

North Queensland Conservation Council

... the voice for the environment in North Queensland

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

North Queensland Conservation Council (NQCC) is the Regional Conservation Council covering the region from Bowen to Cardwell and from the Reef to the Northern Territory/Queensland Border. Our role is to act as the voice for the environment in the region and encourage others in the region to advocate on its behalf. We take seriously our role as commenting on proposed government policy and on government decisions. We trust that this submission will assist in the strengthening of vegetation protection laws.

There can be no doubting the unacceptable rate of clearing of Queensland’s vegetation, assessed to be second only to the rate of clearing of Amazon rainforest.

Loss of vegetation contributes to climate change, soil run-off and wind dispersion, damage to the GBR (from all three). It is essential that vegetation conservation laws are strengthened. The proposed Bill goes a long way to ensuring that but still requires strengthening if Queensland’s vegetation is to flourish.

NQCC supports:

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.

The ‘benefits’ of vegetation removal must be carefully and objectively weighed against the ‘costs’, taking into account tangible and intangible costs and benefits and the cumulative impact of removal.

A local example of unacceptable clearing in the Townsville region is that for the Pentland project. This involves the clearing of 19,100 hectares of land for the production of irrigated sugar cane and sorghum in order to grow food for cars (ethanol). The net cost of this, especially when weighed against the introduction of electric vehicles is short-sighted.

2. **Reintroduction of the requirement to obtain Riverine Protection Permits** to better regulate damaging clearing in watercourses.

Damage to riparian land contributes very significantly to bank erosion and sedimentation of waterways, from inland areas to the GBR. Riverine Protection

Permits must also be strongly enforced, with significant penalties imposed for infringement. Sedimentation of the Great Barrier Reef marine Park and World Heritage Area contributes significantly to the degradation of reefal waters in and around Townsville. Cleveland Bay, recognised as an ecological hotspot, is being rapidly downgraded by inland erosion and sedimentation made worse by massive and expanding dredging for the purposes of increased marine traffic.

It is this cumulative impact that must be considered (as is made clear in the Reef 2050 Plan).

3. **Phasing out existing Area Management Plans**, which have allowed significant clearing under lower regulation across Queensland.

Vegetation in Queensland is precious, playing a very significant role in land and water protection. The land must be managed for vegetation retention.

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 that were not protected under the VM Act currently.

Such protection will assist with the costly efforts to decrease flow of sediment into the GBRWHA.

NQCC supports the following amendments, proposed by Queensland Environmental Defenders Office, on the condition that they are strengthened by the following proposed amendments, which would reduce excessive clearing of wildlife habitat, impacts to the Great Barrier Reef and climate change emissions:

1. **Improved protection 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*). This is supported.
2. **'High value regrowth vegetation' must be extended to fully meet the government's pre-election commitment by protecting high conservation value regrowth vegetation.** Further amendments are needed to allow much more extensive protection, including of endangered vegetation species and communities, vegetation in reef catchments, riparian areas, threatened species habitat and areas where landscape integrity is at risk.
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 prior to clearing being allowed. Furthermore, 'thinning' should no longer be permit or code assessable for anything above 10% of a specific woodland area.
4. **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 that 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.

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5. **The Bill does not tighten excessive clearing allowed under fodder harvesting codes so amendments are needed.** Fodder harvesting should be limited, at least, to where there is an official drought declaration.

Yours sincerely



Wendy Tubman
President

16 March 2018