

Vanessa Neale

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Committee Secretary
State Development, Natural Resources
and Agricultural Industry Development Committee
Parliament House
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Dear Committee,

Submission to Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 ('VMOLA Bill') inquiry

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry. I am a resident of Queensland who is both a nature lover and biological scientist.

I am pleased to see that the Queensland government is taking steps to reverse the changes made by Campbell Newman's government, changes that increased Queensland's land clearing rates to one of the worst in the world. I have been particularly concerned about the effects on native wildlife, who are directly killed by land clearing and then indirectly by loss of habitat. The loss of vegetation in itself is also terrible, both because of its intrinsic value and the contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. Clearing occurring in and near catchments along the Great Barrier Reef is also highly undesirable.

For the Bill to be considered a success, it should, at minimum, completely reverse the Newman's government's changes. It appears that there could be loopholes that will hinder this from occurring, as highlighted by this article in the Guardian Australia: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/21/loopholes-in-queenslands-new-land-clearing-laws-would-allow-broadscale-razing>

In brief: Some clearing is "locked in" as category X land under the current regulations. The proposed legislation needs to address this. It has been reported that agricultural groups are encouraging land owners to designate land as category X to pre-empt the new legislation. Additionally, thinning should only ever be conducted where the scientific evidence supports it and never on high-value areas of vegetation.

Better still, the Bill should improve protections from what they were prior to the Newman government's changes. It should also do something to address "panic clearing" and prevent landholders from clearing vast tracts of land before the new legislation takes hold.

I have included some notes below from the Environmental Defenders Office Queensland.

The following elements of the VMOLA Bill are strongly supported as they are a step to help reduce excessive clearing in Queensland:

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; **(see clause 16)**
2. **Reintroduction of the requirement to obtain Riverine Protection Permits** to better regulate damaging clearing in watercourses **(see clauses 51 and 52);**
3. **Phasing out existing Area Management Plans** which have allowed significant clearing under lower regulation across Queensland; **(see clause 14)**
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 which were not protected under the VM Act currently. **(see clauses 133 and 38)**

We generally support the following amendments, however it is essential that they are strengthened by our proposed amendments to truly reduce excessive clearing of wildlife habitat, impacts to the Great Barrier Reef and climate change emissions:

1. **Improved protected 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. **However, ‘high value regrowth vegetation’ must be extended to fully meet the government’s election commitment by protecting high conservation value regrowth vegetation.** Extra amendments are needed to allow much more extensive protection including endangered vegetation species and communities, vegetation in reef catchments, riparian areas, threatened species habitat and areas where landscape integrity is at risk.¹
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. **(See clauses 4 and 38)**
4. **However, to truly reduce the significant clearing allowed for ‘thinning’ it should no longer be an allowable activity by permit or code, particularly not for mature and high value regrowth vegetation and under existing Area Management Plans.** ‘Thinning’ can include clearing up to 75% of a forest under current laws and has been responsible for significant clearing across Queensland without scientific justification that this is a necessary activity at all.
5. **The Bill clarifies that landholders may seek to amend their property map of assessable vegetation (PMAV) to re-regulate clearing in areas which were locked in across Queensland as not needing assessment under Newman Government laws.** This clarification is supported as helpful.

¹ Queensland Labor, 2017 ‘Saving Habitat, Protecting Wildlife and Restoring Land’ Policy Document, <https://www.queenslandlabor.org/media/20226/alpq-saving-habitat-policy-document-v3.pdf>

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

Thank you for your time and attention.

Yours sincerely,
Vanessa Neale