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Committee Secretary
State Development, Natural Resources
and Agricultural Industry Development Committee
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Dear Committee,

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

I am a former researcher and Honorary Fellow at the University of Queensland. I am passionate about the need to halt unregulated clearing of native woodland and forest. This passion is not only based on my own personal love of the natural world and its rich complexity, but on my research into the patterns, drivers and effects of deforestation over the past 15 years.

Over many decades, clearing of native forest has contributed to increasing greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, the loss of many of Queensland's unique and beautiful native animals and birds and the environmental degradation of both the land, waterways and the Great Barrier Reef. While previous clearing was driven in part by former government policies and ignorance of the full impacts of clearing, we know enough about the damage that is being caused by continued clearing to realise that it cannot continue.

I commend the introduction of this Bill to reinstate some of the restrictions on the clearing of native vegetation to protect the fauna and flora of Queensland. In particular, the removal of permits to clear for high value agriculture, the phasing out of Area Management Plans and the reintroduction of controls on clearing and protection of regrowth close to watercourses are welcome steps.

However, there are some omissions which will hinder the government's ability to address some of the underlying issues with over-clearance of vegetation in Queensland and the severe consequences for native fauna, regional climates, and environmental degradation on the land, in rivers and streams and in the unique World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef. The main omissions are:

1. Remnant vegetation

At present, significant clearing of remnant vegetation is allowed under self-assessable codes which in effect are the equivalent of letting the fox run the henhouse, and hence open to patent abuse by some landholders in the name of thinning or fodder harvesting. My work with co-authors at the University of Queensland published in 2017 showed that loss of remnant vegetation continues on a downward trajectory with the greatest percentages still being in endangered regional ecosystems (Rhodes et al 2017). If this pattern continues, and nothing so far suggests it won't, then the logical end point is that within the lifetime of a child born today, these vegetation communities and their dependent fauna will be extinct.

To address this, the existing codes need to be revoked or carefully rewritten to limit self-assessable clearing to small areas which demonstrably do not present a risk to the ecosystems and environmental conditions in Queensland. In particular, thinning should be stopped as a self-assessable action, except in limited cases where a scientific assessment is made and clear guidelines are issued. The

establishment of a central registry could make it easier to track the frequency and scope of vegetation management through amended self-assessable codes and increase transparency.

2. **Regrowth vegetation**

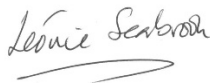
In view of the point made above about the continuing loss of threatened regional ecosystems within the existing regulations, it is absolutely critical that we begin the planned recovery of endangered ecosystems and the flora and fauna they support. To remove these vegetation communities from the endangered list, existing mature regrowth or degraded vegetation must be protected under the new legislation. There are some provisions in the Bill which protect high value regrowth previously mapped as category 'C' of 'R' on PMAVs (Property Maps of Assessable Vegetation) or along watercourses in the Great Barrier Reef catchments, and these make a good start in addressing the government's election promise to *"introduce legislation to protect remnant and high conservation value non-remnant vegetation"*.

However, the suggested provisions do not follow the government's definition of *"high conservation value" to include endangered vegetation species and communities, vegetation in reef catchments, riparian areas, threatened species habitat and areas where landscape integrity is at risk.* In particular, there is no explicit inclusion of *'endangered vegetation species and communities'* or *'threatened species habitat'*, which is absolutely essential to arrest the continuing loss of endangered regional ecosystems and fauna. The reason for this is because on large areas of private and leasehold land much of the high conservation value non-remnant vegetation falls into category 'X' on existing PMAVs and is, therefore, completely unregulated and unprotected. Category 'X' land covers 27.88 million ha of Queensland. It was estimated by WWF (Taylor, 2018) that nearly 600,000 ha (63.4%) of all clearing between 2013-2016 took place within this category 'X' vegetation, of which over a third was either remnant or high value regrowth (over 25 years old).

To address this, we need an immediate remapping of all category 'X' vegetation and re-categorization of non-remnant vegetation based on its age and the conservation status of its original regional ecosystem. If the current system of allocating categories to vegetation on properties is kept, which is probably not the wisest course, then the government must also establish an explicit mechanism for the on-going reassessment of properties which used to support regional ecosystems which are now endangered or which provide habitat for threatened fauna. This cannot be a voluntary action on the part of landholders as few are likely to take up the offer of PMAV reassessment. It needs to form part of the legislation.

I would like to appear before the Committee in their hearing for this enquiry, if this opportunity is available.

Yours sincerely



Leonie Seabrook

References

1. J.R. Rhodes, L. Cattarino, **L. Seabrook**, M. Maron (2017). Assessing the effectiveness of regulation to protect threatened forests. *Biological Conservation* 216: 33-42
2. Martin Taylor, WWF-Australia Protected Areas and Conservation Science Manager WWF-Australia Briefing 29 January 2018