

Elizabeth A Hobson



15 – 03 - 2018

Committee Secretary
State Development, Natural Resources
and Agricultural Industry Development Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000
Email: sdnraidc@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee,

Submission to Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 ('VMOLA Bill') inquiry

I have lived in the Dawson Valley in the Theodore District for six decades and seen the devastation of the brigalow and softwood scrubs in the quest for highly productive agricultural land which, with few exceptions, has given producers a quick windfall followed by tailing off of productivity, severely increased erosion impacting the southern Great Barrier Reef, the introduction and increasing use of chemical fertilizers, the replacing of natural pastures with highly invasive buffel and leucaena now running rampant through the Valley accompanied by uncontrollable parthenium and various cactus species.

The resultant increase in production costs has contributed to a rapid decline in numbers of workers involved in primary production, as smaller operators are forced out and larger holdings are farmed with little interest in sustainability or environmental impact.

Last weekend I observed a clear-felled remnant of open scrub on the Banana Range where previous overstocking had reduced ground cover to negligible and erosion to maximal. The capacity of the rocky soil to support productive pasture cannot possibly justify either the cost of the clearing or the loss of biodiversity and shade for animals. While not knowing the financial situation of the land owner, I can only surmise that there must be a tax benefit in the expenditure (and perhaps loss) involved.

If the only reasons for clearing land were to improve its productivity on the basis of scientific evidence, there would be little need for controls on clearing. However, in a regime where wealth can be accumulated and GDP improved by damaging land, we need to manage remaining native vegetation and make its retention a profitable option, demonstrable by research.

I strongly support the following elements of the VMOLA Bill, as I believe they will significantly reduce excessive clearing in Queensland provided that they are rigidly enforced and implementation is carried out in cooperation with Primary Producer organisations and NRMs:

1. **Removal of the ability to obtain permits for high value agriculture and high value irrigated agriculture.** The Statewide Landcover and Trees Study found that 10% of mature bushland clearing from 2013-2016 happened under these permit types, with generally insufficient verification that the land was high value agricultural land, was needed for agriculture, and was actually utilised for the agricultural activity applied for; **(see clause 16)**
2. **Reintroduction of the requirement to obtain Riverine Protection Permits** to better regulate damaging clearing in watercourses **(see clauses 51 and 52);**
3. **Phasing out existing Area Management Plans** which have allowed significant clearing under lower regulation across Queensland; **(see clause 14)**
4. **Extended protections of regrowth vegetation near watercourses across Great Barrier Reef catchments, to reduce damaging runoff,** including Eastern Cape York, Fitzroy and Burnett-Mary catchments which were not protected under the VM Act currently. **(see clauses 133 and 38)**

I generally support the following amendments, however it is essential that they are strengthened by our proposed amendments to truly reduce excessive clearing of wildlife habitat, impacts to the Great Barrier Reef and climate change emissions:

1. **Improved protected of ‘high value regrowth vegetation’**, being vegetation that has grown back well after being cleared. The Bill creates a broader definition, including vegetation that hasn’t been cleared for 15 years and re-extending regulation to freehold, indigenous land and occupational licences **(see clause 38)**. I support this.
2. **However, ‘high value regrowth vegetation’ must be extended to fully meet the government’s election commitment by protecting high conservation value regrowth vegetation.** Extra amendments are needed to allow much more extensive protection including endangered vegetation species and communities, vegetation in reef catchments, riparian areas, threatened species habitat and areas where landscape integrity is at risk, particularly where the introduction of invasive pasture species and weeds pose a heightened fire risk to remnant stands of old growth native plants.
3. **Tightening of the definition of ‘thinning’ (now known as ‘managing thickened vegetation’)** is supported. The Bill now requires that thinning activities must ‘maintain ecological processes and prevent loss of diversity’. To ensure this definition is given effect there must be a requirement that it be demonstrated and independently verifies prior to clearing being allowed. **(See clauses 4 and 38)**

4. **However, to truly reduce the significant clearing allowed for 'thinning' it should no longer be an allowable activity by permit or code, particularly not for mature and high value regrowth vegetation and under existing Area Management Plans.** 'Thinning' can include clearing up to 75% of a forest under current laws and has been responsible for significant clearing across Queensland without scientific justification that this is a necessary activity at all. To wit, the clearing on the Banana Range mentioned above.
5. **The Bill clarifies that landholders may seek to amend their property map of assessable vegetation (PMAV) to re-regulate clearing in areas which were locked in across Queensland as not needing assessment under Newman Government laws.** This clarification is helpful.
6. **However, the Bill needs to be changed to *require* amendment of maps that lock in unregulated clearing of all high value vegetation.** Under the Newman Government, significant areas of Queensland were locked in under property level maps which allowed the clearing of unregulated 'category X' even though the clearing would impact mature, high value vegetation. Leaving map amendment up to the land owner will leave significant areas of Queensland where clearing is unregulated. Seeing some very senseless clearing following the changes under the Seeney-Newman regime make this amendment highly desirable.
7. **The Bill does not tighten excessive clearing allowed under fodder harvesting codes so amendments are needed.** Fodder harvesting should be limited to where there is an official drought declaration and the plan for harvesting is approved independently.

Had I seen all land managers treat their land as a precious resource to maintain for posterity, I would not be asking for regulation, but generations of producers freely given land without regulation has resulted in such costly degradation that the repair bill for our grand children will be enormous, and some precious resources lost forever. These changes are highly desirable, and I applaud our Government for taking action on them.

Yours sincerely