



Advancing Rural Queensland



Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2013

*AgForce Queensland Submission to the Health and
Community Services Committee*

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Introduction

AgForce is the peak lobby group representing the majority of beef, sheep and wool, and grain producers in Queensland. AgForce represents around 5,000 members and exists to ensure the long term growth, viability, competitiveness and profitability of these industries. Our members provide high quality food and fibre products to Australian and overseas consumers, manage a significant proportion of Queensland's natural resources and contribute significantly to the social fabric of rural and remote communities.

The objects of the *Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2013* (hereafter, the Bill) are to amend the Nature Conservation Act 1992 (NCA) and other related legislation in order to:

1. Increase access to national parks and other public lands
2. Achieve red tape reduction
3. Streamline legislative process

AgForce is largely supportive of all three of these objectives.

With approximately 80pc of Queensland under management for primary production, AgForce has a keen interest in the acquisition and management of Queensland's protected areas, with many members located adjacent to these areas and therefore heavily affected by them.

With rural land effectively providing the basis or bank for all other land uses, AgForce has been affected over the years by policies surrounding protected area acquisitions. Indeed, the previous government oversaw a policy position which used the rural lease renewal strategy to boost the national park estate, often at low values and whilst the negotiating power of lessees was compromised by their need to gain a lease renewal. While no entire properties were designated as future conservation areas under that policy, many landholders were forced into negotiating for part of their properties to be 'locked up' for protected area estate. The remoteness of these areas makes management and access difficult and forces lessees into a situation where public access becomes a minefield for the lessee who is attempting to carry on a business on the surrounding property. Therefore, AgForce is opposed to such acquisitions which cause ongoing management problems for adjoining landholders and for which there is inadequate resources for ongoing management.

AgForce's experience with a historic lack of resourcing for managing protected areas has influenced the view that the most effective management is often provided by a local landholder as part of a bigger and viable production enterprise. For many years AgForce has been a proud supporter and participant in private conservation area. In fact in Queensland, approximately 1.5% of the State is off-reserve private conservation areas (usually in the form of Nature Refuges).¹ This is around one-quarter of Queensland's total protected area estate. Whilst AgForce is supportive of controls for the best of the best conservation areas, we believe this latter approach offers a more practical management method for other lands.

¹ Pers communication. Allan Williams, Director Nature Refuges Sustainable Landscapes (DERM)

AgForce has considered the *Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2013* and provided comments on aspects of that Bill in the sections below.

Broadening the Object of the NCA

The Bill proposes to broaden the objects of the NCA to open national parks and increase access for tourism and the community by providing for the following supplementary outcomes with regard to meeting the objective of the conservation of nature:

- The use and enjoyment of protected areas by the community
- The involvement of indigenous people in the management of protected areas in which they have an interest
- The social, cultural and commercial use of protected areas in a way consistent with the natural, cultural and other values of the areas.

AgForce is supportive of these aims and amendments which we hope will provide a balance between nature conservation and other activities such as recreation and commercial where they are shown not to be detrimental to this fundamental purpose. We note however, that the second abovementioned objective fails to mention the involvement of neighbouring producers and seek that this be reflected in the final Bill.

The remoteness of some areas of protected area estate is not conducive to public access and therefore AgForce does not support blanket increased commercial and public access on these areas. Through the State Government's review of recent acquisitions we wish to work with the State in setting appropriate management on such areas.

Given that many national parks were previously run as cattle properties, we believe that in many instances and if carefully managed, grazing and conservation can be compatible outcomes on many of these properties. This has been recently proven with the provision of temporary grazing permits for graziers requiring emergency drought assistance. Whilst only a short program, the preparation of environmental management plans, identification and subsequent fencing off of environmentally sensitive areas and combined low stocking rates meant that conservation outcomes have been maintained and even improved through lowering fuel loads.

AgForce advocates that a more structured and permanent grazing permit process could provide these benefits as well as delivering a rental income, payment of rates for local government and infrastructure maintenance on these properties while not compromising nature conservation outcomes. Our experience with the latter is that where grazing permits have been allowed to expire on transitioning tenure, the condition of both the area and its infrastructure has deteriorated rapidly. Therefore we look forward to playing a role in the implementation of this practical approach which we believe can deliver more than just conservation outcomes.

Reducing the Number of Protected Area Tenure Classes

AgForce broadly supports the amendment of specified tenure classes to remove complexity and outdated classifications, many of which have never been utilised.

In particular, we look forward to the grandfathering of the 'forest reserve' tenure from future use following a review and reclassification process of all remaining forest reserves. Unfortunately in Queensland over recent years we have seen the closure of many state forests where these areas are transitioned to national park despite in many instances having limited conservation value. Many of these forestry areas had grazing permits and licenses issued over them with the lessee providing infrastructure maintenance and pest, weed and fire management as well as paying rates and rental.

Fixed improvements such as fences and handling facilities result in better land management. This is achieved through more effective control of grazing pressure and more closely matching it to the environmental conditions of local areas. The inclusion of better-spaced and located water facilities also helps to spread livestock grazing more evenly across the landscape. The construction of access roads allows for improved weed and pest and fire monitoring and control. All of these development and improvements result in an improved outcome for the State. It is therefore in both the State and the lessee's interests to have improved security of permits/licenses to facilitate this investment and encourage a greater degree of care applied to the management of these areas. With the Western Hardwoods and South East Queensland Forest Agreements and subsequent removal of both grazing and logging there were substantive community job and infrastructure losses in the associated regions. AgForce's independent research done in 2009 estimated that the grazing industry would lose in excess of \$66 million worth of production per annum should State Grazing Leases continue to not be renewed. For these reasons we support a holistic and outcomes-based review of these tenures.

Revision of Management Principles

The amendments outline amendments to the management principles of national parks in line with the expanded use for educational, recreational and ecotourism opportunities. Given these management principles must still be consistent with the natural and cultural values of the park then AgForce has no objections to this approach.

AgForce particularly looks forward to working with the department in setting management principles on the new classification of Regional Park which we believe could offer a range of benefits in addition to conservation protection.

Provision for the Creation of Special Management Areas and Resource Use Areas

As noted above, many protected areas are capable of delivering on multiple outcomes in addition to pure conservation. AgForce therefore supports the Bill's creation of special management areas which can be determined and implemented on a case-by-case situation where science supports it.

Streamlining of Management Planning Processes

As AgForce notes from previous experience, there have been very few formal management plans certified for protected areas. Further, the required process for developing those plans was

unnecessarily arduous, often prolonging a finalised plan. For these reasons, AgForce supports administrative streamlining of the development of these plans and a prioritisation which provides plans to be expedited where there are particular cultural or natural resources or values

Reducing the State's Exposure to Liability to Incidents occurring on QPWS Land

Given many of our members neighbour protected areas they at times will access it for a range of reasons which may include mustering cattle which have escaped through fences and constructing firebreaks or assisting in burn offs. In these instances AgForce does not support immunity of the State where an incident has occurred through no fault of the landholder. In particular, AgForce requests clarification on whether immunity will extend to the abovementioned situations and stresses that in these instances the State cannot be granted immunity.

Amendments to the *Forestry Act 1959*

AgForce is supportive of the grandfathering of the timber reserve tenure and more particularly, looks forward to discussing with the State the future of forestry areas. AgForce has not been involved in the scientific review of acquisitions and tenures but as a neighbour and often user of these areas we are keen to work with the State to arrive at a practical suite of well-managed lands.

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