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Committee Secretary
State Development, Natural Resources and Agricultural Industry Development Committee
Parliament House
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***Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2018*.**

The Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland Fraser Coast Branch wishes to make a submission to **support** the proposed *Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2018*.

The objectives of our society are:
(1) to preserve the fauna and flora of Australia by all lawful means;
(2) to educate by all means possible all sections of the community, particularly the young, in understanding the principles of conservation and preservation of the natural environment;
(3) to discourage by all legal means possible the destruction, exploitation or unnecessary development of any part of the natural environment; and
(4) to encourage rational land use and proper planning of development and use of the natural environment and management thereof.

Our branch has a membership of about 90 people.

INTRODUCTION

The Statewide Landcover and Trees (SLATS) report for the year 2015-2016 found that 395,000 hectares of land had been subject to broadscale clearing. To put this into perspective, the area cleared is one and three quarters (175%) of the land area administered by the Fraser Coast Regional Council. It is difficult to mentally envision that such a large area could be cleared in only one year!

The loss of native forests has a negative impact on many of the environmental issues that concern our group.

- Loss of habitat for wildlife and resultant loss of biodiversity
- Increase in release of greenhouse gases resulting in climate change causing increased ocean temperatures, increased strength of tropical cyclones, increased duration and extent of drought and flooding.
- Increase in runoff of silt and nutrients into watercourses damaging seagrasses and coral reefs, loss of topsoil from agricultural land, and degradation of the inland waterways.
- Loss of vegetation cover and increase in albedo has a positive feedback impact during drought* causing droughts to be more severe.
- Inappropriate clearing can lead to salinisation of soils.
- The landscape has less resilience which can lead to forest collapses such as has occurred in southwestern West Australia.

We also acknowledge that a law is only effective if it is enforced. We support the amendment in addressing:

- Abuse of permitted practices such as fodder harvesting and thinning which are valuable practices and should not be abused.
- Pre-emptive clearing.
- Monitoring, enforcement and penalties for breaches.

SECTIONS OF THE ACT THAT SUPPORT BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

I. Limiting broadscale land clearing will help to combat climate change.

Vegetation clearing management provisions introduced in 1999 contributed greatly to Australia's goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions during the period of the Howard government. The relaxing of these provisions since 2009 has led to more than a doubling of the rate of land clearing and hence increased the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. A hectare of forest can store up to one hundred times the amount of carbon that a hectare of agricultural crops. Last year globally, 1.5 billion tonnes of CO_2 was released into the atmosphere due to forest clearing

Our global contribution to greenhouse gas levels is very small. However, since as a nation we will suffer severe impacts due to global warming, it is incumbent upon Australia to join with the international community in combating climate change. The damage to the Great Barrier Reef by stronger tropical cyclones, increasing ocean acidity and rising ocean temperatures is damage to an international wonder of inestimable significance.

II. Expanding the number of river systems to be subject to riparian vegetation protection to conserve the Great Barrier Reef.

Riparian vegetation provides many benefits for biodiversity:

- Stabilises the banks of watercourses and reduces erosion during rainfall, storm and flood events.

- Shades the water reducing temperature so that the oxygen levels are higher. Reduces sunlight reaching the water thereby reducing algal growth.
- Provides habitat for wildlife.
- Branches and trees which fall into the watercourse provide in-stream habitat for aquatic organisms.
- Helps filter nutrient runoff from agricultural activities into the watercourse which contribute to outbreaks of blue-green algae.
- Provides a corridor for wildlife movement.

We are pleased to see the restriction on clearing riparian vegetation now includes the Burnett Mary River system. During flood events, great plumes of silt are carried from the Mary River onto seagrass beds and onto coral reefs. The destruction of seagrass during flood events has led to starvation of dugongs on the Fraser Coast. Also, silt coats the coral reefs allowing algae to flourish and damage the coral by preventing light from reaching the zooxanthellae.

The requirement of a 50 metre riparian buffer zone is very modest. A buffer zone of 100 metres is recommended by a Monash study in 2010 in order to preserve instream biodiversity.**

However, any buffer is preferable to none. (In the Lockyer Valley, Apan et al*** found that "The large proportion of deforested riparian zones within steep slopes and first order streams raises serious questions about catchment health..."

III. Extending protection to "near threatened species."

i. All efforts should be made to prevent species slipping into the status of "vulnerable to extinction." The measure is long overdue. The current plight of the koala is a textbook lesson in the dangers of allowing clearing of koala habitat despite the concerns of many conservation groups. Until recently koalas were listed as "common" and no protection was afforded to their food trees. Our own surveys in the Fraser Coast region have shown that the numbers of koalas here have crashed in the last five years.

ii. Even now, Dr. Martin Taylor of WWF estimates that 180 koalas died as a result of bushland bulldozing in Southeast Queensland between 2013 and 2015 – despite the fact that they are listed as vulnerable in SEQ.

iii. Further measures need to be taken to protect vital ecosystems necessary for the survival of declared threatened species. For instance, to assist the survival of the glossy black cockatoo (a threatened species), allocasuarina trees in mixed woodlands require protection.

IV. Extending protection to regrowth of high value ecosystems that were cleared over 15 years ago.

We fully support this.

V. Extension of the Act to cover high value regrowth on indigenous and freehold land.

The extension to freehold and indigenous land is a logical progression. When the Newman government was in power, the cost of converting leasehold to freehold land was quite low. It would be a perverse incentive to convert leasehold title if the reason were to avoid regrowth clearing controls. The amendments achieve conservation outcomes over all tenures which most Queenslanders would consider "fair".

VI. Ensuring that outcomes are achieved.

Laws require enforcement. We support the amendments that increase compliance.

The amendments greatly support the objectives of our society.

VII. Retrospectivity of the *Act*

We strongly support the retrospectivity of the Act to the date of its presentation in Parliament, March 8, 2018.

Many Queenslanders recall the meetings and discussions that occurred prior to the enacting of the VMA of 1999 by the Beattie Government. The long lead up time allowed a great deal of pre-emptive clearing of valuable habitat, including koala habitat. We are pleased to see that the amendment attempts to forestall a repetition of this practice by making the provisions of the amendment retrospective to March 8, 2018.

VIII. Fodder harvesting and thinning

We support tightening up of the legislation and monitoring of thinning and fodder harvesting.

These activities are legitimate as long as they are done sustainably. However, we note that in the recent SLATS report a massive amount of clearing occurred in the brigalow belt and mulga lands, probably for fodder during the drought. These ecosystems are particularly vulnerable to over-clearing. Grazing lands and the use of natural resources such as water and natural vegetation need to be managed sustainably both for the sake of the livestock industry and for the long term future of our topsoils and watercourses.

Thinning is vital for successful management of timber reserves for forestry but has evidently been abused. The new regulations mean that thinning will be used

for the purpose it was intended – return to the composition of the original ecosystem composition.

IX Increased penalties and enforcement and monitoring provisions.

Technology has greatly reduced the amount of human labour required for monitoring land cover.

During the early 2000s there were so many breaches of the VMA, that DNRM did not have enough officers to investigate many instances of illegal clearing. It is to be hoped that, via satellite imagery, the use of drones and computer analysis of data, the condition of broadscale landscapes can be assessed much more efficiently.

We note that the penalties for many breaches have increased fourfold and that mistake of fact has been removed as a defence for breaches of the Act which will bring it into line with the enforcement of most legislation.
We support increased powers of access for officers.

ADDITIONAL CONCERNS

Vulnerable land types where clearing should be limited:

- Soils at risk of salinity if tree cover is reduced. Trees help to draw down the water table. Removal of the trees allows salt to reach the surface where scalds can occur and only salt tolerant pastures and crops can be grown.
- Areas subject to landslips.

We also recommend that the *Act s*hould clearly state that high value vegetation should not be cleared, even for high value agriculture.

Yours sincerely

Vanessa Elwell-Gavins
Secretary

Audrey Sorensen
President

REFERENCES:

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**Minimum width requirements for riparian zones to protect flowing waters and to conserve biodiversity: a review and recommendations. Report to the Office of Water Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria, 2010 Hansen,B et al Monash University.
***A study of riparian landscapes in the Lockyer valley