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STATE DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE  
AND INDUSTRY COMMITTEE

**Submission on Proposed Changes to  
Vegetation Management Laws**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Queensland's vegetation management laws and their effects on rural industry.

**Background**

I have been involved in the pastoral industry all of my life, growing up on a beef cattle property, Spring Creek, in the Einasleigh Uplands bio-region and leaving there in 1973 to relocate to a property on the Mitchell grass downs near Winton. When I left Spring Creek we effectively managed the herd mustering with horses and a light aircraft to spot. Fifteen years later, helicopter mustering was essential combined with men on horseback. This change in management was due entirely to the thickening of vegetation following the wetter years of the 1970s.

Our family business operated a property (Mulgrave) in the Barcaldine/Blackall area from 1994-2002 where we developed Gidgee scrub country and managed regrowth, experiencing first hand the tightening of restrictions on vegetation management to the point where it became very difficult to sustainably manage the vegetation on the property – one of the reasons for our selling the property in 2002.

Our family partnership now operates Cathedral, north-west of Winton, a property with a mix of Mitchell grass downs, Gidgee grassland, Gidgee scrub, flood-out country, lateritic hills and escarpments. It is currently experiencing aggressive encroachment and thickening of Gidgee to the point where carrying capacity is becoming severely prejudiced.

We have not sought to obtain control permits because the methods of control are not cost effective given the gross margins currently available in the beef industry and the expected productivity improvement could not be justified by the expense. The only method of control that I believe is economic in those circumstances is chaining with two machines.

**The Problem**

The existing legislation governing vegetation management in Queensland was introduced by the Beattie Labor government accompanied by a blitz of publicity extolling the virtues of preserving biodiversity and claiming that the legislation was vital to achieve this goal. This campaign was based on emotion supported by environmental groups who vastly exaggerated and misrepresented the real picture. They totally ignored science and natural history which pointed to the fact that much of the present grazing lands in Queensland had experienced, over the past one hundred and fifty years, a steady thickening of vegetation.

This is clearly evidenced by the journals of the early explorers and the earliest aerial photography programs (early 1950s) as well as more recent documentation of vegetation

encroachment and thickening following the wet years of the 1970s. Today, anyone with even the most basic training in Botany can identify clear evidence of vegetation thickening as they drive the highways of inland Queensland, in full view of stands of Eucalypts and Acacia with densities of 1000 or more trees per hectare, and perhaps ninety per cent being younger than fifteen to twenty years of age.

It has long been recognised by botanists and ecologists that much of Australia has evolved during the last few million years under a regime of periodic fire. Since European settlement and the introduction of sheep and cattle, accompanied by artificial waters (particularly artesian bores and bore drains) there has been experienced a marked increase in grazing pressure on these grasslands. This was due, not only to livestock, but also to the increase in marsupial populations in response to the removal of water as the major limiting factor in the regulation of those natural populations.

Acacia species generally are shallow-rooted plants susceptible to fire. They have a natural defence to fire in that once a stand of trees attains a certain density it shades out natural grasses, such as Mitchel and Blue grasses. Buffel grass appears to compete more effectively with Gidgee. Young Acacia is particularly susceptible to fire provided there is adequate grass to support that fire.

Eucalyptus species, having evolved with fire, have developed a survival mechanism in their root system known as a ligno-tuber, such that mature species are able to regenerate after even the hottest of fires. Young seedlings are, however, susceptible to fire whilst older trees often become infested with termites and die after a period of time. This way a balance was achieved between old trees dying out and sufficient seedlings surviving to replace them. Once fire frequency was reduced over-population occurred.

The resultant reduction in the quantities of fuel available for wildfires has resulted in a much reduced frequency of fires in the rangelands and grasslands of eastern Australia, generally.

### Outcomes

The Beattie/Labor legislation resulted in the following:

1. Because the use of two machines in clearing was prohibited, it became very difficult to manage vegetation in a financially viable manner.
2. Contractors involved in vegetation control, who had built up sound rural businesses employing families in rural areas, found their businesses were suddenly marginal and their capital investment had suffered a massive devaluation.
3. People who had had secure jobs for many years were laid off.
4. In many areas biodiversity has suffered because unchecked vegetation encroachment and thickening results in the development of mono-cultures, especially in the Gidgee and Mulga lands.

5. The restrictions imposed on land development in farming and grazing businesses has made those businesses more marginal over time, reducing their productivity and profitability.
6. Thinning permits became a marathon in perseverance for producers wishing to address their vegetation problems.
7. As rangelands scientists began acknowledging the developments mentioned in point #4, the government's message as to why the legislation was necessary switched from "biodiversity" to that of "meeting Queensland's greenhouse gas reduction targets".
8. As time went on it became increasingly obvious that the legislation was far removed from the science on which it was supposed to have been based.

### **Recommendations**

1. I fully support the introduction of a Vegetation Management regime based on a much less restrictive and prescriptive suite of laws.
2. The legislation should be framed around sound science, not emotive scare-mongering.
3. I believe that the use of two machines to manage regrowth and to carry out new pulling, where approved, should be permitted.
4. Permits for new clearing should be available provided riparian areas and other fragile locations are suitably protected.
5. Permits to control encroachment and vegetation thickening should be self-assessable, but subject to agreed guidelines.

If Queensland, as a responsible part of the global community, is to play its part in feeding the rapidly expanding populations of the developing world, a sensible balance between conservation and practical, cost effective vegetation management must be established. This is the first step in the right direction that I have seen for more than twenty years, so it is important that we get it right.

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