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State Development , Natural Resources
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Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018

Birds Queensland welcomes the opportunity to comment on this Bill as it has far-reaching consequences for the native bird species of Queensland, included threatened and vulnerable birds.

Our aim is to promote the scientific study and conservation of birds with particular reference to the birds of Queensland. We represent almost 800 members.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of land in Australia has been modified for human use. Clearing of native vegetation continues to occur for many reasons including agriculture, plantation forestry, mining and urban development. Land clearing in Queensland is accelerating with the latest data confirming that 296,000 hectares of bushland was cleared in 2013-14 – three times as much as in 2008-09. Clearing in Queensland alone in 2013-14 was more than was cleared in the whole of Australia in 2008 (216,500 ha). The rate of clearing appears to continue to grow with 830,000ha cleared in 2015-16.

The number of notifications to clear land has grown to almost 115 a month – a roughly 30% increase from the rate of fewer than 90 per month previously seen.

Land clearing destroys plants and local ecosystems, and removes the food and habitats on which native animals rely. In addition, land clearing helps weeds and invasive species to spread, affects greenhouse gas emissions and can lead to soil degradation, including erosion and/or salinity, which in turn can reduce water quality.

The removal of native vegetation is a major threat to Australia's environment and biodiversity. Many species of animal and plant are under threat not only due to land clearing and changes in the surrounding environment, but also because of invasive species which spoil their habitat.

We recognised that clearing native vegetation for appropriate agricultural use can provide economic benefits that help meet the needs of a growing population. However the clearing of infertile marginal land such as tropical savannah on Cape York cannot be considered as appropriate for high value agriculture.

The federal government has committed hundreds of millions of dollars to improve water quality on the Great Barrier Reef. Yet ongoing land clearing in catchments that drain onto the Reef will reverse many of the gains these programs aim to achieve. The data show that clearing in catchments that drain onto the Great Barrier Reef constituted 35% of total clearing across Queensland in 2013-14. The loss of native vegetation cover in such regions is one of the major drivers of the deteriorating water quality on the Reef.

The Australian government's Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF) is paying hundreds of millions of dollars to reduce carbon emissions from industry. But the carbon released from Queensland's land clearing in 2012-2014 alone is estimated at 63 million tonnes, far more than was purchased under the first round of the ERF. The clearing undertaken and planned would wipe out more than \$1bn worth of carbon abatement.

Species cannot recover if their habitat is being destroyed faster than it is being restored. Clearing of native vegetation on Cape York has destroyed habitat of four endangered bird species with Government Recovery Plans; namely the Gouldian Finch, the Golden Shouldered Parrot, the Red Goshawk and the Buff-breasted Buttonquail. Two of the species are endemic to northern Queensland. Gouldian Finch are found elsewhere in Queensland but are very rare and the Red Goshawk in declining in numbers in southern Queensland.

Birds Queensland strongly supports the proposed legislation and has the following comments:

1. The Legislation removes the ability to obtain a permit to clear for High Value Irrigated Agriculture. This is especially important in threatened habitat and habitat of endangered species and where large scale clearing is conducted on marginal land that is clearly not suited to Irrigated High Value Agriculture and that encompasses important wildlife habitat.
2. The Legislation restores protections for ecologically important regrowing woodlands ('High Value Regrowth'). We strongly support the intent to align high value regrowth with High Conservation Values. However, the definition of 'high value regrowth vegetation' must be extended to fully meet the government's election commitment. 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.

3. The Bill achieves the objective of reinstating the application of the riverine protection permit framework to include the destruction of vegetation in a watercourse, lake or spring by amending the provisions of the Water Act 2000. Reinstating the application of these riverine protection permit provisions will ensure appropriate management of the risks associated with riverine activities to prevent adverse impacts to the integrity of the watercourse and the environment. This will increase the protection for the Great Barrier Reef from sediment run-off and other impacts of clearing.
4. The legislation ensures the framework can be more effectively enforced. We want assurances that the resources to monitor clearing will be provided. However, we also request that self assessment cease and make assessment by the Government an easy low cost process for the farmer.
5. The Bill assists landholders who wish to protect remnant or high value regrowth vegetation on their land.
6. The Legislation appears to give the Minister the discretion to make an accepted development vegetation clearing code for all activities. We consider that decisions about changing codes should be undertaken through objective science based assessments and the final decision not rest in the hands of the Minister.

This submission is endorsed by the Birds Queensland President and Management Committee.



Ms Rae Clark
President, Birds Queensland

References

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