



Creating a compassionate world

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Agriculture and Environment Committee

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Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016

Submission on behalf of Animal Liberation Queensland

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

Animal Liberation Queensland (ALQ) is an independent animal advocacy organisation founded in 1979. ALQ is a not-for-profit organisation in the state of Queensland and a registered charity. ALQ campaigns on a broad range of animal protection issues and represents the interests of all animals. More information is available at www.alq.org.au.

Summary

ALQ would like to provide input on the issue of land-clearing from an animal protection perspective. We are deeply concerned about the impacts and scale of tree clearing on our native wildlife, both on land and in marine and freshwater ecosystems.

These impacts are both direct (habitat destruction) and indirect (climate change), and have been taking place on a vast scale.

We would also like to make explicit that animal agriculture is a huge part of the problem, responsible for the majority of our native bushland clearing.

Land-based wildlife

The strengthening of land-clearing protections is urgently overdue if we are to protect habitats for Queensland's precious wildlife.

According to Bush Heritage Australia, nearly half our mammal species, including some wombats, wallabies and bandicoots, are already either extinct or threatened with extinction as a result of land clearing, habitat destruction and other threats.

We know from Federal Environment Department figures that koala numbers declined by 42% across Queensland and NSW from 1990-2010, but by a shocking 68% on the Koala Coast south-east of Brisbane. This is simply unacceptable for a species formally listed as vulnerable.

There is a vast list of other threatened species of flora and fauna whose habitat has been rapidly destroyed by land clearing, including the Northern Quoll, Greater Bilby, Mahogany Glider, Northern Bettong, the Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby, and the Red Goshawk to name but a few.

Analysis from WWF Australia reveals that 211,820 hectares of the bushland cleared in the period between 2012-2014 was habitat where 61 threatened animal species are known to occur or are likely to occur, together with 139 threatened plant species that are integral to these ecosystems. This staggering loss included 40,312 hectares of koala habitat¹.

It is estimated that tens, if not hundreds of millions of animals are killed every year in Queensland as a result of land clearing. Precise numbers are not known, but the best available data indicates that approximately 223 native vertebrate mammals, birds and reptiles are killed per hectare cleared².

We also know that rescue groups in Queensland have reported substantial increases in wildlife rescue cases over the past three years, with habitat loss from land clearing identified as the main driver of the upsurge³.

Marine and freshwater wildlife

Sadly, the repercussions of land clearing and terrestrial habitat modification are not limited to land-based animals. The Great Barrier Reef receives runoff from many major catchments and clearing results in soil and chemical runoff which negatively influences the quality of freshwater flowing into the Great Barrier Reef ecosystem⁴.

Increased sediment loads impact coastal and inshore seagrass communities due to decreased light availability. Species of conservation significance that are dependent on seagrass, such as dugongs, are therefore negatively impacted.

Agricultural runoff has resulted in the introduction of 12,144kg of herbicides into the region each year (loc.cit.). An increased nutrient load can promote outbreaks of crown of thorns starfish which has both ecosystem and economic impacts, given the \$6 billion that the reef contributes annually to the tourist economy.

Increased sediment deposits resulting from land clearing have already impacted the reef's biodiversity through coral smothering events and algal blooms. Moreover, the bioaccumulation of pollutants, such as heavy metals, in marine fish and mammals is having long term impacts on populations due to reproductive stress, neurological disorders and cancers⁵.

Despite some improvement in land management practices, land clearing and subsequent declining marine water quality continues to be one of the biggest threats to the Reef's ecosystem's resilience. 2013-14 alone saw a shocking 102,000 hectares of land cleared in Great Barrier Reef catchment areas.

Examples such as the proposed for clearing of land in Reef catchment areas at Olive Vale Station in Cape York demonstrate the urgent need for reform of the so-called 'High Value Agriculture' clearing permits.

¹ WWF *More than 40,000 hectares of koala habitat cleared after Qld landclearing controls weakened*, February 2016

² State of the Environment Indicator: BD-08 Estimated loss of biodiversity resulting from land clearing. Department of the Environment 2006, <http://www.environment.gov.au/node/22134>

³ WWF: *Land clearing causing upsurge in distressed native wildlife needing treatment*, April 2016, <http://www.wwf.org.au/?16100/Land-clearing-causing-upsurge-in-distressed-native-wildlife-needing-treatment>

⁴ Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report, 2014

⁵ www.gbrmpa.com.au: Declining water quality

Livestock a major culprit

ALQ wish to make explicit that the vast majority of clearing in Queensland to date has occurred for the purpose of animal agriculture.

In Queensland between 1988 and 2008, around 86,000 square kilometres of land was cleared, 91% of which (78,000 square kilometres) was for livestock pasture⁶.

We know that 'High Value Agriculture' was meant to be for cropping, but clearing has gone way beyond areas mapped as suitable for crops, and we have seen most of it subsequently turned over to grazing or left barren⁷.

Around 14 Mt of soil are deposited into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon each year, a rate around 3 to 4 times higher than before the land was cleared, and the greatest increase has been from intensively-grazed catchments⁸. A 2013 Queensland Government report estimated that more than 75% of total sediment in the Fitzroy and Burdekin rivers was soil lost from grazing land⁹.

The clearing at Olive Vale Station was stated as being predominantly for sorghum¹⁰ to supplement grazing operations. Sorghum grown in Australia is used almost exclusively as a feed crop (cattle, pigs and poultry)¹¹. And indeed recent reports have confirmed that Olive Vale's clearing is largely for sorghum which will be bailed to use in feedlot operations in north Queensland¹².

It is extremely concerning that despite the growing evidence of significant negative environmental impacts of livestock, government policy at both federal and state levels continue to support expansion these industries. Government policy should focus on diversifying the regional economy and put in place appropriate incentives and assistance to transition away from livestock, especially in areas of drought or where new clearing is undertaken for grazing or to produce feed crops.

Climate change

Not only has vital habitat for wildlife been destroyed, but the vast scale of recent clearing has contributed significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, and removed vegetation that otherwise functions as a valuable carbon sink. Almost 300,000 hectares of woodlands in Queensland was cleared in 2013/14 alone, equating to some 36 million tonnes of carbon release. Climate change in turn further threatens our terrestrial and marine wildlife, while simultaneously jeopardising future agricultural productivity.

⁶ Bisshop, G. & Pavlidis, L, "Deforestation and land degradation in Queensland - The culprit", 2010

⁷ WWF, Bushland destruction rapidly increasing in Queensland, 2015; and <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-17/wwf-report-critical-of-queensland-land-clearing-return/6782208>

⁸ BZE Zero Carbon Australia Land Use Report, 2014

⁹ Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education: Australia's National Greenhouse Accounts - National Greenhouse Gas Inventory, 2013

¹⁰ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-04/queensland-government-steps-in-to-stop-olive-vale-land-clearing/6521928>

¹¹ Queensland Government Department of Agriculture and Fisheries: *Overview of the sorghum industry* <https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/plants/field-crops-and-pastures/broadacre-field-crops/sorghum/overview>

¹² Cape York Peninsula grazier looks to new industry, Queensland Country Life, 27 April 2016, <http://www.queenslandcountrylife.com.au/story/3870744/queenslands-northern-most-sorghum-crop-video/>.

Why does it matter

We believe in the intrinsic worth of other species, distinct from benefits they may bring to humans. However, we also point out the immense value of the 'ecosystem services' offered by our native vegetation. Not only that, but agricultural value decreases when we denude the landscape of trees, causing increased droughts, land degradation and erosion. The ongoing destruction of Queensland's world-famous marine and terrestrial biodiversity would also damage our tourism industry, and it would be a travesty if UNESCO downgrade the Reef to "in danger" on our watch.

Comments on specific aspects of the Bill

We believe this Bill will significantly improve delivery on the purposes of the Vegetation Management Act, to reinstate effective land clearing controls, in order to prevent the loss of biodiversity and maintain ecological processes. We particularly endorse the following essential provisions:

- The abolition of permits for 'high value' and irrigated agriculture, which have enabled vast clearing of forest habitats on the pretext of economic value. Under this regime alone, we have seen approvals for the clearing of 112,000 ha of remnant vegetation, habitat to over 50 threatened species.
- Restoring protections for High Value Regrowth on freehold and Indigenous land.
- Restoring protections for trees in riparian areas and extending these to cover **all** Great Barrier Reef catchments.
- Reinstating the riverine protection permit framework to apply to vegetation in a watercourse, lake or spring.
- Shifting the onus of proof onto the landholder where illegal clearing has taken place on their land, removing the 'honest mistake of fact' defense.
- Requiring offsets in all cases where residual impact remains.
- Ensuring the amendments have retrospective effect, as experience shows that forthcoming legislative changes often spark 'panic clearing'.

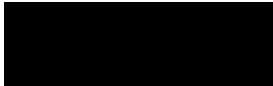
However, we would also like to see the Bill strengthened via:

- Amendments to the Thinning Self-Assessable Code which currently provides a significant loophole, allowing large-scale habitat destruction.
- An update to the definition of High Value Regrowth from the old 1989 baseline, to a rolling 20-year baseline, so that more recent regrowth is also protected.
- Provisions to ensure any exemptions are very small scale and do not apply to areas of high conservation value.
- Cancellation of all remaining applications and permits for so-called 'high value agriculture'.
- Stronger enforcement powers and resources, to make sure illegal clearing is stopped, after shocking examples such as Strathmore Station where 58,000 hectares cleared on areas mapped as habitat for Australia's rarest bird of prey, the Red Goshawk, and other threatened species, without the required Federal assessment, and orders to cease disregarded.

Conclusion

We know from the available evidence that legislative measures to control clearing are effective. For example, there was a clear drop in bushland destruction after the 2006 ban on broadscale clearing, and similarly following the 2009 reforms that restricted ecologically significant regrowing woodlands uncleared since 1989. The weakening of these controls in recent years has seen a shocking increase in clearing, and urgent action is needed. Clearing has significant impacts on native wildlife (on land, feshwater, and marine), as well as climate change. We therefore wholeheartedly support the passage of these amendments and urge the committee to consider additional steps to close remaining loopholes.

Yours sincerely,

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Chay Neal
President, Animal Liberation Qld

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