

24 March 2014

Mr Ian Rickuss
Chair, Agriculture, Resources and Environment Committee
Member for Lockyer

By email: AREC@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Mr Rickuss,

AREC Inquiry into *Environmental Offsets Bill 2014*

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the AREC inquiry into *Environmental Offsets Bill 2014*. As you would be aware, the broader issue of native vegetation clearing policy is an important issue for the sugarcane industry.

In recent times, the Queensland Government has made a concerted effort to remove unnecessary red and green tape holding back the agricultural sector. It is important that this red and green tape is removed if agriculture is to develop as a pillar of the Queensland economy. The Environmental Offsets Bill 2014 is a very good example of this red and green tape reduction.

However, the success of the Queensland Government's consolidated offsets framework is reliant on the efficiency and design of other vegetation policies, such as *the Vegetation Management Act*, the *Nature Conservation Act (Protected Plants)* and the Queensland Government's State Development Assessment Provisions (SDAP).

CANEGROWERS recommends the bill be passed, and encourage AREC to investigate the other issues raised in this submission, such as investigating how the impacts of clearing native vegetation can be mitigated, not simply avoided or offset.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to respond to AREC inquiry into *Environmental Offsets Bill 2014*. If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to contact me on (07) 3864 6444.

Yours faithfully,

Brendan Stewart
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

CANEGROWERS submission to AREC inquiry into *Environmental Offsets Bill 2014*

Summary

- CANEGROWERS supports the *Environmental Offsets Bill 2014*.
- CANEGROWERS' concerns regarding the requirement to provide an offset originate with the VMA and Protected Plants regulation, not the *Environmental Offsets Bill*.
- CANEGROWERS recommends that the Committee investigate the greater use of mitigation methods within Queensland's native vegetation clearing policies, as opposed to relying on the new offsets framework.
- An example of a mitigation practice to enhance biodiversity values is the use of the sugarcane Best Management Practice (SmartCane BMP).

Response to the Bill's policy objectives

CANEGROWERS agrees that the *Environmental Offsets Bill 2014* meets its stated objectives. Of particular relevance are the bill's objectives with regards to reducing green tape by removing duplication of environmental assessments and inconsistencies between specific-issue offset policies.

CANEGROWERS supports the *Environmental Offsets Bill 2014*.

Requirement to offset

Origin of the requirement to offset

Separate pieces of legislation to the *Environmental Offsets Bill*, such as the *Vegetation Management Act (VMA)* and the *Nature Conservation Act (Protected Plants)* requires applicants wishing to clear or "take" vegetation to provide an offset for their clearing activities.

For example:

- VMA: the State Development Assessment Provisions (SDAP) Module 8 requires an offset as one of the acceptable outcomes (AOs) to protect the environment;
- Protected Plants legislation: an offset may be required by the Chief Executive when providing a permit to "take" a protected plant.

CANEGROWERS' concerns regarding the requirement to provide an offset originate with the VMA and Protected Plants regulation, not the *Environmental Offsets Bill*.

When clearing is unavoidable – mitigate or offset?

As a cornerstone of environmental policy, it is generally accepted that clearing of native vegetation should be avoided. If the clearing cannot be avoided, the impacts of the clearing should be mitigated. If the impacts of the clearing cannot be mitigated, then the clearing should be offset.

Considering that clearing native vegetation for the establishment of agricultural cropping areas cannot be avoided, it is important to examine policies that focus on mitigating or offsetting the clearing. Current vegetation policies in Queensland that impact on the sugarcane industry are too focused on avoiding clearing or providing an offset for the clearing – the lack of capacity for farmers to mitigate the impacts of the clearing vegetation places a punitive regulatory and financial burden on farmers.

Further, it seems that the primary assumption behind current vegetation clearing policies is that expanding the area of agricultural cropping will result in environmental degradation. CANEGROWERS does not support this view. In the sugarcane industry's experience, economic development and environmental stewardship can be complimentary – particularly in regards to enhancing biodiversity values through wetland construction, streambank revegetation, aquatic habitat and invasive species control.

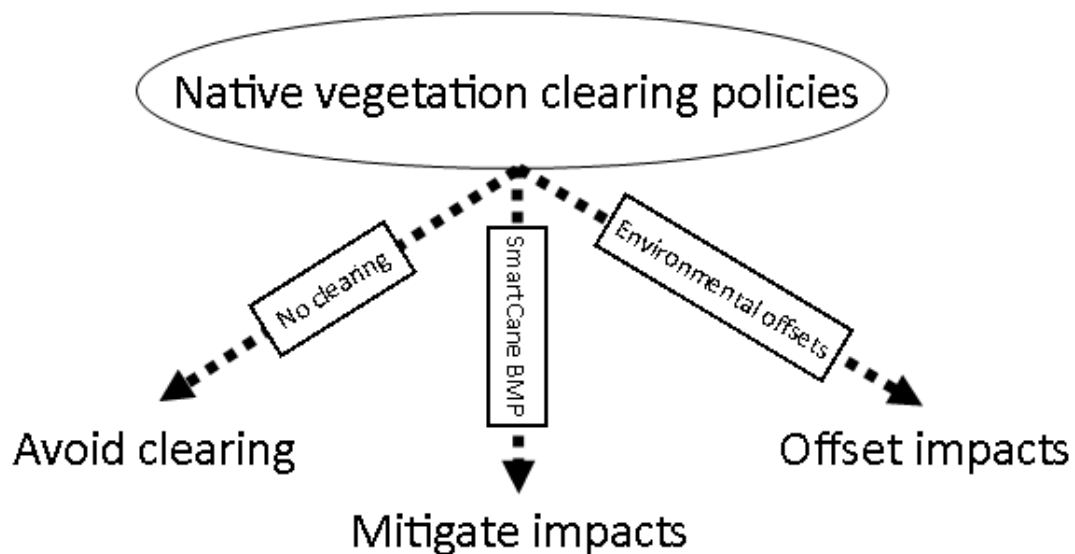
CANEGROWERS recommends that the Committee investigate the greater use of mitigation methods within Queensland's native vegetation clearing policies. An alternative solution relevant to the sugarcane industry has been provided in this submission.

Alternative solutions

Best practice environmental stewardship and biodiversity enhancement

Better biodiversity outcomes can be achieved by focusing on stewardship and enhancement, rather than replication of the existing natural environment through offsets. The potential for mitigation or improvement in biodiversity values following a conversion of land use to agricultural production should be considered in Queensland's native vegetation clearing policies. Mitigating the negative impacts or enhancing the biodiversity values of a site following clearing of native vegetation can be practically achieved by allowing proponents of agricultural developments to follow a BMP framework, instead of providing the proposed financial or physical offsets (figure 1). This could also be achieved using a combination of these strategies.

Figure 1: Using the SmartCane BMP to mitigate impacts of native vegetation clearing



Source: CANEGROWERS

In partnership with the Queensland Government, CANEGROWERS has developed a sugarcane Best Management Practice (SmartCane BMP) to encourage practices that ensures the long-term profitability, productivity and environmental stewardship of the sugarcane industry.

Within the SmartCane BMP framework, a "biodiversity and natural systems" component has been designed to protect and enhance biodiversity in riparian, wetland and connectivity areas. For example, sugarcane growers are encouraged to construct wetlands to trap sediment and filter surface run-off, plant dense native vegetation in riparian areas, develop integrated aquatic weed control plans, confine cropping land to easily drained areas and to manage invasive pests, like feral pigs and rats. These activities benefit the profitability and productivity of the farm enterprise, but also provide unique and valuable environmental services that can improve biodiversity values.

The activities promoted in the SmartCane BMP are tailored to deliver a conservation gain by directly increase habitat viability and reducing the threat of further threat or extinction to native flora and fauna. The improvement of biodiversity values and enhancement of the natural environment should be considered a mitigating factor under Queensland's native vegetation clearing policies.

Impact on the 4-pillar economy

CANEGROWERS supports the Queensland Government's aims to double the output of the state's agricultural industries by 2040. To achieve this goal, regulations that have inhibited the sensible development of agricultural cropping land must be repealed or streamlined. The most significant of these reforms has been the overhaul of the VMA.

Changes to the VMA have been made to include two new clearing purposes for the development of dry land cropping (High Value Agriculture – HVA) and irrigated cropping (Irrigated High Value Agriculture – IHVA). These new clearing purposes recognize that there will need to be a significant amount of land use change to achieve the government's 4-pillar economic objectives.

Put simply, the output of Queensland's agricultural industries cannot dramatically increase without a corresponding increase in the area of land under production – clearing native vegetation cannot be avoided. However, expanding agricultural cropping areas does not mean that clearing native vegetation must result in lower biodiversity values or species extinction, provided the clearing is appropriately mitigated or offset using best management practices, based on scientific research and continuous improvement.

Most of the potential expansion areas for the sugarcane industry are areas identified as essential habitat, of concern regional ecosystem or are in designated "connectivity areas". Based on the current policies of avoid or offset, the requirement to offset expansion of sugarcane cropping land (either financially or physically) in these areas will not be economically viable. Without provisions for mitigation under other native vegetation clearing policies, relying on offsets alone will place a significant financial and regulatory road-block for future agricultural development.

CANEGROWERS believes this outcome is not a desired outcome for the sugarcane industry or the Queensland government.

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