

SUBMISSION

In providing this submission we refer directly to the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018, and Explanatory Notes that encompass the proposed changes to the above Acts and a range of commentary and issues.

In our opinion the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 proposed changes are **oppressive, restrictive and onerous** and do not reflect the expert knowledge and understanding that landholders hold after **many decades of proven sustainable land management**.

We **do not in any way support broad scale land clearing or land degradation**, however we **do not support** and cannot operate with **our industry being even more heavily regulated and debilitated by new oppressive vegetation management laws**. Indeed we fear it will impact heavily on sustainable farms that cover the vast majority of this state – and have serious consequences for those communities and food and fibre production in Queensland (Australia's most productive farming state).

Our argument is as follows:

1. Removing High Value Agriculture and Irrigated High Value Agriculture from the Vegetation Management Framework

- **Definition change of *high-value regrowth* vegetation, so that the term will apply to vegetation not cleared in the last 15 years, rather than 28-year-old 'regrowth'.**
- **Regulating regrowth on freehold land, Indigenous land and occupational licences in addition to leasehold land for agriculture and grazing.**
- **Removal of high value agriculture and irrigated high value agriculture as a relevant purpose under the *Vegetation Management Act 1999*. This will remove the ability to apply for a development approval for clearing for high-value and irrigated high value agriculture.**

This sweeping change will not only affect large-scale cropping businesses but also strip away the ability of land holders to clear small areas of land to develop farms to help keep them sustainable during extreme weather events such as drought.

The removal of High Value Agriculture (HVA) and irrigated HVA (IHVA) will have widespread effect – hitting farmers in all regions - and will impact them in various ways according to their different land types, existing vegetation, previous clearing and types of operations.

Freehold land (for which the land owner has *already* paid a premium and *already* been taxed upon, and which *should* ensure rightful ownership of the timber on their country) is *already* heavily managed with existing laws. To further reduce the management options which a landowner has, makes the situation 'no-win' for those running grazing enterprises.

Within our own business, this change will considerably hamper our ability to grow supplementary pastures for our beef cattle, especially during times of drought. We live on a river system and have irrigation allocation which we would like to utilise – unless we are able to (sustainably) clear small sections of land and manage the thick tree regrowth along some of the alluvial flat areas, we will be unable to fully protect the sustainability of our business. Our property is very well timbered already – we are careful to leave established trees and nature corridors across our various land types. We do not believe the work we wish to do in these small, previously-managed sections would greatly impact our very healthy ecosystems.

These proposed changes also greatly affect how we grow our business – we have undergone succession planning in our family business, reducing the size of the enterprise and the land area we have previously operated on. As a result, we are currently looking to add land parcels that will allow our production to operate more efficiently, specifically with land types that will ensure we don't have to send our grower cattle to feedlots to finish (they would spend their lives on pasture, with

minor supplementation on-property). These new restrictions seriously hamper our options (as we look at the potential of land to add value to our business) as we consider this very necessary step.

It will also undoubtedly reduce land values, as potential buyers balk at investing in land which will not be able to return the value it is currently capable of (e.g. a place that might offer small areas that potentially might grow fodder crops or other crops that might supplement income and allow operations to diversify, would be drastically reduced in value with these new laws).

2. Retaining Self-Assessable Codes

Science-based self-assessable codes currently help farmers carry out the routine vegetation management practices necessary to sustainably produce food and fibre.

No-one observes their land more than the farmers who run it – no-one sees in as much detail, the needs and responses of the land to management activities. No-one is better placed to assess what needs to be done, so that future generations can live and work on a sustainable, healthy and productive farm.

The currently used self-assessable codes help farmers to ensure trees and grass stay in balance, avoid soil erosion and feed animals in drought. Farmers are not required to obtain permits for work done under the self-assessable codes, but are required to notify the Queensland Government.

Under these existing codes, the government is at all times informed of work being undertaken, promoting a more open and encouraging relationship with Queensland's primary producers.

3. Including High Value Regrowth as an additional layer of regulation under the Vegetation Management Framework on leasehold, freehold and indigenous land

The re-inclusion of High Value Regrowth (HVR) as an additional layer of regulation on leasehold, freehold and indigenous land appears to be an overt grab by current Queensland Government in search of meeting targets for international treaties e.g. the Paris Protocol.

In 2009, when initially introduced, this HVR layer was prepared hastily in a 'desk-top' mapping exercise with associated errors including areas of non-native vegetation (such as orchards) and bare earth. If a proposed regulated vegetation management map for proposed Category C is incorrect, it may include introduced woody weeds or vegetation (that does not meet the definition of high value regrowth).¹

The Government is also essentially adding an extra regulation over FREEHOLD and indigenous land. Freeholding is supposed to grant rights to the timber on a property.

As graziers, we manage vegetation and selectively thin the trees on our land to grow pastures for our cattle to graze. Vegetation in more rugged country, less inclined to strong grass growth, is left to provide shelter and wildlife corridors. We strive to achieve that delicate balance between healthy grazing and natural ecosystems on our properties. We do this by adopting sound ecological approaches to grazing land management where optimum productivity and healthy landscapes are ensured.

We have been doing this across our properties for over three generations – in a completely sustainable manner. As beef producers, we need to meet growing demand from consumers both here in Australia and overseas in order to remain productive and create sustainable jobs in agriculture. In order to achieve this, we must be allowed to manage regrowth vegetation on our land.

Despite media reports to the contrary there has been an overall Australian reduction in land clearing⁵. The following table (*ABC News, 2018*) shows that overall Australia has actually recorded an annual net gain in forest area for the 2010-2015 period of 0.2 per cent per year. This means that more forest area was established over this time period than was actually lost.

The following tables published in the UN's [Global Forest Resources Assessment 2015](#) provide worldwide comparisons of forest changes.

Top ten countries reporting the greatest annual net loss in forest area, 2010-2015

Country	Area (hectares)	Rate
Brazil	984,000	0.2 per cent
Indonesia	684,000	0.7 per cent
Myanmar	546,000	1.8 per cent
Nigeria	410,000	5 per cent
United Republic of Tanzania	372,000	0.8 per cent
Paraguay	325,000	2 per cent
Zimbabwe	312,000	2.1 per cent
Democratic Republic of the Congo	311,000	0.2 per cent
Argentina	297,000	1.1 per cent
Bolivia	289,000	0.5 per cent

Top ten countries reporting the greatest annual net gain in forest area, 2010-2015

Country	Area (hectares)	Rate
China	1,542,000	0.8 per cent
Australia	308,000	0.2 per cent
Chile	301,000	1.8 per cent
USA	275,000	0.1 per cent
Philippines	240,000	3.3 per cent
Gabon	200,000	0.9 per cent
Laos	189,000	1 per cent
India	178,000	0.3 per cent
Vietnam	129,000	0.9 per cent
France	113,000	0.7 per cent

Source: Global Forest Resources Assessment, 2015; Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations

Figure 1 (Source 4)

Vegetation was cleared on just 0.23 per cent of Queensland's land area in 2015/16, or less than one quarter of one per cent. And that doesn't factor in how much vegetation grew during the same period (*Department of Science, Information Technology & Innovation, 2017*). Despite alarmist analogies about the number of football fields cleared, the Statewide Landcover and Trees Study puts the figure into context, revealing that just 0.23 per cent of Queensland's land area was cleared in 2015/16 (*Department of Science, Information Technology & Innovation, 2017*).

Two thirds of the clearing occurring in Queensland is to manage areas that have previously been cleared and for routine vegetation management practices. On our property we use regrowth clearing to aid in construction of fences, firebreaks, property maintenance, pasture growth

and access tracks. Preventing the clearing of regrowth that is more than 15 years old will impact our regrowth plan and cause us to lose valuable grazing lands.

4. Increasing Category R regrowth watercourse vegetation to include additional catchments in the Burnett Mary, Eastern Cape York and Fitzroy Great Barrier Reef Catchments.

In addition to the high value regrowth layer of vegetation types being added back onto no-go areas, landholders will also be seriously impacted by overnight changes to the regrowth watercourse mapping and the extent of essential habitat mapping.

Cities are increasingly spreading across arable land, along river systems and their nearby rich alluvial soils, taking over previously farmed areas. As a result, more areas need to be cultivated (and generally cleared more heavily) to replace this lost agricultural food-producing land, in order to feed an ever-increasing number of mouths.

There is currently a strong focus on developing Northern Australia, with great opportunities to utilise fertile soils for the production of food. The Queensland State Government Vegetation Management Framework will prevent farmers in these regions from developing agriculture projects, and greatly hinder the sustainable growth hoped for in this region.

Our own property (in the North Burnett) is very heavily treed and always re-grows trees where we have managed the vegetation previously to provide more open pastures for our cattle to graze. And while the land here is more suited to grazing and less to growing crops, we hope to cultivate small areas for fodder crops for our cattle, to help 'drought proof' our business. The natural areas for this low key, low impact style of cropping are on the alluvial regions alongside watercourses (from which we would draw an already-allocated irrigation allowance). It would be almost impossible to successfully achieve in areas further away from our river and creeks.

This (fodder cropping) measure would ensure that our business is far more sustainable and less likely to need assistance (such as government support) when a drought or tough season hits. However, this strategy will be almost impossible under these new over-reaching laws, rendering us far more susceptible to drought events.

5. That no compensation will be payable to landholders subject to added layers of regulation – high value regrowth, regrowth watercourses and essential habitat during transitional arrangements

Essentially, the government is proposing the stripping of vast areas of manageable land from farming enterprises, without addressing any kind of compensation for the unavoidable affects this act will have on grassland area, income lost and hugely reduced land values.

We believe that any legislative changes made that will impact the bottom line of businesses currently working in food and fibre primary industries right throughout Queensland, and they MUST be compensated once implemented. The changes will not only affect management options, grassland size and turn-off of livestock, but also impact land values (which will affect banking agreements as a matter of course).

The direct and flow-on effects of proposed legislation could be devastating. If these changes are to be forced upon primary producers, they must not go uncompensated.

6. Increasing compliance measures and penalties under vegetation management laws.

We believe the proposed Bill potentially breaches fundamental legislative principles (FLPs) as outlined in section 4 of the Legislative Standards Act 1992. Legislation should have sufficient regard to the rights and liberties of individuals and consequently should not adversely affect rights and liberties, or impose obligations, retrospectively.

In addition, penalties have effectively been tripled, indicating the Government does not think farmers who mistakenly clear vegetation are being penalised enough.

How ironic that our forebears were punished by governments of the day for NOT clearing enough land, while our generations (and future ones) will be punished for trying to maintain those very areas, to try to continue to grow food and fibre for an ever-expanding population.

Is it not time that the government worked WITH primary producers instead of AGAINST us? This endless pressure and threat of penalties will ensure that Queensland loses many good farmers with a wealth of knowledge and expertise, along with those from the next generation who can see how quickly their government moves to penalise them, rather than seeking ways to reward them for their efforts to lift sustainability with production.

7. Other matters relevant to the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 that the review committee should consider appropriate and worth some consideration

I believe there are huge misunderstandings about tree clearing/vegetation management built into this proposed legislation. Those pursuing these changes seems to be under the misconceptions:

- 1) That veg management/tree clearing means ALL trees are knocked over or wiped out. This is NOT true. *The vast majority of veg management is a careful 'weeding' process that seeks to maintain a balance between native trees, grasslands, flora and fauna.*
- 2) That once areas are cleared/thinned, trees will never grow back. *They can and do, and often with added vigour. Some existing tree types, like mulga can actually a complete pest and choke everything else out, unless they are regularly 'harvested' or knocked over for use as cattle or sheep fodder.*
- 3) That trees are better at preventing erosion than grass. *In our experience (and according to experts in the field⁹, and the state government's own resources^{2 & 3}) grass cover can actually be FAR more effective in this role. One can only conclude, in fact, that chasing so much tree cover will actually serve to increase erosion issues.*

The ongoing uncertainty – with laws changing with every new government coming in – is also terribly damaging right across rural, regional and remote Australia. Morale and mental health amongst farmers is already down (and suicide twice the national rate ⁶). Constantly being attacked through wild and unsubstantiated claims and easy rhetoric by environmentalist groups with their own agendas, which is often repeated by politicians keen to secure the green vote (seemingly at the expense of primary producers).

In the 30 years from 1981 to 2011 Australia lost 106,200 farmers (40%) – that is 294 farmers disappearing each and every month for 30 years (*Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017*). The decline has continued. The proposed Queensland vegetation management laws are guaranteed to further increase that decline, with a land confiscation of over one million hectares of farming land that has previously been effectively managed by landholders for generations.

Despite this decline in numbers Australian agriculture was the largest contributor to national GDP growth in 2016-17, contributing 0.5 percentage points (more than 25%) of national total 1.9 per cent growth. Gross value of farm production is estimated by ABARES to have reached a record \$62.8 billion in 2016-17⁸. Now take into account that Queensland is currently **Australia's most valuable agricultural state** (2017) producing almost a quarter of our food and fibre. ([Australian Bureau of Statistics Agricultural Census](#)⁷). What a remarkable lot of producers we have in this state!

How does this government plan to explain that Queensland farmers can no longer achieve this kind of outcome for Australia, as farms reduce production, as the state loses farmers (with their wealth of environment and industry knowledge) who cannot accommodate these sweeping and irresponsible changes, and how will it budget for the associated reduction in export dollars (and taxes)? Where do legislators think the state's food and fibre will come from?

Seems a lot like biting the hand that feeds.

In conclusion:

- * The current Queensland Government has admitted that their vegetation data management knowledge is defective.
- * There has been no consideration on the costs, time, labour input and stress that this will add to our grazing business. No compensation packages for vegetation permits already acquired. No time given for graziers to establish a regrowth and thinning management plan.
- * The proposed changes will result in graziers not being able to forward plan due to constantly changing legislation, which is complex to understand and comprehend.
- * A 'one size fits all' approach is not an effective tool for management of hugely diverse regional ecosystems. Any changes to existing legislation MUST be holistic and diverse, factoring in the differences between regional ecosystems and taking into account the many land management tools that have been effectively used by farmers for generations.
- * The consultation period and submission process has been rushed, allowing limited time and resources for landholders to fully comprehend the new legislation.
- * The proposed changes will result in lower land values and decreased productivity for Queensland, and come at enormous personal and business costs to primary producers.**

We are genuinely concerned for our futures.

If we, just one family business trying to remain viable and sustainable, can be so adversely affected, imagine the enormous flow-on impact across the state that will be felt. These changes will have huge ramifications, not only within the industry, but through the rural and regional towns who also rely on us, and on food and fibre supplies throughout Australia.

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VEG MANAGEMENT AMENDMENT SUBMISSION – M & A SALISBURY

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