacceptable level which, if allowed to continue, will lead to serious consequences.

The Commission applauds a number of the protections which the present Bill proposes:

- The re-introduction of protections for high value re-growth on both Aboriginal and freehold land;
- The restoration of protection for trees next to river banks;
- The extension of protection provisions for trees next to river banks in all six Great Barrier Reef catchment areas;
- The removal of "high value agriculture" as an acceptable reason for the issuing of a permit to clear large tracts of remnant woodlands;
- The restoration of the presumption that landholders are responsible for land clearing that takes place on their property and the removal of the provision which enables landholders to claim that land clearing was carried out in error;
- The inclusion of a retrospective provision to pre-empt large scale tree clearing and a rush of land clearing applications in a bid to beat the coming into force of the legislation.

The combined effect of these provisions will be enhanced protection of important areas of woodlands and the habitats of vulnerable fauna and flora. The provisions will also reduce the threat to the Great Barrier Reef caused by increasing rates of sediment discharge into the waters of the Reef.



It is also clear that increasing rates of land clearing will increase greenhouse gas emissions. We have seen the appalling level of coral bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef this year as a result of rising ocean temperatures and acidity, both of which are consequences of rapidly accelerating climate change.

We also point out that rising sea levels attributable to climate change are causing enormous distress and challenges to a number of Torres Strait Islander communities.

Ensuring that land clearing rates are sustainable is vital to Australia meeting its COP 21 commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Broadscale land clearing at present levels in Queensland will seriously reduce the capacity to remove carbon pollution from the atmosphere.

Queensland's Catholic Bishops reminded us of the importance of protecting the Great Barrier Reef in their 2004 pastoral statement, *Let the Many Coastlands Be Glad*. Pope Francis challenged us all in his 2015 encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, to take action to protect important ecosystems, prevent the loss of biodiversity, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to support vulnerable peoples affected by serious environmental damage like those in the Torres Strait currently facing the threat of climate induced sea level rise. In the light of these challenges issued by our Church's leaders, our Commission feels duty bound to publicly appeal for action by the Parliament of Queensland to control land clearing practices which result in immense environmental harm.

We are facing serious environmental challenges now and action must be taken to halt this damage, but we also owe it to future generations to protect the natural heritage which we will leave them.

Our Commission urges the Committee to support the provisions of the legislation so that further damage to vital ecosystems on the mainland and in the Great Barrier Reef can be halted. We also encourage the Committee to support the legislation as a contribution to supporting vulnerable Torres Strait Islander communities now and to safeguarding the legacy we leave future generations of Queenslanders.



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**On behalf of the Catholic Justice & Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Brisbane**



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