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To: Committee Secretary,
State Development, Natural Resources & Agricultural Industry
Development Committee,
Parliament House,
Brisbane, QLD 4000.

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To the Committee Chair,

**Submission on the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill
2018**

Established in 1968, the Townsville Branch of Wildlife Queensland has a 50-year history of environmental education, conservation action and conservation advocacy in our region. We have argued strongly and consistently for best practice, science-based conservation management and the need to preserve habitat for our unique wildlife species. Over this half-century we have seen many changes – good and bad – but the most disturbing has been witnessing the loss of so much of our forests and bushlands and our growing awareness of the magnitude of the decline in wildlife populations and biodiversity which has resulted.

We welcomed the successive land-clearing reforms introduced from 1999 and were dismayed to see how these laws, fine-tuned in subsequent years and which seemed by and large to be working well and achieving good outcomes, were greatly weakened in 2013. The consequent escalation of broad-scale clearing, the well-documented devastation of wildlife populations, and the appalling animal suffering seen and unseen, truly shocked us.

Our submission on the *Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill* of 2016 summarised the key benefits of reducing and regulating vegetation loss. These benefits are not just positives for native flora and fauna. Protection of soils from erosion and salinization, reduction of fire-risk, mitigation of the effects of drought and climate change, and restriction of the invasion of pests and weeds, are positives for farmers and rural landholders as a

whole. For the wider Queensland and Australian community the positive outcomes of protecting the Great Barrier Reef, safe-guarding water quality, increasing carbon storage, reducing emissions and maintaining the overall health of the natural environment and the ecological processes which sustain all life can hardly be over-estimated.

It is therefore with relief that we welcome and broadly support this latest Bill, knowing that already too much has been lost and that we are running out of time to protect what is left.

In relation to the current Bill, we are pleased to support the following measures:

- Re-definition of high conservation value regrowth to include areas which have remained uncleared for 15 years
- Restoration of protection of high-value regrowth vegetation on freehold and Indigenous lands
- Removal of “high-value agriculture” and “irrigated high-value agriculture” as a relevant purpose for clearing
- Stricter definition of “thinning” (re-defined as “managing thickened vegetation”) along with requirements that include maintenance of ecological processes and no loss of biological diversity
- Extension of Reef riparian vegetation protection by including watercourses within the additional areas of the eastern Cape York, Fitzroy and Burnett-Mary catchments
- Increased protection of essential habitat to include that of near-threatened wildlife species, as well as those classed as endangered or vulnerable.
- Capacity for currently unregulated Category X vegetation areas, containing remnant or high-value regrowth, to be re-classified at the request of land-holders
- Reinstatement of the riverine protection permit framework to cover destruction of vegetation in a watercourse

We have studied advice from the Queensland Conservation Council, Environmental Defenders’ Office and World Wildlife Fund and note their concerns with some aspects of the Bill. We ask the Committee to take on board these concerns and as far as possible strengthen identified weaknesses and close potential loopholes that could lessen the efficacy of the legislation and/or allow harmful practices to take place. Three points are emphasised below:

1. We have particular doubts in relation to the activity of “managing thickened vegetation” (formerly “thinning”) and believe there must be a requirement to demonstrate that the specified conditions will be met prior to clearing. “Thinning” (by whatever name) should not be permitted for mature and high-value regrowth and the percentage of clearing allowed should be substantially lower than the 75% currently permitted.

2. Likewise we fear the extent of areas that could still be cleared for “fodder-harvesting” unless this is tied to officially drought-declared areas and strictly controlled to ensure low-impact.

3. We also believe that the Bill should require amendment of property maps where areas of high-value vegetation have been previously “locked-in” as unregulated category X. This would considerably reduce the area of ecologically significant vegetation that could otherwise still be cleared across the State without permit or regulation.

We also note, with some regret, that provision for ‘reverse onus of proof’ of an offence will not be reinstated, and the defence of ‘mistake of fact’ or ‘mistaken belief’ will remain. In the context of this legislation the 2016 intention to reinstate the former and remove the latter had seemed entirely reasonable. However, we accept that both proposals had been falsely represented in the public arena as attempts to trap the innocent. To avoid similar claims and media scare-mongering we accept that it may be wiser to leave both unchanged.

In conclusion, we believe that action to control tree-clearing is not, and should never be seen as, a fight between conservation and agriculture. It is about managing and caring for our environment with all of its unique wildlife and flora, grounded on the best scientific information and advice, for the benefit of all of us.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment on this important Bill and wish its members well in their deliberations. We look forward with hope to the day this Bill is enacted and we thank all those within government and beyond it who have worked so hard to bring that day to pass.

With best regards,



Liz Downes
on behalf of the executive committee

