



10 April 2013

State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000
By Email: sdiic@parliament.qld.gov.au



Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013

Capricorn Conservation Council has since 1973 been the principal non-government environmental organisation in Central Queensland, covering the Fitzroy Basin, plus the coastal and marine areas from Baffle Creek to St Lawrence.

CCC submits that the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013 requires much greater scrutiny that allowed by the rushed 10 April deadline for stakeholder submissions.

While some of the proposed VMA amendments are intended to remove unnecessary duplication of effort and conflicts between several areas of legislation the consultation period needs to be extended to enable deciphering which changes are sensible and which provisions could become covert moves to allow broad scale clearing to resume.

Removing frustration from Vegetation Management Act understanding if **all** stakeholders have a chance for fair comment, may actually lead to more people choosing not to clear areas on their properties because they no longer fear that the regulations will get tighter and tighter and feel that Governments can be trusted on their promises. Pre-emptive clearing was common each time things like High Value Regrowth regulations were whispered about during pre-elections periods. We fear some land managers will test the limits of the proposed 'simplification', particularly when 'onus of proof' is watered down.

It is critical that the Minister, in making a decision about an area of high value agricultural, should only do this with a publically released land and water management plan or similar which validates his/her actions. This would require the Department to have sufficiently qualified expert soil, water and vegetation management staffs, numbers of which have been in steep decline in recent years.

Some agricultural expansion can be validated but not, for example, wholesale expansion of *Leucaena* plantations into marginal lands (e.g. Desert uplands Bioregion), or trialling 10,000 hectares of cotton on the Gulf hinterland black cracking clays.

It is impossible to analyse within the submission notifications period the proposed Amendments against the existing Act and make assumptions on where these changes give excessive powers to the Minister and allow unacceptable practices to be carried.

CCC works closely with Natural Resource Management Groups such as the Fitzroy Basin Association and sub-catchment groups with members from of organisations such as Agforce, QFF, Cotton Growers in supporting changing practices relating to sustainable pastoral/agricultural management which support both biodiversity and sustainable concepts. The ‘quiet revolution’ in primary production practices from many producers has recognised the roles of protecting biodiversity though improved production benefits by protecting native vegetation for example and along streams, connecting corridors, rangeland country, river flats.

Many producers (some of who are CCC members) have celebrated increased beef production while allowing Brigalow¹ re-growth coupled with organic soil health techniques, cell grazing, and nature protection, (refuges) and reduced or eliminated fire regimes. Others have invested in sustainable farm forestry with the same balanced outcome.

We are concerned however that the lack of clear definitions in proposed changes such as ‘environmental clearing’ could open the door to those producers remaining ignorant the benefits of such improved practice or others who *will* push the boundaries, literally and figuratively of the hastily devised VFM Amendment Bill to the detriment of Queensland’s rapidly diminishing natural habitats. With Koalas under extreme pressure in South East Queensland

CCC supports the sentiment expressed by Queensland Conservation Council, Environmental Defender’s Office and other regional conservation groups that:

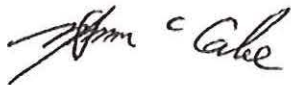
- Protecting vegetation is important for many reasons including to safeguard water quality, to protect soil quality, to protect biodiversity and to sequester carbon.
- The change would allow regrowth in other Queensland catchments, such as the Fitzroy would continue unprotected

¹ As it is a legume, brigalow has symbiotic nitrogen-fixing bacteria, *Rhizobium*, in its roots. The soils of the Brigalow Belt are of better agricultural quality than the red earths of the mulga zone or the gravelly soils of the foothills of the Great Divide. By Australian standards, the soils of the brigalow country are good dual-purpose agricultural soils.

- Further, the Vegetation Bill would significantly weaken protection of vegetation in all Great Barrier Reef catchments and other areas of the state. The preliminary findings of the Strategic Assessment of the GBRT World Heritage Area note that the biggest single threat to the reef came from land clearing and agricultural practices.
- 'Sustainable development' is not defined and should encompass ecological resilience and net biodiversity gain as reflected in the current Queensland Biodiversity (currently being reviewed and a Nature Conservation Strategy)
- The condition of Queensland Rivers and wetlands is under considerable pressure from the legacy of broadscale clearing as evidence in the loss of soils, and changed riverine country since the continued extreme rain and flood events since 2008. Any additional loss of ground cover and trees arising from the amendment bill could be catastrophic for nature and the production value of the land.
- The current legislative model of protecting remnant and regrowing native vegetation, under the Vegetation Management Act 1999 represents good public and environmental policy, and its strengthening in the mid-2000s enabled the Howard Government to claim it was meeting the implicit Kyoto carbon target which would have applied to Australia. The Amendment Bill places this achievement at risk and could embarrass Queensland international and with the Australian communities' expectations.

CCC cannot understand why there is an unholy rush to introduce the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013 before the whole community has a chance to discuss and collaborate on any necessary changes. We urge the State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee to recommend the deferral of the Bill.

Yours Sincerely



Michael McCabe
Coordinator