

SUBMISSION:
Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018

SUBMISSION BY:

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To whom it may concern,

As one of the three landholders from this district who spent a great deal of time working through the land types and negotiating the Dirranbandi Area Management Plan (AMP), I am deeply saddened to see all this work thrown away on a political strategy which doesn't consider the wider vegetation implications.

Our AMP was not negotiated under the Newman Government Legislation but under the previous Bligh Government, and should be allowed to continue for another ten years in order to allow enough time for the current area management plan to be properly and fairly assessed. It is impossible for the government to accurately assess a system that hasn't been in place long enough to give a result. The question must therefore be asked; what motivations are behind this change in legislation? It suggests that the changes being made aren't created from either an ecological or agricultural standpoint but rather one of political control.

The majority of landholders don't extensively clear their land and are intent on managing the country responsibly for the greater good of future generations. Reasonable landholders have no problem with those who have cleared recklessly being penalised. The proposed legislation severely disadvantages all landowners regardless of those who did not recklessly wholesale clear their land and with no regard to their previous management. The legislation removes the ability to manage and maintain the landscape to maintain a triple bottom line outcome; social, economic and environmental. It will drive people from the land destroying rural communities, it will cripple local economies and vegetation left unmanaged will create a feral environment.

In recent years I have been working with the Agforce Vegetation Committee in an endeavor to develop better long term stability for the landscape. We have been consulting with the Queensland Herbarium and the Department of Natural Resources and Mines and Energy (DNRME) and have never had adverse feedback from our land management concepts and believed we were making progress in evolving the policy. After reading the intended legislation changes, it is very clear that the government has no intention of looking for a satisfactory resolution which is essential for the Queensland landscape.

As a landowner with a property which straddles both Queensland and New South Wales, I have extensive knowledge of the Property Vegetation Plan concept in NSW. Its creation was based on landscape models for which appropriate management procedures were based. The regional ecosystem data which is the foundation of the Queensland Vegetation Management Act was considered at length in NSW but disregarded as it was not considered accurate enough for vegetation management consideration. During the development of our AMP's, it became evident that the data inaccuracies were as high as 85% of the study areas identified by representatives from the Queensland Herbarium and the DNRME.

I introduced the concept of a landscape based approach when I arranged a meeting with AgForce between the NSW and QLD environmental officers in Cunnamulla with particular

reference to invasive native scrub (INS). The AgForce committee decided that it would be productive to work within the existing QVMA to develop the concept of a Baseline Area Management Plan. As with a PVP, the department and landowners would settle on a landscape that could be managed in an appropriate manner to achieve long term sustainability with reviews to ensure that the goals of environmental land stability and production were in balance.

Without longer term stability our environmental goals will be splintered with the next government in office inevitably bringing further changes. This causes a devastating swing in the environmental pendulum which will cause unimagined damage. Stability is the only way forward for the protection of Queensland environmental issues.

The re-inclusion of High Value Regrowth as an additional layer of regulation is another proposed legislation change based on incorrect data and unfounded scientific rationale. 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. Legislation governing the landscape without accurate ecological data and no consideration for social and economic consequences suggests an overt grab by the Queensland Government in search of targets for meeting international treaties such as the Paris Protocol.

The Queensland government states that no compensation will be available to landholders under the legislation changes to the Vegetation Management Act. It is incredibly disheartening to see the lack of action or acknowledgement regarding income loss as the law changes result in less productive, and therefore less profitable land.

It is essential that the government realises its responsibility to maintain positive environmental outcomes under an agreed stewardship arrangement that financially rewards practice that would not necessarily be done otherwise, but have a positive outcome which would protect threatened or essential habitats.

Increasing compliance measures and penalties under vegetation management laws is fear mongering and only bullies landowners into submission without allowing for discussion or improvement. According to the CSIRO report, the accuracy of the data being used as a foundation for these vegetation laws is at best 75% accurate. Would you penalise someone if you were less than 75% sure they had committed a crime? The CSIRO report is also a total insult to landowners in stating the ecological sensitivities 'too complex' to let us manage our own land.

Upon reading the support material that influenced and developed the strategy of this legislation, it is clear that the department (either of its own volition or by inferred political pressure) has not responded to respecting the right of landowners and custodians to manage and prosper on their properties.

Human interference has already dramatically shaped and altered the landscape and ecosystem since first human occupation. If proper land and vegetation management is not maintained, then the result will be an unusable, overgrown landscape. Professor Bill Gammage documents in his book, 'The Biggest Estate on Earth,' that the pioneers of these districts found open and park like landscapes with 5 to 10 trees per hectare rather than the 2000 stems per hectare of false sandalwood pine and mulga that has currently thickened the Queensland landscape. The proposed codes will prevent the ability to maintain a responsibly managed and productive landscape.

The legislation changes claim not to have a negative impact on Queensland agriculture. Dr Bill Burrows¹ says that native trees and shrubs limit pasture productivity and land cultivation required for better crop production and there is a strong relationship 'between potential pasture production and woody plant basal area (or stem density or canopy cover).'² Burrows also goes on to say that the 'widespread and ongoing "thickening" of the canopy and sub-canopy layers in Queensland's grazed "intact" forest and woodland communities has not deterred the Regional Ecosystem (RE) classifiers within government from continuing with the charade of describing much of this thickened vegetation as "Remnant" – clearly implying that vegetation structure and composition presently on site, is a residual and identical to that present in 1788.'³

*'Queensland's tree/shrub cover increased its aboveground biomass and carbon content over the 20 year period 1993 – 2012. This is despite the fact that this timeframe coincided with a period of active broad scale tree clearing. Failure to understand woody population dynamics in Queensland's grazed woodlands has no doubt contributed to the seeming inability of government to settle on a realistic and stable woodland management policy, applicable to agricultural lands.'*⁴

Queensland Government Soil Conservation Guidelines state ground cover not tree cover determines erosion risk.⁶ Land managers use a range of soil conservation tools including reducing tree cover to increase ground cover to protect vulnerable soils from erosion.

Mulga regeneration also depends on seasonal conditions and should not be prescribed to defined time periods. Above average rainfall years will influence recruitment and growth. The current 'artificial wilderness' density of mulga is a result of climate, grazing and reduced use of fire. This was confirmed from a survey of 67 landholders who have lived in the Mulga region for more than 40 years and managing more than 20 per cent of the Mulga bioregion.⁷ Restoration and balance to Pre-European open mulga forest requires mechanical intervention, stock and grazing management and fire management over a long-term basis (70 years or more). Mulga forests are often devoid of native animals and birds. The tree density is too thick to sustain their habits and food sources. Thick mulga forests also suppress recruitment of diverse tree species such as desert poplar and supple jack.

I'd like to remind the government that as a landholder, I am in the business of food production and fibre for the Australian and international market. Not in the conservation industry and that a solution needs to be found which doesn't restrict responsible land management. Burrow's research concludes that, 'Politicians and conservationists who truly cared for the welfare of rural landholders and the contribution the latter make to the Australian economy, along with world food and fibre supplies, would not target an individual landholder's ability to run a viable farm business. In turn, when farm businesses are profitable, they might be surprised to find the Queensland economy and good conservation outcomes benefit as well.'⁸

¹ *Bill Burrows has a Master of Agricultural Science degree from the University of Queensland and a PhD from the Department of Environmental Biology in the Research School of Biological Sciences, Australian National University. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences & Engineering. He was also elected a Fellow of the Tropical Grassland Society of Australia and The Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology. He is a past recipient of the Cattleman's Union of Australia, Research Medal and was awarded a Centenary Medal in 2002 for 'contributions to Australian society in the field of ecology'. Bill retired from his position as Senior Principal Scientist in the Queensland Department of Primary Industries & Fisheries (now DAF) in 2004, after a 40 year career researching the ecology and management of Queensland's grazed woodlands. He is a past president of both the Australian Rangeland Society and the Tropical Grassland Society of Australia, and has authored or co-authored over 100 research and technical papers published in national and international scientific literature.

² <https://www.beefcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Vegetation-Management-in-Queensland-Background-notes-for-State-MPs-Dec-20152.pdf>

³ Burrows, *ibid*.

⁴ Sattler, P.S. and Williams, R.J. (eds) (1999). The Conservation Status of Queensland's Bioregional Ecosystems. (EPA: Brisbane). p1/11.

⁵ Burrows, *ibid*.

⁶ Queensland Government 2015. Soil Conservation Guidelines for Queensland. <https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/soil-conservation-guidelines/resource/faea9273-48bc-40ac-9a65-eb3bc8e63472>

⁷ Witt GB. 2013. Vegetation changes through the eyes of the locals: the 'artificial wilderness' in the mulga country of south-west Queensland. The Rangeland Journal 35, 299-314.

⁸ Burrows, *ibid*.

Looking further into the data under which the Queensland government has made the foundation for the new legislation, it is clear that there are many inaccuracies and falsehoods being concluded. The research of Donald Franklin and the Tropical Savanna Research Centre at Charles Darwin University conclude that thickened woody vegetation across Australian savannas reduce habitat of granivorous (grass seed eating) birds such as the threatened finch species (Gouldian, Star Crimson and Black-throated) and squatter pigeons and RAOU records going back to the 1800's show a marked decline preceding any land clearing activity.^{9 10} The CSIRO report directly contradicts this and conveniently fails to mention any environmental benefit for active land management to the health of the ecology.

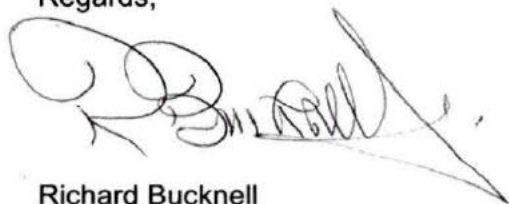
If I examine the motivation under which the new legislation has been written, I am at a complete loss as to its benefit. Not only is the legislation based on inaccurate data, it bears no consideration to wider reaching social and economic consequences. The fact that the Vegetation Management Act has been altered over 30 times in the last 9 years attests to the lack of clear vision of Queensland's land management plan and the stability needed to let the ecology thrive.

If the government's goal with this legislation is to allow the environment to revert back to its 'natural state', then they would need to reverse 60,000 years of human development and intervention. One only has to look at the vastly growing kangaroo population to see the effect increased water availability has had in Australia. We have to accept the reality that Queensland's landscape has been shaped by ancient and modern civilisation and we need to find a balance between the social, economic and environmental needs of the land in order to create a sustainable solution.

Agriculture is Australia's fastest growing sector and largest contributor to the national GDP growth, however, by introducing such crippling vegetation laws, it is unclear how the industry is meant to maintain the productivity of the landscape and keep up with the ever growing population. Growth and change are part of what it means to live in modern civilisation. It is unbelievable that a responsible Government could express such complete lack of understanding of how agriculture and the environment can co-exist. The current brick wall approach to maintaining the ability for agriculture to play its part in the evolution and development of Queensland is political lunacy.

I can only hope for a swift resolution and dismissal on these disastrous proposed legislation changes.

Regards,



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⁹ McCullough M and Musso B. 2004. Healthy rangelands: principles for sustainable systems – focus on Australia's Burdekin rangelands. Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre, Charles Darwin University, Darwin. Australia.

¹⁰ Franklin, D.C. (1999). Evidence of disarray amongst granivorous bird assemblages in the savannas of northern Australia, a region of sparse human settlement. *Biological Conservation* 90: 53-68.