

Sub No 51

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STATE DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE
AND INDUSTRY COMMITTEE



10th April 2013

State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee

Lodged via email to sdiic@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee

Re: Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013 submission

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity for Terrain NRM to make a submission on the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013.

Terrain NRM is the designated regional Natural Resource Management body for the Wet Tropics region. Established in 2003, Terrain is a not-for-profit public company funded from a range of corporate, government and philanthropic sources. Current key funding programs include projects under the Queensland Government's NRM program and Australian Government's Caring for our Country Program and its key component Reef Rescue, which Terrain is administering on behalf of the region.

Terrain's key role is to support implementation of the Regional NRM Plan, *Sustaining the Wet Tropics*, by supporting action, facilitating funding and integrating effort to achieve sustainable communities, industries and ecosystems in far north Queensland. Terrain's activities build partnerships to secure the health of our natural resources including the region's biodiversity, water and soil. Terrain provides direction, knowledge and information, advice and practical support to community groups, industry, government, organisations and individuals with an interest in NRM.

Queensland's native vegetation resources provide the foundation that much of our biodiversity, ecosystem services, agriculture and tourism depend upon. Terrain acknowledges and supports the objective of the Bill to: maintain protection and management of Queensland's native vegetation resources.

COMMENTS

Creation of new clearing purposes for high value agriculture, necessary environmental clearing and natural disasters

The Bill proposes that applications to clear endangered or of concern regional ecosystems must contain information on proposed actions which result in a significant beneficial impact to the biodiversity values on the subject land.

Terrain suggests that the information should be scientifically correct and comprehensive and address threatened species and ecological connectivity in the local landscape. Terrain suggests that this provision also apply to applications to clear "not of concern" remnant vegetation.

"Sustaining the Wet Tropics: A Regional Plan for Natural Resource Management" includes the biodiversity target of "No net loss of the area of native vegetation across the region". It is

recommended that the following areas be excluded from areas that are eligible for clearing for agriculture:

- remnant vegetation that is part of a habitat network that allows species to move across the landscape, e.g. remnant vegetation that connects protected areas; remnant vegetation that is a habitat or corridor for a threatened species; remnant vegetation adjacent to a wetland or waterway; etc.
- remnant vegetation on sensitive areas such as steep slopes, sodic soils or storm tide inundation areas.

We recommend that areas allowed to be cleared for “necessary environmental clearing” and natural disaster preparation be allowed to regrow following the clearing and continue to be regulated as before. Similarly, areas that are allowed to be harvested or thinned should then be allowed to regrow as native vegetation and be appropriately managed as native forest.

Terrain is not aware of any areas where clearing to restore the ecological or environmental condition of the land was not able to be achieved through the existing VMA, therefore we are unsure of the need for amendments in this regard.

Regarding amendments to allow clearing to prepare for likely natural disasters, poorly planned disaster preparation clearing can cause worse erosion exacerbate flooding upstream and downstream and reduce remaining vegetation’s resilience to disasters and ability to recover. There are already existing exemptions that allow authorities to undertake essential management activities and prepare for imminent risk, e.g. entity exemptions for River Improvement Trusts. We recommend targeting exemptions to informed authorities rather than broad exemptions.

Removal of regulations for clearing high value regrowth

We understand that regrowth within 50 metres of a watercourse shown on the watercourse map in the Burdekin, Mackay Whitsunday and Wet Tropics catchments will continue to be regulated. Terrain supports conservation of these areas. We suggest that 50 metres be defined to mean 50 metres from the top of the high bank and apply to both sides of the waterway, and that waterways include waterways as defined under the Water Act 2000.

Protection of regrowth on waterways in reef catchments will not only benefit reef water quality, but will also provide valuable wildlife corridors, including for threatened species. However wildlife, including threatened species, also use some regrowth away from waterways to move between remnant habitats. Recovery plans for Wet Tropics endangered species, the cassowary and mahogany glider, both recognise clearing causing fragmentation is a major threat. For example, CSIRO and Terrain’s Mission Beach Habitat Network Action Plan identifies the need to protect, connect and reduce critical threats in all remaining cassowary habitat at Mission Beach, including regrowth. Detailed Habitat Linkage reports have identified that regrowth provides critical links in corridors for cassowaries between isolated National Parks. We therefore suggest that the principle of retaining regulation of regrowth in reef catchment waterways be extended to regrowth in corridors for endangered species. Endangered species such as cassowaries are often keystone species for the environment (essential to forest survival) and iconic to the community and tourism industries. Terrain can assist in providing information on regrowth areas that are known to be corridors for endangered species in the Wet Tropics bioregion.

We understand that the VMA refers to and regulates certain essential habitat for threatened species, but under the VMA, only remnant vegetation qualifies as essential habitat; i.e. regrowth is not recognised and regulated as essential habitat. As above, we suggest that regrowth habitat for endangered species be conserved.

Self-assessable vegetation clearing codes

Terrain notes and applauds the valuable stewardship role that landowners play in the Wet Tropics. The introduction of self assessable clearing codes could be used as valuable tool to assist landowners to increase their vegetation knowledge and role in managing vegetation.

NRM groups such as Terrain have valuable knowledge to contribute in preparation of self-assessable vegetation clearing codes. Practical support could also ensure that that well-intentioned weed management, thinning does not inadvertently spread weeds and introduce new weeds, leading to productivity and environmental declines and escalating management costs.

Certain plant species provide critical resources for certain fauna. We recommend that important plant species for endangered fauna in essential habitat be protected from thinning and harvesting, e.g. grass trees in mahogany glider habitat.

Creating a single regulated vegetation management map

Current mapping showing endangered, of concern, not of concern, high value regrowth and essential habitat for threatened species is helpful to many landholders in property management planning, including working with their neighbours to plan wildlife corridors. We hope such mapping will remain available on request.

The new maps will lock in regulated and non-regulated vegetation into the future, so vegetation community boundaries won't change. We know the Wet Tropics environment is dynamic and changing and mapped vegetation communities may also need to adapt and move in response to changing conditions. The maps could be expanded to include habitat and corridors in some areas to enable recovery of endangered species, and coupled with voluntary mechanisms to secure this new habitat in the landscape, particularly when the landholder and/or the public have invested considerable resources. Voluntary Declarations are an important mechanism that we understand will remain available.

Refining mapping of regrowth

Terrain appreciates that many areas of vegetation are improperly mapped as 'Regrowth' and that such areas often constitute high value agricultural production areas on properties. These areas are typically challenged successfully under application for a Detailed PMAV and deemed to have been improperly mapped and subsequently corrected. If DERM were able to continue refinement (improvement) of the regrowth mapping already in existence, this may be of more value to landscape productivity than removing regulation of regrowth.

'Panic clearing' associated with the implementation of the VMA saw the rate of clearing in the Wet Tropics jump to 2600ha in 2000 and 2800ha in 2006 coinciding with the final enactment of permits pertaining to clearing under the VMA. The rapidity with which the regrowth legislation was introduced in late 2009, replacing the moratorium on clearing high value regrowth vegetation, largely prevented another round of such clearing. If the VMA is significantly repealed, another round of clearing of marginal lands may commence. Legislation has played a significant role in the reduction of clearing in this region to 174ha/year in 2009/10. This constitutes a reduction of some 93% on the rates seen during the clearing spikes in the two events mentioned above. Native vegetation including natural regrowth is a valuable asset; revegetation costs \$30,000/hectare in the Wet Tropics and takes years to successfully establish.

Thank you again for the opportunity comment on your proposed amendments, and please do not hesitate to contact Terrain for any further information. I would like to take this opportunity to note that Terrain NRM already works closely with many landowners in areas of significant vegetation and would like to highlight the importance of stewardship across all landscape values including production, water quality and biodiversity. The VMA plays an important role in balancing these values and any amendments or new management mechanisms should ensure a whole of landscape approach.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carole Sweatman', written in a cursive style.

Carole Sweatman
Chief Executive Officer