

PO Box 269 3 Porters Lane
Nambour QLD 4560
info@scec.org.au
T 07 5441 5747 F 07 5441 7478
www.scec.org.au

SUNSHINE COAST
Environment Council



10 April 2013

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



Dear Sir/Madam

Submission on the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013

The Sunshine Coast Environment Council (SCEC) is the peak regional environmental advocacy group on the Sunshine Coast. Established in 1980, it currently represents 50 community groups working on conservation with a combined membership of over 15,000 individuals.

Context

The Sunshine Coast is one of the most biodiverse areas in Australia and a noted "biodiversity hot spot". Experiencing increasing impacts from unmitigated growth, this highly significant biodiversity is, in a regional context, in decline. Habitat is being cleared faster than it is being replaced and the enhancement of viable biodiversity corridors between coastal and hinterland ecosystems is vital as the predicted effects of climate change unfold.

The Sunshine Coast is potentially at a critical threshold, with approximately 133,500 hectares of remnant vegetation remaining - only 42% of the region's 3,127 square kilometres¹.

The Sunshine Coast is a highly sought after tourism destination largely due to its natural values and nature based experiences. Introducing the Bill as proposed is potentially at odds with the government's 'Tourism' pillar and could lead to the undermining of the important tourism industry and economy in a place with a vision mandated by the community and adopted by the Sunshine Coast Council to become "Australia's most sustainable region - vibrant, green and diverse"².

Comments

- SCEC opposes the changes to the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* as currently framed and expresses concern at the non-consultative approach adopted by the government leading to the Bill being tabled.

¹ Sunshine Coast Biodiversity Strategy-Executive Summary pg 6

² [Sunshine Coast Regional Council Corporate Plan 2009-2014 pg 5](#)



- The proposed changes are a massively retrograde step in the fundamental stewardship and protection of the natural environment.
- The Bill is yet another poor hallmark of the Newman government's ill-conceived and unacceptable rollback of environmental regulation
- The proposed amendments break a promise made by the Premier prior to the election. *The LNP will retain the current level of statutory vegetation protection. Campbell Newman letter 14 march 2012*
- The amendments as proposed could lead to damaging speculative clearing
- The intent and objectives of the Bill not only ignore the current trend of accelerating biodiversity decline but will be responsible for exacerbating a shameful and ecologically dangerous situation.
- The flawed objectives demonstrate the short-sightedness and a seemingly entrenched lack understanding, particularly at a political level, of the importance of essential ecosystem services provided by vegetation (particularly complex and non-remnant and remnant communities), healthy soils and water
- Economic and GHG reduction opportunities through carbon sequestration are lost by this backward move
- The policy settings through this Bill are completely out of step with contemporary science and sustainable agriculture practices
- What is the criteria to determine the suitability or otherwise of a proposed agricultural activity? What if a crop fails and massive areas have been clear-felled? Poor practice and non-rigorous assessment is encouraged by flawed legislation
- The Northern Australian Taskforce established by the Australian Government concluded the ability of Northern Australia *to become a food bowl is not supported by evidence.*
- At least 700,000 hectares across QLD will be vulnerable to land degradation and biodiversity loss as a result of the new vegetation clearing provisions.
- The longterm social, economic and environmental effects of new clearing provisions have not been adequately assessed.
- The Bill provides the Minister with new discretionary powers, without any economic feasibility or impact assessment or consultation with the public
- We refer to four key changes to existing vegetation protection summarised by the Environmental Defenders Office (Qld) which are of major concern to SCEC
 - Clearing applications could now be made for additional relevant purposes of high value agricultural clearing and irrigated high value agricultural clearing under section 22A VMA. While it is recognised there are criteria that must be met for those purposes, it would leave highly significant areas across the Sunshine Coast region vulnerable to extensive clearing. This is *unacceptable and must not proceed*
 - Areas such as Northern Queensland would also be unacceptably exposed to extensive clearing for agricultural purposes. *This would have unacceptable adverse impacts on the GBR and must not proceed.*

- 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 1994 is being moved into this Category X and will no longer be protected. *We understand this will unacceptably expose hundreds of thousands of hectares of regrowth and riparian vegetation to clearing*
- Removing all the wild rivers provisions from the VMA5 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. Doing so would undermine the agreed and necessary protections for wild rivers. Declared wild rivers in the GBR catchment that would have decreased protection from clearing if the Vegetation Bill comes into effect include Hinchinbrook, Lockhart Basin and Stewart Basin. *This is unacceptable and must not be wound back*
- While it is recognised some landholders are fine environmental stewards, the significant weakening of compliance, offences and enforcement provisions heralds an attitude that basically self-regulation, if even attempted, is sufficient to ensure best practice and acceptable environmental outcomes. It does nothing to encourage due regard for nature and removes necessary regulatory incentives to act in an environmentally responsible manner. Defences such as “mistaken belief” and removing the penalty provisions that allow for forfeiture of lease if the lessee has more than one conviction for a vegetation clearing offence are ludicrous.

The Sunshine Coast Environment Council does appreciate this opportunity to provide comment and would welcome further consultation to elaborate on our submission.

Yours sincerely,



Narelle McCarthy
Liaison and Advocacy