



Speech by

**HOWARD HOBBS**

**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

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Hansard 30 November 1999

### TREE CLEARING

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (11.30 a.m.): Recently, much has been said about tree clearing in Queensland. The perception given by this Government and conservationists is that irresponsible farmers are wrecking public land in Queensland. However, the facts indicate otherwise.

Honourable members may not realise it, but there is more standing woodland in Queensland today than there was at the time of white settlement. History tells us that, when Captain Cook sailed the east coast, the first things he saw were fires. In that era, the Aborigines used to burn off areas. Also, lightning would start fires in woodlands and grasslands. The whole countryside was vastly different. For example, Grassy Hill at Cooktown is now covered in woody vegetation. If we go to Cape York and most other parts of Queensland, we find a thickening of vegetation. When the stage coaches used to run in western Queensland, they took hessian screens for privacy when people needed to go to the toilet. Today there is so much timber along those roadways that a dog can't bark. That example serves to illustrate that the vegetation is thickening.

The carrying capacity of rural land is also being affected. In the past, whereas a certain number of sheep or cattle were on a run, the thickening of vegetation means that there is now less grass and, therefore, they no longer have the same capacity.

Dr Bill Burrows has documented this change in a scientific assessment. Anybody who wishes to look at it can do so. The Minister's figures indicated that from 1995 to 1997 some 340,000 hectares per year, or an 18% increase, was cleared, 40% of which was on leasehold land and 57% of which was on freehold land. Interestingly, for 1991 to 1995 the figure was 289,000 hectares, of which 53% was leasehold land and of which 44% was freehold land. However, the figures given to me when I was the Minister indicated that between 60% and 70% of regrowth was included in that overall calculation. How has the figure suddenly gone down to 18%? One imagines that some sort of calculation has been made in relation to the long-term permits that have been issued. However, not enough time has elapsed for those to have any real effect. This suggests that there is something wrong with the Minister's figures.

Also, each year in excess of 40% of all clearing reverts to regrowth. I will cite some of the figures for this year. Of the 340,000 hectares of land cleared each year, 40% reverts to regrowth, which gives us 136,000 hectares. That leaves 204,000 hectares. If 65% of that is regrowth, that leaves 61,400 hectares of cleared land. If we take into consideration the 72 million hectares of woodland in Queensland, that represents 0.0008 of a per cent of the area. We are not talking about a lot of land in this instance.

Research has identified that Queensland's grazing industry is also a net sink for greenhouse gas carbon dioxide and not a net source, as has been promoted by many. Research also indicates that the thickened Queensland vegetation absorbs approximately 140 million tonnes of carbon dioxide each year—more than double the volume being emitted by the land use and forestry sectors. Therefore, the previous national greenhouse gas inventory figure which attributes land use and forest industries as contributing 24% of the total national carbon dioxide emission is absolutely incorrect.

Today the Minister quoted some figures. He stated that land clearing in Queensland contributes to about 18% of Australia's greenhouse impacts. In reality, that figure is not correct. Also, the Kyoto

talks found that emissions by land clearing had by 1995 already fallen to 78,000 megatons. Thus Australia could increase emissions from land clearing and still meet the Kyoto targets. That is the situation.

Also, more research needs to be carried out on crops—for instance, cane and cotton—and various grasses to determine their capability as carbon sinks. After all, cotton is a woody weed. Those are issues that we need to assess. Through thickening, trees also cause land degradation. People do not often realise that. They think that the more trees we have the better off we are. That is not the case. In many instances, where we have more trees we have less grass, because there is not enough moisture for it to grow. That produces more run-off. At the end of the dry season, the rain comes down and the topsoil is washed away. That is basically because there are too many trees. In my region of Warrego there is now double the number of trees that there were previously.

**Mr Lucas:** You've got to be cruel to be kind, have you, when you're knocking down trees?

**Mr HOBBS:** Sometimes you have to be. Out in those areas they do a lot of clearing in the mulga country and the natural grasses and vegetation come back. They have to manage it to make sure that they do not get too many trees. It is a real problem. People must understand that situation. People also think that we must have trees to stop erosion. That is not the case. Buffel grass and binding-type grasses are more effective in binding the soil together to stop the erosion of creeks and gullies. On major river systems trees are also needed. There needs to be a mixture. I have used a dozer to smooth out a wash-out. Once the grass takes hold, it will bind the soil and water will not erode it.

It is important to state that land-holders are responsible. This has been the case for the past 10 years in particular, since Landcare has been operating and property plans have been put together. The modern farmer knows a lot about sustainable management. Labor has an agenda to stop all vegetation management in Queensland. Its media campaign on tree clearing, salinity and endangered species is total misinformation. Outrage was expressed by the Minister about the permits that have been issued. Those permits were sustainable permits issued by his own department. Not one endangered tree would have been lost under that process. Any trees of concern or vulnerable species are taken into consideration. The permits were issued under very strict guidelines. There is no sense in suddenly becoming upset by the number of permits that have been issued.

Today, when asked whether he was going to revoke those permits, the Minister did not answer the question. Therefore, it is clear that the Government is going to revoke those permits. How low can they go? He also expressed outrage about the areas of trees cleared. There has never been a qualification by the Minister in relation to regrowth. As I said before, he cites a figure of 18%. Under our Government, the figure was 65% of the calculations. Something has gone wrong. The figures are not right. We need some explanation of them. We should be able to compare them with the briefing notes that I had when I was the Minister.

I turn to the issue of salinity. The Minister said, "Shock, horror. There is a report about salinity in the Nindigully region—7,000 hectares which has not been found before." However, in truth it was only 2,000 hectares—an ancient lake that has been there since time began. Everyone has known about it. The local farmer knew about it and conducted a Landcare operation there. Seven years ago, while monitoring it the way any good, responsible farmer would do, he applied for NHT funding and received money to put down some bores. They were monitoring the water, because they were also farming on some of the land. After three applications for NHT funding—and the first two times they were knocked back because it was not classified as significant—they were given some money. That is the way misinformation is being peddled out there. The salinity audit states that this information is yet to be independently reviewed and it should be considered preliminary in nature and that it is not expected that dry land salinity in Queensland will dominate the landscape within the next 100 years, as observed in southern and Western Australia. In respect of those regions, it is being stated that salinity may occur through tree clearing. However, we now have double the number of trees in that catchment than at the time of white settlement. What they are saying is illogical.

**Mr Lucas:** What's your basis for saying that?

**Mr HOBBS:** The number of trees has doubled. The country is thickening because there are no fires to burn the suckers and they keep growing. That is the reason. We recognise that salinity is an important issue and that we should plan accordingly. However, this Government should not impose unreasonable standards. The most damaging event to Queensland was the introduction of rabbits.

Time expired.

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