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**Cloncurry Shire Council
Submission to:**

**The Queensland Parliamentary State Development, Natural Resources and Agriculture Industry
Development Committee**

The Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018

From: Cloncurry Shire Council
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Primary Issues:

- Change of Definition of high-value growth
- Introduction of additional regulations without supporting explanations
- Removal of high value agriculture and irrigated high value agriculture as a relevant purpose
- Changes to the process for obtaining approval for thinning (now called managing thickened vegetation)
- proposal to withdraw the accepted development code (for managing thickening)

Type of Vegetation/Tree coverage:

The purpose of the proposed changes is to preserve remanent vegetation. On many large cattle grazing properties in the Cloncurry Shire, the remanent/native vegetation should be open grass plains with trees that promote growth of such grasses.

The Gidgee – which is a native species, is in plague proportions in this area. As a drought resistant species, it has gradually taken over country which should be native open downs with native grasses and trees that promote grass growth. Years of sustained drought, has seen the encroachment and disproportional growth of this species.

As such, the majority of tree clearing required in the North West is to maintain historical and remanent levels of open downs country. The required tree clearing is in fact to bring back the correct balance of trees and open plains. Open plains country enabled with native grass growth, such as the Mitchell grass, reduces erosion and has historically maintained good top soil and also absorbs Carbon Dioxide. Unlike more native and proportionate tree coverage, the Gidgee does not encourage grass growth around it.

It was in fact open plains country that first attracted cattle and grazing in this region. Historical records would prove that the Gidgee has encroached and become entirely dominant in a region that should be plains and open land. Traditional owners are testament to the open plains and were active in reducing weeds and other invasive species such and the Gidgee, through their well-documented practice of fire management. It is also crucial to understand the size and impact of tree clearing in this Shire.

We are fortunate to have some of the largest private single holding cattle stations in the country. Most tree clearing applications are to small areas of total holdings and their impact to tree coverage is negligible.

What is important to consider is that effective tree clearance is required to bring back the correct balance of native species and to sustain open pastures and plains. The removal of woody tree plant competition can and does increase pasture production and restores the land vegetation to a native and traditional balance.

Costs and Understanding the proposed new Laws:

The proposed changes also require costs and approvals which are cumbersome and not timely in their responses or authorisations. Additionally, the proposed Act seems to revoke the right to appeal. This is unconscionable.

With dwindling Departmental staff and offices in this region, the ability to talk and discuss these issues is getting harder. This coupled with the worst drought in history, our prime grazing and productive land holdings could be straddled with more costs and red tape, at a time where they should be supported in bringing lands back to pre-drought status, open up more pasture and restore grasslands. These proposed laws will hamper productivity and effective land management and drought proofing practices.

In recent times it has been almost impossible to find any data on regrowth. This coupled with distance and connectivity issues will make the ability to discuss and appeal decisions made by Departmental staff that are not on the ground or able to travel to see the area quite costly, cumbersome and ambiguous.

There is a real opportunity to employ staff regionally to assist landholders through the process rather than having centralised offices based in the major cities. Having offices based in the regions would be a proactive response and allow support to the landholders during the process in this, one of the nation's primary food belts.

Irrigated agriculture projects:

The Bill will have a significant impact on the potential for progression of the Cave Hill Dam and irrigated agriculture projects in the Cloncurry Shire. Our recent long-lasting drought and subsequent rain and flooding has been a significant reminder of the need for water proofing this region. Removal of the ability to apply for a development approval for clearing for high-value and irrigated high-value agriculture will limit the extent of land potentially suited to irrigated agriculture being cleared.

Ambiguity:

Another concern is the apparent rush to have this legislation passed. Poor lead time and short notice periods that are over the school holidays will mean that important submissions and representation may not be made. Our Shire is recovering from drought, flooding rains, and we now have a cyclone watch in the North, our major producers and those who will be directly affected by these new laws, are currently otherwise occupied. During recent rains many properties lost telephone and internet connections. We are concerned that the short lead time and current isolation will prevent relevant and timely responses.

The compliance to these new laws needs to be understood before it can be practically applied. Delivery of this needs to be done in manner that recognises remote and isolated holdings. Websites and access to data is not necessarily available to all.

The management of land has and appears to have become more complex with more ability to prosecute non-compliance, enter property without notification yet without an effort to explain the changes to landholders prior to the implementation of the new legislation.

Summary:

Cloncurry Shire Council seeks to remind Government that the vast North West is part of the food belt of this country. We live and operate in remote and vast holdings, with world class products.

The proposed new laws if applied, will only introduce cumbersome and difficult processes, red tape and powers of entry that have implied concepts that our regional producers are not managing their landholdings in a balanced and environmentally sustainable manner.

These new laws do not understand the vast pasture lands of the west, nor woody pasture re- growth. Our landholders seek to manage their property to maintain and restore native pasture that first attracted primary production in this area.

They seek to do this in a timely manner and not be held back by lack of access to information and compliance to data that is incorrect and ambiguous. If applied we have concerns that retrospective penalties will be applied, as determined by incorrect mapping from a desk in the South West corner of the State with limited or no application for appeals. We need to support our landholders who are 'greener than green' and already managing their holdings in an environmentally sensitive manner, with native species in correct balance.