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Committee Secretary  
State Development, Natural Resources  
and Agricultural Industry Development Committee  
Parliament House  
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Brisbane Qld 4000  
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Dear Committee,

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

I am an ecologist who has lived and worked for all of my life west of the Great Dividing Range in Queensland. Over the past 15 years, I have worked for various Government agencies (mostly the then-Department of Primary Industries and then-Environmental Protection Agency), as well as working closely with not-for-profit groups and regional NRM bodies across semi-arid and arid Queensland. Since completing my PhD in historical ecology of Queensland's rangelands in 2014, I have worked for the University of Queensland where I am currently a post-doctoral researcher with the Threatened Species Recovery Hub. I write as both an everyday citizen who loves the bush, and a scientist.

I, like many others, was horrified by the watering-down of the Vegetation Management Act under the Newman Government, and the resultant increase in land clearing. Over the past five years, remnant forests and woodlands that I have walked through, watched birds, animals and recorded plants in, sat at sunset or camped overnight, have literally been flattened. I have seen centuries-old trees like coolibah and poplar box lying pushed over in paddocks, and wondered what it says about a culture that sanctions the loss of ancient trees that pre-date our arrival, as white settlers, in this country. I also wonder what animals and birds lived in the well-developed hollows that these old trees provide, and what their fate may have been when their home was destroyed.

In the last few months, I have been buoyed by the new Labor Government's commitment to stopping broadscale land clearing in Queensland. I believe that the proposed VMOLA Bill provides some provisions to do this, particularly in regard to the removal of the provision for obtaining permits for clearing for high value agriculture, and the phasing out of the existing Area Management Plans which have allowed significant clearing with very little regulation.

However, I feel that some proposed amendments are not sufficient for the Government to fulfil its election promises. I believe that these proposed amendments need to be strengthened to be effective in reducing clearing. In particular, for the regions I know, I support:

1. Tightening of the definition of 'thinning' (now known as 'managing thickened vegetation'). The Bill now requires that thinning activities must 'maintain ecological processes and prevent loss of diversity'. However, the science of vegetation dynamics in Queensland's rangelands and savannahs (including numerous recent peer-reviewed papers published by myself and others) clearly shows that many areas that are purported to have 'thickened' are actually similar in structure to pre-1788, and changes in woody density are overwhelmingly the result of climatic cycles (some of which we have not been here long enough to witness, let alone understand). Thus I feel that much clearing done under the guise of 'thinning' is not only harmful, but also premised on discredited myths about what the country used to or 'should' look like.
2. Following on from this, I believe that so-called 'thinning' 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 broadscale clearing across Queensland without any ecological justification.
3. **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' vegetation, 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 and fail to end broad scale landclearing as promised by the Government.

Finally, the existing Bill does not tighten excessive clearing allowed under fodder harvesting codes. Fodder harvesting (which is mostly of mulga, *Acacia aneura*), is a very complex issue, and amendments are needed here. People are now managing mulga in a completely different way, and there is a big difference between fodder harvesting and managing mulga as a crop - the latter goes well beyond the intent of the Act. Fodder harvesting should be defined as pushing or lopping individual trees during drought times, not an avenue for large-scale clearing of remnant and old-growth mulga.

The minimum bottom line needs to be **no more clearing of remnant vegetation**, much stricter controls on clearing in long-term regrowth, and wise use of the incredible resource that is *Acacia aneura* (mulga) so that the grazing ecosystem is sustainable for centuries to come. At the moment, this is not the case. The current Bill goes some way towards meeting these objectives, but can be improved significantly – and backed up by the best available science.

I would be happy to be consulted further on these matters, or to appear before the Committee to provide scientific information or clarification.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jennifer Silcock

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