

Submission to the State Development, Natural Resources and Agricultural Industry Development Committee on Proposed Changes to the Vegetation Management Act and Framework.

Organisation: Barcoo Shire Council

Principle contact: Cr. Michael Pratt

Position: Deputy Mayor

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(This submission is not confidential)

Submission

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to lodge a submission inquiring into the effects of the proposed changes to the Vegetation Management Act, delivered by Dr Anthony Lynham MP, Minister for Natural Resources and Energy, to Parliament on 8th March 2018.

Barcoo Shire Council is concerned that these proposed changes will unnecessarily impose a detrimental impact on the environmental, cultural, social and economic sustainability of our region and the mental well-being of our landholders.

Shire Profile

Barcoo Shire covers an expanse of 61,974 sq. klm. and is a remote rural Shire located in the heart of the Channel Country. The Shire's primary river systems are the Thomson and Barcoo which amalgamate above Windorah to become Cooper's Creek, terminating in Lake Eyre.

Topography within the Shire consists of the following bioregions; Mitchell Grass Downs, Gidyea and Mulga Woodlands, Spinifex and the world renowned, Channel Country floodplain. The proposed Veg. Management Act changes, primarily affects our landholders producing food and fibre within the Mulga and Gidyea landscapes.

To demonstrate Barcoo Shire's credibility in sound environmental management, Council and landholders have embarked on an achievable, affordable and

enforceable five-year pest management plan, to eradicate all Weeds of National Significance from our Shire.

Barcoo Shire Council Concerns

The proposed changes to managing both thickening and encroachment of Gidyea within our region, are flawed and not based on scientific evidence, as follows:

1. **Proposed regulations state that Gidyea stem densities in the Mid-dense Category (>1250 stems/ha) do not exist within the Mitchell Grass Downs bioregion.** Photographic proof below dispels this statement and hence the associated environmental degradation resulting from thickening exists.
 - 4,800 stems per ha. were measured (below), using 100m X 4m transects.
 - Dead Gidyea trees above the canopy clearly demonstrates the original scattered tree density, prior to thickening.
 - This ecosystem is a wasteland, totally devoid of groundcover to slow runoff, retain topsoil and protect vulnerable fauna. Small ground dwelling reptiles, arthropods and other insects, quail and other Gidyea compatible birdlife eventually re-locate or die.



Thickened Gidyea vegetation

- A monoculture cannot sustain the ecological balance necessary for the wellbeing of adapted native wildlife, due to an inevitable break in the food chain, thus creating a domino effect.
- The loss of topsoil, significant shading from the juvenile Gidyea canopy and a build-up of tannins and salt in the remaining soil, totally prevents the establishment of any plants and resultant ground cover.
- The ecosystem becomes a safe haven for wild dogs and feral pigs.
- Appropriate thinning and managing total grazing pressure will re-create the required grass/tree/living organism balance, evident prior to thickening.



A balanced productive natural Gidyea woodland

- Thickening and encroachment of Gidyea along watercourses is choking out other native flora e.g. Coolibah, Sandalwood, Lignum, Bluebush and native grasses and herbages.
- Increased runoff, increased erosion, rapid stream flows creating bank destabilisation.

- Increased sediment flow diminishing water quality, creating significant silt deposits in natural waterholes and lagoons and ultimately the Thomson and Barcoo river systems.
2. **Reducing the maximum thickened area to be managed to a mere 400ha/lot.**
- Given the Safe Carrying Capacity (SCC) of Barcoo Shire Gidyea and Mulga bioregions is 1 DSE:5 ha, the area required to sustain a viable livestock business is approx. 50,000 ha. The maximum of 400 ha/lot of thickened vegetation to be managed is unacceptable within this low rainfall belt and only equates to the size of an average horse paddock. The cost per ha, of relocating machinery to only thin 400 ha is too expensive.
 - The thickened area to be managed must relate to the average size of a viable, living area within each bioregion.
 - A Development Application to increase the 400ha maximum can be lodged however past experience indicates approval or otherwise can take up to two years, upon which seasonal conditions and finance may not suit.
3. **Regional ecosystem 4.3.23** seems to have been left out of both the provisions for thinning and encroachment – this is despite past departmental staff recognising it as a regional ecosystem where significant encroachment has occurred and giving verbal undertakings to address the issue. These areas were previously mapped as 4.3.20 (which is covered by the encroachment code) but in the past 10 years, these areas have been (correctly) mapped out as a separate regional ecosystem. 4.3.23 is an alluvial boree ecosystem which has been significantly encroached by gidgee throughout the central west and should be included in the encroachment code.
4. **The proposed legislation represents a significant shift in permitted vegetation management principles and techniques.** Management of our environment, particularly an environment such as ours in western Queensland needs to be a community shared approach – seeking to vilify one part of the community does not improve overall management of biodiversity in western Queensland. Surely given comparatively low education levels in much of agriculture, the complexity of the proposed changes and the issues that are at stake, there needs to be a significant education and extension program to go along with this process. Field Days with Departmental Extension Officers demonstrating the correct techniques for assessment, recording pre-management data and notification and demonstrating the use of a thinning bar within the bounds of the Act.

5. **A tenfold increase in the punishment** of \$126 per penalty point from 50 penalty points to 500 penalty points for an infringement, which in most cases would be a misinterpretation of the rules, is totally unfair and an abuse of power. The thinning code is so impractical that it would be near impossible to use a 6m. bar behind a dozer, which is the only affordable means of thinning in extensive holdings and not at some stage, break the law!
Having to avoid all mature, habitat and tall immature trees by 5 metres is impossible and negates the use of a thinning bar, designed to swing around non-target trees.

There is so much at stake and little attempt by DNRME to educate and advise landholders, leaving them to sink or swim. This is totally unfair and indicates an agenda to use inappropriate punishment as a heavy-handed tool, forcing landholders to ensure they totally understand the quagmire of regulations within the Act. before treatment, or potentially face prosecution of up to \$1M (recent Eidsvold case), or even jail!

6. **The mental well-being of landholders, fearful of an unintended infringement and the resultant penalty is at stake**, simply by attempting to maintain a balanced, diverse ecosystem through responsible management of vegetation thickening and encroachment impacting on the productivity of the property.

General

Barcoo Shire Council acknowledges the need for veg. management legislation and for the Act to be updated from time to time. However, amending the Act. eighteen times since its introduction in 1999 is bewildering and severely impacts the ability of landholders to plan for and implement farm management decisions. Furthermore, new regulations triggered by political persuasion and ill informed, urban based “environmental” organisations and not evidence-based science, are unfair and unacceptable.

Approximately 40% of Barcoo Shire is within the Gidyea and Mulga bioregion with an av. annual rainfall of only 275 mm. Subsequently, large holdings are required significantly adding to running costs, development costs and costs for managing thickening and encroaching vegetation. New regulations which are clearly not “fit for purpose” across Queensland let alone a remote region, impose an unfair, unaffordable, unnecessary and emotional burden on landholders, struggling through prolonged drought and faced with an ever-increasing barrage of wild dogs and macropods.

Although we acknowledge the Government's great initiative in funding the cluster fence subsidy scheme, it does seem ironic to then introduce new laws to diminish

landholder's ability to manage thickening vegetation, thus limiting the very welcome, but potentially short lived, productivity gains from wild dog fencing.

Barcoo Shire Council sincerely hopes that the State Development, Natural Resources and Agriculture Committee will conclude in their report, that due to a lack of acknowledging published scientific evidence and fair practical outcomes, some of the proposed amendments to the Vegetation Management Act must be reconsidered.

Consultation with informed stakeholders eg. retired environmental scientist Dr. Bill Burrows ex. Senior Principle Scientist with QDPI&F (now DAF) and backed up by on-ground field work, is essential. (*Dr Burrows spent 40 years researching the ecology and management of Queensland's grazed woodlands.*)

We all want good biodiversity outcomes and we want a sustainable agricultural production system – these do not need to be mutually exclusive. If a well thought out collaborative approach, involving education and extension/awareness, was implemented for vegetation management, the issues of concern to both sides of this debate could be addressed in a pragmatic and well-reasoned approach, based on science and on ground application, relevant to the various regions. We could develop a generation of land managers who are well versed in the science and environmental values of managing vegetation as well as giving all parties certainty about long term management of vegetation and biodiversity. This would surely meet the voiced concerns of both sides of the debate and both sides of politics.

Imagine a future where both farmers and environmentalists and even politicians had a shared vision of managing our environment for the long-term future of generations to come.

In conclusion, Barcoo Shire landholders can work with the *Managing Encroachment; A self-assessable vegetation clearing code* which is a more practical and acceptable regulation. However, when considering the *Accepted development vegetation clearing codes for; Managing thickened vegetation and Managing fodder harvesting*, Council strongly urges Parliament to delay endorsement until further expert advice and consultation is sought.

The proposed amendments to the Act are flawed and are of real concern to landholders, industry organisations and rural communities alike and will not and cannot be accepted!

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond by means of this submission to your inquiry and to present as a witness at the Longreach Committee hearing.