

State Development Infrastructure and Industry Committee

Submission No

47

From: Sally Spain [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, 11 April 2013 3:49 AM
To: State Development Infrastructure and Industry Committee
Subject: Fwd: Submission on Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill

Wildlife Queensland Gold Coast & Hinterland Branch
PO Box 2569
Southport
4215
[REDACTED]

10th April 2013



Herein please find Commentary on the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill

Formal written Copy will follow this emailed version

Our group is a conservative, senior Conservation Association, founded by Dr David Fleay and others, and is about to celebrate fifty years of advocacy, in what is now the sixth largest City in Australia.

We are shocked and saddened by the tenor of this proposed legislation, the obvious haste and shallowness of its premise and tone, its lack of scientific rigour and the perceptible attempt to cater for an ignorant, "frontier" mindset which still exists among a minority--that mindset being that the natural world is limitless, the natural heritage is not struggling to remain sustainable, that the wild areas do not provide the services which allow us and our "economy" to exist but are merely remaining places whose continuing, and possibly final destruction will provide "more."

These proposed changes must be disallowed and any further review of the Act carried out in consultation with the scientific community, whose expertise and duty it is to examine data and systems with a view to their survival--and ours.

The public consultation, which seems proposed as the legislation reaches Parliament, rather than prior, is a particularly disturbing feature in what is presumed to be a modern Australian democratic State.

With two thirds of our Regional Ecosystems at risk or of concern and with less than five percent of the State under National Park protection, the Vegetation Management Act, as it stands, was framed with a view to avoiding mistakes of the past and ameliorating the destruction implied and proven by the above cited facts.

The proposed changes, along with the changes to National Park status and the status of Protected Plant legislation, the loss and logging of scientifically assessed former State Forest National Parks in waiting and a lack of proactive procurement, protection and restoration will deliver, for Queensland, an unsustainable and denuded future.

It is distressing for a long standing and highly respected Society, such as ours, founded by luminaries of international repute, such as Judith Wright and others, used to formal and reputable regulatory regimes, Westminster separation of powers and participatory consultation, with validated scientific data duly considered, to contemplate this hasty deconstruction of validly formed former legislation and faced, frankly, with little more "justification" upon which to base rational commentary than such ill defined, vacuous and randomly emotive slogans as "green tape."

How can Queensland avoid loss of status and lack of credibility (at best) as a duly governed Australian State (an heir to Westminster governance for which some of our Nation have paid with their lives) when the proposed amendments contain statements such as "If the application involves clearing of endangered and of concern ecosystems, the applicant must show the nature and extent of anything proposed to be done as well as the clearing that will have a significant beneficial effect on the biodiversity values of the land?"

What kind of legislative change "simplifies" mapping by "replacing existing regional ecosystem remnant and regrowth maps",-- especially as the proposed changes to Plant Protection Legislation and the gaps in the knowledge base (shown by the discovery of 30 to 40 new plant species per year) will certainly mean, under this regime and the proposed movement towards the generally highly dubious practice of "self regulation," that plants will be obliterated before they are discovered --or their properties known?

And this in a Government that is looking at "pillars" of economic prosperity?

Does not redesignating on the "Simple" maps a category C which marked high value regrowth vegetation on leasehold land for agriculture or grazing to a generalized and non specific Category X imply a shocking want of knowledge or valuation with regard to the transpiration, shelter, soil holding functions, flood mitigating role of vegetation cover and imply, disturbingly, a very simplistic, even ignorant set of premises behind this legislative "push."

It might be some comfort, to some, to be assured, in this grab bag of changes towards destruction and self, and possibly selfish monitoring,, that" the Queensland Herbarium will continue to carry out its regional ecosystem mapping program." However the reassurance that "the regional ecosystem or remnant map will be used by landholders to inform them of the location of the vegetation communities and conservation status on the ground" begs the question of in what context these eager seekers would be using the maps in a regime stumbling towards a haze of self regulation and a lack of consequences for clearance.

Encrypted is, at best, the value of statements such as "The Vegetation Management Regulations 2012 will also continue to be regularly updated to refer to regional ecosystems and their respective conservation status to inform the framework. Therefore the Conservation status of regional ecosystems will still be part of the vegetation management framework and this information will be readily available." Unless real legislative will, with well defined legislative oversight and custodianship of our vegetation and the necessary regime of active identification, education, oversight, compliance and legislative consequences, is in place, we will be in exactly the same position as if there were no governance at all.

There is some reference, in the brief justifications for these change,s that New South Wales is heading down some similar path. Yet it is a proven scientific fact that a Marine Reserve, (which has just suffered retraction and diminution by that State Government), enables the consequent generation of marine life, which moves from the protected zone to enrich and increase the marine populations of the unprotected areas, with obvious implications for sustainability and fishing resources.

In the same way the Wild Rivers protection dismantling is short sighted. Apart from the protection of species, in a relatively pristine area, which species or related species may be lost in other areas subject to agriculture, industry, housing etc and apart from the intrinsic value of holding, still, an area in its near created state, when so much else is lost or diminished, the iconic status and "branding" for Queensland, is a value of such an area and is of importance economically. As economics (very narrowly defined) is one of the driving claims of this unfortunate legislative exercise, this seems a gross oversight.

Changing the lot size triggers of MCU or RaL applications from two to five hectares, with the result that fewer applications are referred to DNRM is also, in the opinion of, and with regard to the experience of this Society a grave mistake. As our area of immediate WQ interest is within the McLeay McPherson Climate Overlap we have observed many small sites which are very, and sometimes most, unexpectedly, rich in content. Our campaign at Jabiru Island helped to protect a small area which had five species of mangrove and as mentioned above important land based species cannot be overlooked, especially in a biodiversity hotspot such as South East Queensland, subject as it is to so much increasing pressure and incursion.

The duty of a Government is not to provide facile solutions but to look to our best interests and guard them---and for this they are accountable.

The matter of redefining Regional Vegetation Management Codes to allow clearing for high value agriculture is an area which requires circumspection. Clearing in Australia over the last two hundred years has lost ninety percent of our tree cover and much valuable agricultural land has been lost to housing and other projects, which have been sited on prime agricultural land when other alternative sites should have been sought. The Vegetation Management Framework and proposed amendments are justified on the fact that it has " been criticized" but this seems to be unduly dependent on a narrow range of critics, as cited, (i.e. landholders, developers , local government and other stakeholders,) and without comprehensive, best practice consultation it is uncertain how many landholders, other stake holders, varied economic interests and which local authorities and representatives are supportive of the status quo rather than hasty and regressive change.

Criticism too must accrue for claims such as "amending the Vegetation Management Act will maintain protection for our important native vegetation." As academics qualified in this area, scientific bodies and conservation groups are uniformly concerned about these changes and generally supportive of the Act as it stands (as submissions made, even in the short time frame available will undoubtedly attest) and in view of the fact that the criticisms cited above, appear to have come, in some part, from areas where fiscal self interest may be evidenced, rather than disinterested concern for the community heritage, the onus is upon the Government to justify these changes---and thus far this is not the case. Changes not embedded in community Will or widely approved interests are not generally of long tenure but, unfortunately, with the

highest mammalian extinction rate in the world and flagship species such as koalas in dwindling numbers and health, this is a dangerous the time to choose to destroy rather than conserve. The claim that amendment of the VMA to regulate clearing in a way that "allows for sustainable land use" is unworthy of 21st Century legislative credence and is embarrassing to have to respond to in the necessary dialogue between legislators and duly constituted community groups.

The vegetation maps published in the recent edition of "National Geographic," bringing Australia's koala crisis and its shocking history of vegetation loss over two centuries to the world's attention, should give a Government, that is claiming an economic "pillar" of tourism, pause, in its to possible intentions of repealing regrowth regulations on free hold and indigenous land and creating new clearing regimes for agricultural land .Food security might be more ensured by guarding the rainfall that transpiration from vegetation provides and ensuring the water tables are not endangered via coal seam gas extraction.

In view of the huge pre-emptive clearing spike which occurred before the introduction of the Vegetation Legislation it does not seem morally correct of the Government to contemplate removal of the provision that landholders are responsible for clearing on their land. The notion that land holding is a privilege and that the loss of vegetation and its dependent species is not something to be contemplated lightly on a planet where all are dependent on vegetation for oxygen, rainfall and climate sustainability still, like seatbelts in cars, needs legislative affirmation.

Most unfortunately, at a time when Queensland needs affirmation and preservation of its remarkable natural heritage (home to almost seventy percent of Australia's bird species) this Government seems to be concentrating not on creative forward looking legislation but on undoing. Additional and possibly broad scale clearing, clearing in catchments, loss of protection for near threatened species via mapping identification, no proactive vegetation legislation reform for the highly vulnerable and very valuable vegetation needing protection in the expanding urban areas of South East Queensland, including the highly threatened coastal lowlands, increased, ill advised and questionabl, Ministerial empowerment and dubious self assessable code status, unavoidable, consequential destruction of, rather than lack of proactive protection for connectivity and corridors, which was a key tenet of the State of Environment Report, are not pillars upon which we can rely for our beautiful Queensland's future.

Indeed they carry us not into the future but into a dark past. Proposed oil drilling on the Barrier Reef saw the inception Wildlife Queensland. That mindset and the ignorance and despoliation of the natural gifts we have been given, in the name of a gung ho progress which regresses, is not a scenario we need to revisit. Limited notions of development which are helping to decimate our State symbol, the koala, which still brings in its humble and beleaguered way, the overseas tourist who inhabit the buildings we develop, need to change. Respected societies such as ourselves will continue to advocate for wildlife as long as it remains. But our State symbol is numbered at an unhealthy, genetically challenged tiny percentage of the millions that gently graced the East Australian Coast at European settlement. Our State symbol. On the wane. Won't do.

per Sally Spain, President Wildlife Queensland, Gold Coast & Hinterland Branch