



Speech by

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TREE-CLEARING GUIDELINES

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (6.20 p.m.): It gives me great pleasure to rise tonight to second the Minister's amendment. As the Minister has said, this is a unique opportunity for this Parliament to demonstrate support for rural Queensland, and it is unique in many ways. Firstly, it is an opportunity to put Queensland's agricultural industry on a sustainable footing by introducing responsible vegetation management principles. Excessive and inappropriate land clearing is not a problem that is going to go away and we have to deal with it now if we are to protect our State's biodiversity and its food bowl for all time.

Secondly, it is an opportunity to access Federal funds, which in two or three years' time simply will not be there. It is an issue that Governments, either State or Federal, have to deal with, and quite properly this Government—the Beattie Labor Government—is acting now when the time is right. At the moment the Federal Government does have buckets of money to draw on. One of those buckets is the \$580m set aside for greenhouse gas reduction measures. The Commonwealth also has the Natural Heritage Trust funds and, of course, the best known bucket of all is the funds from the sale of Telstra. The Beattie Government has taken on the challenge of introducing sensible land management guidelines—something the Opposition failed to do. It is interesting that its date for bringing in its guidelines was June of 1998. Was that not the same date for the regional forest agreement? It failed there, too. Now, at a critical time when we need an indication from Canberra of their financial support, there is silence.

Let me just remind the members of this House why this issue is so critical, why action is needed now. There are three fundamental reasons why the issue of land clearing must be addressed. Firstly, land clearing is the greatest single threat to biodiversity in Australia, threatening plant and animal species with extinction. Land clearing results in change to the watertable, bringing mineral salts to the surface, creating saline soils and rivers, as is so evident in the Murray-Darling basin, parts of which are possibly damaged beyond repair with serious impacts for agricultural production affecting the whole of the rural economy. Of course, land clearing does result in increasing greenhouse gas emissions at a time when Australia must reduce its levels.

Members opposite had some debate and some squabbling about what the actual figures are, but I challenge any member on the other side of this House to challenge those fundamental reasons why we need to address land clearing. I hear no response!

I am not going to quibble with those figures that we have heard here tonight. I am going to read from a letter written by eminent scientists—people to whom this community can look for accuracy and expertise in this debate. The letter, in the *Courier-Mail* of 19 November, states—

"A moratorium on land clearing is the best way to arrest declining biodiversity and ecosystem health, as well as providing for sustainable agriculture. A wealth of literature points to land clearing as the single greatest threat to biodiversity. The state of the environment report tells us that the deterioration of critical ecosystem services, especially soil and water quality, will accelerate if clearing continues.

Clearly, these trends threaten to deprive future generations of the high standard of living enjoyed by Queenslanders today.

The outcome of the negotiations taking place between stakeholders in this debate, including legislative change, will play a large role in determining Queensland's future environmental and economic health and wellbeing.

In the meantime, we regret the failure of leadership of the state's primary producer groups, who have not seen fit to speak out against the unnecessary and self-destructive panic clearing taking place on a massive scale."

That letter was signed by Professor Roger Kitching; Professor Ian Lowe, Griffith University; Dr Dana Bergstrom, University of Queensland; Professor Harry Recher, Edith Cowan University, Perth; Dr Richard Hobbs, President of the Ecological Society of Australia; and Associate Professor Brendan Mackay, Australian National University, Canberra. Those are the people who are telling members opposite what they want to ignore, hoping that it is all just going to go away. However, it is not.

What is the critical element that we need now to ensure the success of the current negotiations? The critical element that we need now is without doubt the ability to provide compensation to landowners if their ability to make money from their land is reduced by virtue of tree-clearing guidelines, and I fully support their right to compensation. That is why this amendment to the motion calls on the Federal Government to immediately commit \$100m to support Queensland's rural and regional agricultural producers in protecting vegetation as an essential step in sustaining Queensland farming and grazing lands. If the coalition votes against this amendment, it will be demonstrating its disregard for rural Queensland and it will stand condemned as yet again putting political point scoring ahead of the interests of Queensland.
