

Dr Leah Coutts

Thursday 22nd March 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

Introduction

I am a lecturer at Griffith University and my values align strongly with those of the Animal Justice Party. As such, I write to endorse their submission in response to the proposed *Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018* ('VMOLA Bill').

The AJP recognises that bushland destruction has resurged in Queensland due to weakening of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* by the former Newman Government. Land clearing rates have more than tripled, with nearly 300,000 hectares of forests and woodlands, both mature and immature, bulldozed in 2014-15, the latest year for which data are available¹. This has led to Eastern Australia being recognised as one of 11 global deforestation fronts, the areas that on current trends will account for 80% of all global forest losses up to 2030. The current rate of clearing is the equivalent of the Gabba Cricket Ground being cleared every three minutes². In November 2017, the world's leading scientific journal, *Nature*, listed Australia in the top seven countries worldwide responsible for 60% of the world's biodiversity loss between 1996-2008³.

Animal agriculture is the primary cause of land clearing in Queensland

The Palaszczuk Government needs to take considerable measures to not only

slow, but also stop and reverse land clearing. These steps will have to address the underlying causal links between animal agriculture and land clearing. Grazing native vegetation is currently the number one land use of Queensland, with 138,703,328 hectares or 80.21% of total land mass used.⁴ The 2015-2016 Statewide Landcover and Trees Study ('SLATS') Report states that 93% of land clearing is related to animal agriculture 'pasture'.⁵ Without strong restrictions in the *VMOLA Bill*, we are doomed to repeat the mistakes made in southern Australia, where unregulated land clearing has delivered a crisis of salinity, soil loss, river degradation and species extinctions leaving taxpayers with a \$10 billion repair bill.⁶ Measures aimed at animal agriculture may be controversial or unpopular but remain necessary to have any hope in protecting natural habitat and ecosystems.

The legislation needs to recognise that land clearing kills and injures

There are currently no laws requiring those who bulldoze bushland to reduce the impacts on animal welfare and loss of life. In the late 1990s an estimated 100 million mammals, birds and reptiles were killed each year due to the large-scale bulldozing of mature bushland in Queensland, comprising: over 2.1 million mammals, including 342,000 possums and gliders,

¹ World Wildlife Fund, 2017. Tree-clearing: the hidden crisis of animal welfare in Queensland. <http://www.wwf.org.au/ArticleDocuments/353/pub-tree-clearing-hidden-crisis-of-animal-welfare-queensland-7sep17.pdf.aspx>.

² World Wildlife Fund, 2017. Tree-clearing: the hidden crisis of animal welfare in Queensland. <http://www.wwf.org.au/ArticleDocuments/353/pub-tree-clearing-hidden-crisis-of-animal-welfare-queensland-7sep17.pdf.aspx>.

³ Waldron et al., 2017. Reductions in Global Biodiversity Loss predicted from conservation spending. *Nature*, 551. 364-367. doi:10.1038/nature24295. Retrieved from <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature24295>.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, 2017. Land use by state. <https://public.tableau.com/profile/australian.bureau.of.agricultural.and.resource.economics.and.sci#!/vizhome/Landuseprofiles2017v2/Story>.

⁵ <https://www.qld.gov.au/environment/land/vegetation/mapping/slats-reports>.

⁶ Australian Conservation Foundation, 2016. Tree clearing threatens future of clean, green agriculture.

https://www.acf.org.au/tree_clearing_threatens_future_of_clean_green_agriculture.

29,000 bandicoots and 19,000 koalas, 8.5 million birds, such as cockatoos, treecreepers, thornbills, robins and flycatchers, and 89 million reptiles⁷. Furthermore, An estimated 34.1 million native mammals, birds and reptiles are losing their habitats each year to bulldozers, comprising 0.9 million mammals, 2.6 million birds, and 30.6 million reptiles.⁸ Population sizes of vertebrate species have, on average, dropped by more than half in little more than 40 years, continuing to decline at 2% per year.⁹ While the *VMOLA Bill* may reduce the rate of land clearing it fails to adequately protect animals residing in the habitat cleared under the new arrangements.

As WWF recommends, fauna salvage should be mandatory for tree clearing projects, consisting of pre-clearing surveys of native animals and the relocation of animals at risk to suitable habitat with proven capacity to absorb the immigrant animals. Spotter-catchers engaged in fauna salvage work also should be professionally trained, independent and bound by a code of practice with standard operating procedures. If there is to be any clearing, the current draft code of practice for tree clearing should be finalised and adopted to minimise animal welfare impacts through, for example, use of appropriate machinery, restrictions on the timing of clearing and fauna salvage.

We must balance economy with environment

Destruction of ecosystems represents a risk not just to resident plants and animals, but to humans as well. Ecosystems provide us with food, fresh water, clean air, energy, medicine, and recreation. In addition, we depend upon healthy and diverse natural systems for the regulation and purification of water and air, climatic conditions, pollination and seed dispersal, animal population management and diseases.¹⁰

The AJP believes humans can thrive while simultaneously reducing our adverse impacts on the natural environment and considers Queensland's current land clearing rates to be both an environmental and animal welfare disaster. We are grateful for the opportunity to comment on the Palaszczuk Government's proposed *VMOLA Bill* and advocate for greater protection of the natural environment and wildlife that inhabit it. Strong vegetation protection legislation is one component in our vision for a vibrant, environmentally friendly and

compassionate

⁷ Cogger H, Ford H, Johnson C, Holman J & Butler D, 2003. Impacts of Land Clearing on Australian Wildlife in Queensland. Report for WWF-Australia, Sydney.

⁸ Cogger H, Dickman C, Ford H, Johnson C and Taylor MFJ, 2017. Australian animals lost to bulldozers in Queensland 2013-15. WWF-Australia technical report.

⁹ World Wildlife Fund, 2017. Tree-clearing: the hidden crisis of animal welfare in Queensland. <http://www.wwf.org.au/ArticleDocuments/353/pub-tree-clearing-hidden-crisis-of-animal-welfare-queensland-7sep17.pdf.aspx>.

¹⁰ World Wildlife Fund, 2017. Tree-clearing: the hidden crisis of animal welfare in Queensland. <http://www.wwf.org.au/ArticleDocuments/353/pub-tree-clearing-hidden-crisis-of-animal-welfare-queensland-7sep17.pdf.aspx>.

Queensland. The burden is on the Palaszczuk Government to stop land clearing; the current *VMOLA Bill* alone is insufficient. The AJP welcomes the Palaszczuk Government's desire to modernise legislation concerning land clearing and encourages further reflection and improvement upon current legislation and industry practices. We address our specific concerns with the current *VMOLA Bill* below.

I endorse the points supported and welcomed by the AJP:

- 1.greater protection for “remnant vegetation” and “high value regrowth” by removing the ability to apply for a permit to clear such vegetation (clause 16);
- 2.phasing out existing Area Management Plans which are counter-productive to environmental protection (clause 14);
- 3.increasing powers and penalties to investigate and punish land clearing related offences (clauses 21-35); and
- 4.greater protection for regrowth vegetation along waterways within the Great Barrier Reef catchment area (clauses 133 and 38).

Further, I endorse the A JP recommendations below to improve the VMOLA Bill by:

- 1.halting the clearing or thinning of land associated with pasture or animal agricultural activities, including by removing exemptions for ‘fodder harvesting’;
- 2.requiring landholders to conduct an independent species audit and draft an enforceable species management plan before any clearing may commence;
- 3.requiring the presence of spotter-catchers at any clearing and enforcing this requirement;
- 4.*introducing an enforceable duty of care for landholders towards animals on land undergoing a material change in use and / or clearing either through the VMOLA Bill or a separate amendment to the Animal Care and Protection Act 2001; and*
- 5.removing *Category X* unregulated clearing from the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* and removing the need for the landholder’s consent to recategorise land.

The Palaszczuk Government has acknowledged the threat that clearing has to native wildlife, to the Great Barrier Reef and those whose jobs depend on it, to the levels of Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions and to Australia’s ability to meet its international climate commitments. While reductions in land clearing based on the current amendments are a small step in the right direction towards a sustainable future, they are too conservative given the current dire state of the environment.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Leah Coutts