I have had the pleasure to have lived in QLD for just under 20 years now, mostly in remote or rural communities, 10 of those years I have been employed by AgForce living in Longreach, Charters Towers and now Dimbulah. My Husband, Simon and I are the owner operators of a farm, in the Tinaroo Dam scheme. We currently both have off farm income, until our Farm is running to its full capacity and potential.

I want to draw your attention to the huge burden of unnecessary and unwarranted stress that these regulation changes are already having on people, families and whole communities. I want to point out that the current Labor government has put no effort into examining these impacts, or any kind of assessment of the long-term consequences of such a harsh and arbitrary framework, which essentially punishes the people who manage the state’s vegetation.

Living and working in rural and remote communities can at times be a stressful experience. People who live and work in these areas can experience additional pressures such as social isolation, financial hardship, lack of services, limited or unreliable internet/phone services and not to mention natural disasters such as fire, flood, Cyclones or drought. As most of you would know, some parts of QLD have been drought declared for over 6 years now at one stage there was over 80% of the state Drought Declared. These farmer families and small rural businesses have suffered from a natural disaster that no one expected to have lasted this long. Imagine not having an income for 5 years and the stress this puts on not only the business but the individuals. It’s these individuals and families who will now shoulder the even greater burden of being financially, emotionally, publicly, and WRONGLY punished for trying to do the work that is needed to grow Australia’s food and fibre, and to look after their landscape in ways that nobody else can or will.

I have seen over the last few years how the wellbeing of family farmers suffers from the need to make significant decisions made under conditions of stress and even distress. I’ve seen, these salt of the earth people, struggle to manage stressful situations alone, unable to cope and feel embarrassed about it, unable to manage on their own and unable to confide in family or friends. Often, these pressures have a major impact on their mental health and wellbeing, some experience symptoms of anxiety, depression or other health related issues.

One of the pressure’s family farms face is the ever-changing legislation that they need to deal with in day to day operations. A few years ago, at AgForce we put together a pile of the legislation at the time these families needed to understand and it stood as tall as me. How can the average person get their heads around that much red tape and fully comprehend it, understand it and then comply with it?? Since 2013 the Government has released 50 different versions of the regulated vegetation map. What person would have printed out 50 ever changing maps and how would have they even known that there had been an update? I ask: Did the Government inform them? Was there extension staff on ground explaining them? Was there an advertising campaign? The answer is no, unfortunately.

To understand how this amendment bill has affected people and their wellbeing on ground, I will share two stories.
A lady who saw a face book post regarding ‘getting involved with writing a submission against the amendment bill’ I had shared on our AgForce North page contacted me via messenger seeking some help and guidance. She was a lady in her 60’s who had recently purchased her dream property, she was looking to move from her city location to the country side. She didn’t understand what a PMAV was or much about vegetation management it was all new to her. I asked for her phone number and rang her, she gave me her lot and plan numbers and I jumped onto Queensland Globe to check on her situation regarding the regulated mapping layer. She had purchased the property in good faith, signed contracts, committed the money, and planned to use the property to graze livestock. She knew (or thought) that she could manage vegetation regrowth on the property so she could continue grazing into the future. Unfortunately for her, the new purchase is located in a reef catchment area and now has Regulated High Value Regrowth and water course buffer’s. When I explained what the mapping layers meant for her place, she started crying on the phone and was besides herself. She explained how long she had been saving for this block and her aspirations. At the time I tried to comfort her the best I could, but she was so stressed I don’t think she was listening. Her feeling, was that the block now was worthless to her and she probably wouldn’t be able to recoup her money if she put it on the market. So not only have her own plans for the property been ruined, but the market value of that property has been seriously eroded, and she is unlikely to recoup this loss. This kind of impact does not appear to have been even considered by the labor government.

The second story to share was from a recent fencing field day I attended, I asked if I could explain that we expected the bill to be tabled soon and for people to ‘lock in a PMAV’ if they needed to. I took down a map of our own property as an example to show practically what it all meant. Out of the 50 people at the field day when I asked if they knew what a PMAV was only two people put their hands up, one of those I had helped the year before to lock in a PMAV and the other person was someone I had a chat with prior to the day starting. I told everyone that we would hold some Queensland Globe w-shops so people could check their mapping layers and we could explain to individuals what the layers meant. So at this point, I’m already spending my organisation’s time and money doing what the Qld Government ought to have been doing if it had seriously considered the implications of constantly changing the rules, and the needs of the people across the state who manage vegetation on behalf of all Queenslanders. At that workshop held in Mareeba we had 37 people attend. We showed them how to use Queensland Globe and how to check if they had a registered PMAV and their current regulated veg layer. Majority of the people in the room had not locked in a PMAV, The stress and anxiety seen on people’s faces who didn’t understand what the layer’s were or meant for their business was heart breaking. Trying to explain the SAC and knowing full well there would be amendments to the codes or they may be taken off the table all together, was very stressful not only for myself but those who currently relied on the SAC’s. Young families who had wanted to take over the family properties now frustrated and confused of what their future may be.

These extra pressures are absolutely real, and these are only 2 tiny snapshots from my own personal experience in the last couple of weeks. There are thousands more stories like this from across all of Queensland. I ask myself: have these sorts of impacts been considered? And I have to conclude: no they haven’t. These impacts have a genuine effect on mental health wellbeing, I have grave feeling more changes will see more depression. I feel we will see more and more people being pushed to their limits of what they can handle. The Labor government seems oblivious to these effects, and more than, you seem determined not to undertake any kind of work or study that will document the personal, economic and social impacts that these proposed changes will have. How can a government on the one hand, talk proudly about being the biggest agricultural producing state in
Australia, and on the other hand, impose these kinds of emotional, financial and health burdens on the very people who grow the food and fibre and we all eat and wear?

Yes we must consider that the science used is factual and that we need to grow food to feed people, but we must also consider that constantly changing the vegetation management act is having a huge effect of the wellbeing of people in the farming sector.

We can improve the knowledge of producers and their communities to address and mitigate the human welfare issues that result during and after Legislation changes. We need strong rural communities to not only just survive in an increasingly challenging environment but we need them to thrive. The answer is not to punish them, but to work with them.
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