The sugar industry in the Herbert River district occupies about 6.7% of the whole Herbert catchment and produces an annual renewable crop of sugar cane that accumulates more than 6 million tonnes of whole sugar cane biomass annually in a well grown crop, of which about 5 million tonnes is supplied to the mill with the remaining quantity of trash and tops removed during the harvest remaining in the field as a carbon rich mulch to nurture the next ratoon crop of sugar cane.

Sugar production from the cane has been described as “harvesting the natural energy of life” in that it accumulates its biomass by the action of sunshine on the chlorophyll cells in the cane leaf that in turn produce growth starches that convert to sucrose and other natural sugars that are stored on the stalk of the sugar cane bound within a renewable carbon fibre cane stalk that is mechanically harvested for milling. The sugar cane plant is one of the most efficient to produce vegetative biomass drawing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere for recycling in the larger scheme of things. The retention of part of the crop as a vegetative mulch builds soil carbon in the process.

The sugar milling process has historically extracted the sucrose from the sugar cane as the most valuable tradable product that for generations has played a significant part in the food rations of society for thousands of years. It has been written about since the days of Alexander the Great. Modern research has found enormous possibilities for by products of sugar cane such as electricity generation, molasses, ethanol and bioplastics to name a few.
Processes are only now beginning to emerge commercially for converting the fibrous cane bagasse that has traditionally been used to power the mills, to ethanol and furfural.

Natural cane sugar exported from the Herbert/s crop is exported through the port of Lucinda where ships are loaded from an offshore jetty some 5.76 kilometres long that was built in a natural deep-water location that accommodates the largest ships engaged globally in the shipping of bulk sugar without need for the port or an entrance channel to be dredged.

In my preamble I am simply asserting the case for sugar cane production to have a significant and a growing place in Queensland to produce valuable products and increasingly high value byproducts in a world that has demand for the products we produce from the renewable crop of sugar cane.

One of the main objections my organisation has to this Bill’s proposals is the following objective in the Bill’s explanatory notes:

To remove high value agriculture and irrigated high value agriculture as a relevant purpose under the Vegetation Management Act 1999. This will remove the ability to apply for a development approval for clearing for high value and irrigated high value agriculture, and removing supporting provisions such as relevant purpose decision making criteria;

We believe that high value agriculture such as sugar cane should have a legitimate place in the Queensland economy and that it should not be constrained in this way by imposing such a limitation on it.

I have had the experience of seeing landholders have their property rights taken away by vegetation management laws without any compensation whatsoever for the value taken from them.
I have seen the effect of generous protection of our natural fauna by mapping of essential habitat areas that are generous to a fault (in that the mapping of “Essential Habitat” is well beyond the known range of the protected fauna such as the mahogany glider as an outright planning barrier to any kind of clearing the trees for high value agriculture) and here the Queensland Government is proposing to deal a further blow to property owners who already have plenty of barriers and hoops to negotiate – to the extent that clearing for horticulture and sugar cane has been less than clearing for residential development.

My organisation asks that the value of sugar cane as an accumulator and recycler of carbon be considered and recognised and that it NOT be removed as a relevant purpose for clearing.