



Speech by

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AMENDMENT BILL

Dr CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (9.46 p.m.): Yesterday in the debate on the Water Bill I noted the difficulty that members opposite have with making the philosophical leap to embrace ecologically sustainable development. They talk about it a lot, they use the words and they claim to understand the concept of the sustainable use of resources, but actions speak louder than words and their actions on vegetation management demonstrate, as they did on water management, that they want past traditions to continue regardless of the impact on the environment.

Just as they could not accept any constraints on individual rights to use water regardless of downstream impacts, they do not accept that the rights of farmers who clear their land should be limited in some way— regardless of the wider environmental impacts. They do not accept that we need a sound planning framework based on good science, whether that be for water or for vegetation management.

The Premier made a commitment not to proclaim the provision in the Bill relating to "of concern" vegetation, that is, a vegetation type where only between 10% and 30% of the original vegetation cover is left intact, unless the Federal Government came to the party and helped to fund a compensation package for farmers. They failed the farmers and they failed Queensland. In spite of having \$400m set aside to fund any measures to improve our country's greenhouse gas emissions, they refused to act to assist us with the introduction of sound planning roles on tree clearing for the first time in our State's history. They may yet come to the party and play their part. I hope so. But the deadline set by the Premier has passed and we are not prepared to wait any longer to totally protect these regional ecosystems defined as endangered, where 10% or less of the original vegetation remains.

The Vegetation Management Act that was passed last year was overdue legislation. Other States have legislation that controls land clearing. We know that in Queensland land clearing is occurring at a totally unacceptable rate which must be slowed down if we are not to create major problems of salinity, soil erosion and species extinction.

So what has changed since last year? Why are we here again debating amendments to this legislation? Certainly, it is not because the extent of the problem has changed. The latest figures suggest that the rate of land clearing is increasing. It is certainly not because of the Opposition. It still will not accept the need to act. No, it is because the Commonwealth's refusal to provide funding support leaves us with no choice other than to change the laws that we enacted last year.

When farmers made their voices heard at Winton and Roma, urged on, I would say, by a lot of scaremongering from the Opposition, clearly there was a need for us to consider what our next move would be, and we have. So we have come back to this House to further amend this legislation in a way that is responsible. Of course, both the conservation movement and the farmers have condemned the proposed changes to the Vegetation Management Act. But many of their fears are misplaced, and that is what I really want to focus on tonight, because they are misplaced for different reasons.

The conservation movement claims that only a tiny percentage of vegetation will now be protected, yet 73% of all land in Queensland is leasehold and we applied regulations protecting both endangered and of concern vegetation on leasehold land months ago. For the first time ever in Queensland, land-holders in most cases will require approval to clear native vegetation. There are sensible exemptions to that requirement, and I will return to that later. Applications will be assessed

against a State code governing the clearing of native vegetation that has been developed from scientific research and consultation with interest groups.

There is so much misinformation about this issue that it is worth while including here the nature of the basic standard. According to the guidelines, that includes no clearing of remnant endangered regional ecosystems on freehold land, no clearing of remnant endangered and of concern regional ecosystems on leasehold land, retaining vegetation so that regional ecosystems do not move to a lower conservation status and retaining vegetation so that the total extent of remnant vegetation within a bioregion does not fall below 30% of the preclearing extent.

In addition, a clearing application will need to meet the following set of performance requirements: nature conservation values and water quality of significant natural wetlands, lakes and springs are maintained; viable networks of wildlife habitat are maintained; watercourses and adjacent habitat are protected by maintaining bank stability by protecting against erosion and slumping, maintaining water quality by filtering sediments, nutrients and other pollutants, maintaining aquatic habitat and maintaining wildlife habitat; the soil resource is protected against the loss of chemical and physical fertility through erosion or mass movement; the landscape is protected against increased salinity or water logging; there are no adverse effects on the environment caused by the release of acid or metal contaminants from the disturbance of acid sulfate soils; and cleared land is capable of sustainable use where the proposed use is for primary production or forest plantation purposes.

I do not feel that anyone concerned about the management of our land could object to those kinds of standards. Any conservationist should be very comfortable with what is proposed there when these applications are going to be assessed. Regional codes will be contained in the regional vegetation management plans that will be developed by local committees of all stakeholders. This process will provide for the first time a real opportunity to achieve ecologically sustainable development.

Much has been said in this debate about the right to farm as though this legislation will prevent land-holders from doing what is necessary for the everyday management of their property, yet appendix 1 of the guide to the vegetation management policy sets out a whole raft of exemptions of the need to even apply for a permit to clear. I think it is worth putting on the record again just what some of those are to counter the misinformation that has been put forward in many cases in this debate.

The following exemptions will apply under the Vegetation Management Act: clearing of vegetation associated with building a single residence or associated buildings; clearing of any vegetation for activities constituting essential management, which includes establishment of a firebreak, maintenance of existing fences, roads and buildings, necessary clearings to ensure the safety of persons or property, or maintaining a garden or orchard; clearing vegetation for activities constituting routine management in areas that are not mapped as endangered regional ecosystems or have not been declared by the Minister as being of high nature conservation value or vulnerable to land degradation, which includes establishing a fence, road or other built infrastructure that is on less than five hectares, reclearing regrowth vegetation or supplying fodder for stock in drought conditions; clearing vegetation for weed or pest control; clearing for ongoing farm forestry practices, which does not include clearing of native vegetation for establishment of a new plantation; and clearing for fire hazard reduction as defined under the Fire and Rescue Authority Act. There are other exemptions in the urban area, but I wanted to focus on those to demonstrate that farmers are not going to be restricted in carrying out their normal maintenance activities and operating their farms.

In the Cairns DNR district, which includes the Wet Tropics, Cape York and the savanna lands, work is progressing well to introduce this new regime. A regional coordinator has been appointed and has begun discussions with stakeholders. Regional management vegetation officers and regional management planning officers will be appointed in the near future to deal with the applications to clear land to prepare regional vegetation management plans.

There is no hysteria about the process, as seems to be occurring elsewhere. Much of the land is leasehold, where people are already accustomed to operating under clearing guidelines or the land falls within the Wet Tropics World Heritage area where controls already exist. I know, though, that some concern has been expressed that the vegetation maps being prepared by the Queensland Herbarium have not been provided for our area. I do believe there should be more resources put into that process. We can use existing vegetation maps such as those prepared by Webb and Tracy for rainforest areas and the Wet Tropics Authority is providing additional mapping information.

As I said in my previous speech on this legislation, good farmers should have nothing to fear because they will already be managing their land in a sustainable way. If they have not been doing that, then this new legislation will provide them with the opportunity to actually review their practices and ultimately achieve a better result both for themselves and for the environment. As with the changes to water management, for some this legislation requires a change of attitude and a new philosophy but one that is essential for the future if Queensland's natural resources are going to be handed down to our children and grandchildren as healthy, functioning ecosystems to sustain our economy and our way of life.

