



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

Submission to the Inquiry in *Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018*

The Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) is a leading Australian charity working towards the conservation of Australia's unique and diverse marine environments and the biodiversity they support. Our mission is to help protect Australia's oceans for the sake of current and future generations.

AMCS is not-for-profit charity headquartered in Queensland. AMCS has around 250,000 supporters who contribute to our work financially, by undertaking volunteer activities, and through online action and social media.

For more than 50 years, AMCS has worked through science-based research, policy development and advocacy, on ground activity, community engagement and education to take effective action to protect Australia's marine environment. AMCS has a long-standing involvement in improving the protection and management of Queensland's marine environment, including the magnificent and world heritage listed Great Barrier Reef.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the *Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018*

Queensland in the midst of an escalating deforestation and land clearing crisis, with a Gabbasized area of forests and bushlands destroyed every three minutes¹. Tree clearing within Great Barrier Reef catchments has had an impact on Reef water quality adding further stress to the Reef as it copes with the impacts of back-to-back major coral bleaching events. Tree clearing has also driven an increase in carbon emissions in the state.

¹ Queensland Department of Science, Information Technology and Innovation, 2017. Statewide Landcover and Trees Study Report 2015–16 . Brisbane; Qld Govt 'State Landcover & Trees Study' reports, 2012-16.

The SLATS report states that from 2015-16, 395,000 hectares of bushland and forests were wiped out in Queensland alone, and over 158,000 hectares of vegetation were bulldozed in the Great Barrier Reef catchment, the latter representing a 45% increase from 2014-15.

The Australian and Queensland governments have made strong commitments under the Reef 2050 Plan to protect the Reef and ensure that the World Heritage Area is not placed on the in danger list in 2020. Through the Reef 2050 Plan the Queensland and Australian governments have committed to a number of actions relevant to controlling clearing in Reef catchments including:

- EHA7: Prioritise functional ecosystems critical to Reef health in each region for their protection, restoration and management.
- EHA20: Strengthen the Queensland Government's vegetation management legislation to protect remnant and high value regrowth native vegetation, including in riparian zones.

It is important to note that the World Heritage Committee is watching the efforts of the Queensland and Australian governments and have so far been concerned with the progress made in achieving actions around land clearing and water quality. In 2017 the committee noted with extreme concern that:

"... important legislation regulating land clearing has not been passed yet, and that increased efforts are needed to ensure that all important legislation necessary to deliver the 2050 LTSP outcomes is put in place."

The Australian Marine Conservation Society can see significant progress has been made in strengthening the vegetation laws in Queensland. However we are concerned the current bill will not be enough to protect vegetation within Reef catchments and therefore not deliver on commitments given to the World Heritage Committee and ultimately not deliver on the benefits needed for the Reef.

- 1) AMCS is pleased to see that High Conservation Value Regrowth has been redefined to include all regrowth that is 15 years of age or more and cover a 50 metre protection buffer around watercourses in Great Barrier Reef catchments. *The extension of riparian area protections to the last three Great Barrier Reef catchments* is a welcome and necessary addition to this Bill. The government estimates 200,000 hectares of regrowth vegetation will now be afforded greater protection as a result. We are concerned that a 50m buffer is not large enough and would like to see more information as to how this was defined.

Recommend: Base the riparian buffer on current up to date scientific recommendations.

- 2) **Remove exemptions that may continue clearing unabated:** AMCS largest concern with this Bill is that clearing could continue unabated due to current exemptions. Category X accounts for a large proportion of the total area cleared in Queensland - one estimate has over 60% of total clearing 2013-16 as mapped exempt. This is of great concern because no consideration is given to the fact that the areas mapped as exempt may nonetheless contain remnant that has regrown back to maturity, which would normally be in category B, or high conservation value regrowth, which would normally be in categories C or R. As stated we strongly support the remapping of high value regrowth or Reef watercourse regrowth areas currently mapped exempt as new Category C and R respectively. However, this does not include areas that have been made exempt on property maps. The government has stated regardless it will not reverse areas mapped exempt on property maps. This means that the only mechanism now available to protect such vegetation is non-regulatory, through voluntary agreements with landholders. If the laws do not protect any of the forest &

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bushland currently mapped exempt, then it is hard to see how overall clearing rates will be substantially reduced.

Recommend: the Bill should be amended to remove the ability to continue to permanently “lock-in” areas as exempt on property maps. Exempt areas should be allowed to be remapped to ensure all high value areas are protected.

- 3) Finally, we are very concerned that the VMOLA Bill relies too heavily on self-assessable codes, and would largely retain these loopholes introduced by the former Newman government in 2013 for native vegetation clearing. Loopholes allowing pervasive self-assessable clearing provided the major means along with the high value agriculture loophole, by which the 2006 ban on broadscale clearing of remnant or mature bushland has been undermined.

All clearing that has significant conservation impacts, including on threatened species and ecosystems, should be required to follow a full assessment of environmental impacts and should not evade the requirement for explicit approval, regardless of who is doing the clearing or why. This assessment should take place through an independent scientific assessment process and take into account regional level cumulative impacts. Piecemeal clearing of small areas at one time is the major underlying threat to many species because the cumulative impact of clearing many small areas over time and space amount to very large areas and impacts.

Yours sincerely,



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