

Sub No 65



State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee
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Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013

The Cairns and Far North Environment Centre (CAFNEC) is the peak environment organisation for the region from Cardwell north to Torres Strait and from the coast west to the Gulf of Carpentaria. CAFNEC is a non-profit, community organisation that has been operating for over 30 years with the aim of encouraging the community to value, protect and restore the natural environment. On behalf of CAFNEC I would like to provide the below comments on this topic.

There is no doubt that protecting vegetation is important for many reasons, including maintenance of soil and water quality, protection of biodiversity and carbon sequestration. We are deeply concerned that the *Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013*, both on its own and in conjunction with weakening of plant protection regulations under *Nature Conservation Act*, will lead to massive and lasting impacts on native vegetation and the ecosystems services it supplies to our society.

As a result of this proposed Amendment, hundreds of thousands of hectares of currently protected regrowth and remnant vegetation would be exposed to clearing. The Bill will expose at least 700,000 hectares of 23+ year old forests currently protected by virtue of containing endangered ecosystems, endangered species, near watercourses or wetlands and slopes above 12% on freehold and indigenous land to clearing with no codes or conditions applied.

Our reading of the Bill raises concerns of its long term consequences, including that:

- the passage of this Bill would be the biggest roll back of environmental protection in Queensland history (if not Australian history) and would allow for unacceptable loss of vegetation cover, declines in water and soil quality and loss of biodiversity;
- the proposed amendments to the vegetation management framework will lead to the destruction of critical habitat throughout Queensland, decrease water and soil quality and decrease biodiversity;
- the Bill will allow for removal of vegetation in Barrier Reef catchments, leading directly to sedimentation and associated chemical pollution of one of our State's greatest natural assets;



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- the amendments will be detrimental to Queensland economic growth, particularly in the areas of eco-tourism, other NRM industries and lead to increased conflict between agricultural, pastoral, extractive industries, indigenous organisations, the conservation sector and landholders; and
- the Queensland Premier has back-flicked on his promise to the Queensland community about the LNP commitment, prior to the 2012 State government election, to retain the current level of protection under the VMA.

The vegetation management framework consists of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* (VMA) and the *Sustainable Planning Act 2009* and their regulations. Since its introduction in 2000, the framework, policy and codes (developed through extensive stakeholder consultation and with extensive input from the scientific community) with have been applauded by state and national environmental organisations, natural resource management bodies, state and commonwealth government agencies, indigenous organisations, local government, landholders and industry as a critical tool that to protect Queensland's native vegetation.

These vegetation communities and ecosystems include some 1386 described Regional Ecosystems (REs). Government scientists, botanists and ecologists have described all of the vegetation ecosystems throughout the State. According to the Governments' own vegetation database, over 220 REs are described as 'Endangered' and over 560 are described as 'of concern'.

In particular, CAFNEC is opposed to the below aspects of the proposed amendments.

- Allowing for clearing applications to be made for additional relevant purposes of high value agricultural clearing and irrigated high value agricultural clearing. While there are criteria that must be met for those purposes, overall this means areas such as Northern Queensland (in particular Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf country) are now vulnerable to extensive clearing for agricultural purposes. This will have adverse impacts on the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef lagoon.
- A new map system called the **regulated vegetation management map** will lock in areas of vegetation as non-assessable **Category X**. High value regrowth vegetation on freehold and indigenous land which has not been cleared since 1989 is being moved into this **Category X** and will no longer be afforded the protection it deserves. This will expose hundreds of thousands of hectares of regrowth to clearing.
- All the wild rivers provisions are to be removed from the VMA which means that clearing on those wild rivers high preservation areas will be assessed against codes under the VMA not the stricter wild rivers declared area codes. Declared wild rivers in the GBR catchment that would have decreased protection from clearing if the Vegetation Bill comes into effect.



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- The compliance, offences and enforcement provisions are significantly weakened. For example the defences are expanded to include “mistaken belief”.
- The removal of penalty provisions that allow for forfeiture of lease if the lessee has more than one conviction for a vegetation clearing offence.
- That the Minister, without any process of assessment, public consultation or even consulting experts or other department would be empowered under this Bill with declaring these High Value Agricultural areas wherever he deems it necessary.
- The proposal to include ‘sustainable land use’ as a purpose to clear vegetation which contradicts the purpose of the VMA.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this review.

Anna McGuire
Coordinator