



Speech by

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NATURAL RESOURCES AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs REILLY (Mudgeeraba—ALP) (3.03 p.m.): I am pleased to speak in support of the Natural Resources and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2003, because I feel very strongly about the issue which is under debate here, and that is land clearing. Because a number of people may have had some questions in recent times regarding my commitment to and my sympathy with what they call the green lobby, I want to make it perfectly clear at the start that on this issue I am unashamedly and unmistakably green.

I am indebted to the Queensland Conservation Council, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature and other web sites and other local sources for much of the information that I have. The amendments to five pieces of legislation which this bill will achieve address an issue of vital importance, one that is of the utmost importance to this state, and that is the scourge of illegal land clearing.

The second part of the bill fulfils the commitment made by this government last year to use the Commonwealth procedures for dealing with native title for new mining and exploration activity. I will be restricting my comments to the first aim of this bill, and that is the illegal land clearing issue. The measures which we are about to introduce in an effort to clamp down on illegal clearing of native and endangered vegetation are tough, and they need to be because there are a small number of landowners, farmers, graziers and corporations which have been and still are deliberately thumbing their noses at the law and clearing land without permit and without regard for the future generations and future land users.

I am sure that these measures have been described in full by other speakers so I will just go over them briefly. They include five-year bans on clearing permits for anyone convicted of illegal clearing, remediation notices attached to the land title and greater flexibility for magistrates to impose more substantial fines.

These measures, along with others, have been introduced because the current enforcement provisions of the Vegetation Management Act and the Land Act are not doing the job of deterring people from illegal clearing as well as they should be. Some land-holders simply have more to gain financially through clearing than conserving, and that is why we need both punitive measures and incentives to tackle the problem totally. That is why we as a government are still talking with the Commonwealth about due compensation for land-holders who do the right thing, which is the majority of them.

I believe any compensation package should be federally funded, because the issue of land clearing and its long-term effects on our environment is a nationally and regionally geographic one, and the land that we save will be for the benefit of all future Australians. There are many options and examples for the Commonwealth to follow if it has the will. We can consider tax concessions, grants or direct payments for land-holders or leaseholders who show a commitment to conservation and set aside land for future preservation.

Much of the research I undertook in Europe last year when I attended the third world congress of women in agriculture considered not only farming practices in Spain and France and throughout Europe but also the effects of inappropriate practices like unchecked land clearing in many parts of the world. While some European jurisdictions are now prescribing sections of land to be put aside for preservation or subsidising, providing grants to farmers who cooperate or undertake conservation practices themselves, it is hard not to wonder if the horse has already bolted. There is not a lot of native

forest left in Europe, where once there were magnificent tracts of ancient trees and wildlife, including lions and bears.

What became clear to me was that, despite the current commitment over there and the almost sudden realisation that what is left is precious and needs to be preserved, the processes and programs are not prescriptive enough or coordinated across the continent sufficiently to make a consistent and real difference. That is why I advocate a national approach in Australia, particularly to compensation incentives and support for land-holders who not only do the right thing by the law but also demonstrate a personal commitment to conservation and employ environmentally friendly farming practices.

This legislation will not change the way we determine what land can be cleared, and neither will it impose any new restrictions on land-holders' ability to legally clear their land. What it will do is make it inconvenient and uneconomic to illegally cut down native forest. This must be done, and must be done now, if we are to preserve Queensland's natural beauty and biodiversity for future generations to enjoy and if we are to maintain and manage our rich and yielding agricultural lands for generations of primary producers in the years to come.

Shamefully, Queensland clears more vegetation than any other developed nation—almost 500,000 hectares a year. To give honourable members an idea of what that might be, that is an area three times the size of Fraser Island or more than 10 suburban house blocks every minute. With massive land clearing comes the devastation of our unique and fragile wildlife, something that Australia and Queensland is known for and that attracts tourists and boosts our economy in the millions every year. Every year in Queensland 68,000 long-nosed bandicoots, 22,400 sugar gliders, 17,000 brush-tail possums and 7,500 greater gliders are killed through land clearing, according to a Queensland Conservation Council report. The 1997 *New South Wales state of the environment report* also estimates that between 1,000 and 2,000 birds are killed for every 100 hectares of land. Given the rate at which we are clearing in Queensland, that means between four million and eight million birds killed every year.

Mrs Carryn Sullivan: Five hundred species become extinct.

Mrs REILLY: Too many species are becoming extinct at too rapid a rate. At least 1,000 koalas are likely to die each year as a result of loss of habitat and the clearing of bushland. Destruction of native bush has risen by seven per cent in the past year, making Australia the sixth worst nation behind only Brazil, Indonesia, Sudan, Zambia and Mexico. I do not think there is any question that these countries and the unchecked environmental vandalism which they have allowed to unfold have devastated their local and regional environments, their air quality, their standard and quality of life, their health and their agricultural viability. So let us not go down that track. Let us put an end to it here and now while we still can.

In the two years between 1999 and 2001, one million hectares of land was cleared in Queensland, an increase of 33 per cent on the previous two years. Much of this was bulldozed in 1999-2000, when panic clearing was at its peak. Panic clearing—and let us be very clear about what that is—is bulldozing land now even if you do not need it. You do not know if you ever will need it for grazing or farming, but just in case you do and just in case you will not be allowed to use it later or clear it later, you bulldoze it. That is the worst and most reprehensible form of environmental vandalism. It is nothing more than selfish and greedy. To defend it by claiming, 'Well, it wouldn't happen if landowners were paid ahead of time not to do it,' is tantamount to saying that we should be paying people not to break the law. It is unacceptable and there is no logical reason nor defence for it.

Queensland is a megadiverse state. We have more biodiversity than any state of Australia. Professor Ian Lowe, the former chair of the federal state of the environment report, said that land clearing is without a doubt the greatest threat to biodiversity in Australia, and most of it is happening on our doorstep. Over 80 per cent of all land clearing in Queensland is to make way for new cattle grazing paddocks. The rest is for sugarcane and other crops as well as houses, roads, factories and tourist developments. The latest *Statewide Landcover and Trees Study*, which uses satellite technology—which we have already talked about—identified 61,000 hectares of land that potentially has been illegally cleared. I just wanted to repeat that, because that amount of land is about equal to the size of my electorate of Mudgeeraba. I find that pretty scary.

On the Gold Coast, and particularly in an area which is growing rapidly like Mudgeeraba, land is mostly cleared for housing development. In the Gold Coast hinterland there is much to be proud of and much to protect for future generations—not just the notable World Heritage listed Springbrook National Park, but also surrounding forests and bushland in Numinbah, Austinvill, Lamington and right through the south-east ranges. I firmly advocate a position of sensible, sustainable economic growth and development and I support real ecotourism opportunities, because they are the ones that showcase and highlight these environmental jewels to others right around the world and help preserve them for future generations to enjoy. But these things must be carefully balanced with a recognition of the importance of conservation of our environment.

There is a clear and scientific link between land clearing and water quality, soil erosion, salinity and the increase of harmful nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus in our river systems. Some of these feed into the Great Barrier Reef, a jewel that we cannot afford to lose if we are to maintain the economic viability of our state in which tourism has a great part to play. Native vegetation provides a filter to keep rivers, lakes and streams healthy and productive and reduces salinity in waterways. The removal of native vegetation, particularly along river banks, has profoundly damaged our rivers and the aquatic life within them. Salinity threatens land and water quality.

In Queensland, current land use conditions threaten to affect \$3.1 million hectares with salinity by 2050. The area already affected in Queensland has increased by more than 500 per cent in the past 15 years—to 48,000 hectares in 2001. Research by CSIRO and leading scientists has clearly highlighted the link between salinity and the nature of underlying ground water systems. It is very simple. Tree clearing causes water tables to rise. Trees act as natural pumps taking water out of the ground and lowering water tables. A rise in water tables leads to a rise in salt nearer the surface soil. Two-thirds of all land clearing in Queensland is happening in catchments that the federal government has identified as priority areas for action to prevent salinity—areas like the Condamine-Balonne catchment which has one of the highest rates of land clearing in the whole country. What does this mean? This means that it is not just a greenie's argument; it is about securing the future of our grazing and agricultural land so that generations of farmers will be able to continue to produce the diverse range of primary produce we are so fortunate to be able to enjoy locally and harvest for international export.

We need to promote vegetation management practices that will help land-holders, communities and governments better manage native vegetation across the landscape. Already farmers throughout Australia have successfully turned to new farm products and enterprises, such as the cultivation of native crops for oils, flowers, fruits and seeds, in response to land degradation and salinity. Just last year we passed legislation in this House that will allow the production of hemp crops, a move which I hope many Queensland farmers will embrace for the economic and environmental benefits that this crop potentially can offer. I firmly believe that there is a point at which the green lobby and the agricultural lobby meet and should agree. That point is that if we do not do something now to preserve the land that we have, we will have nothing to pass on to our grandchildren either to walk through and enjoy, to farm, to breathe or to drink, because it will all be gone or poisoned beyond repair. We know how much the air and water quality that we enjoy depends upon a healthy environment.

I heard the member for Callide saying yesterday that the government has sought to demonise land-holders. I know that I have been passionate—and I am—about this issue. The member probably wants to accuse me of the same thing. I can see the member for Hinchinbrook champing at the bit to accuse me of something similar, but nothing could be further from the truth. This government is serious about balancing sustainable economic land use with the need to protect the environment and maintain biodiversity. The majority of land-holders recognise that their long-term future depends on environmentally sustainable land management now. I will repeat that for the benefit of the member for Hinchinbrook, who is being too rude to listen. The majority of land-holders recognise that their long-term future—

Mr ROWELL: I rise to a point of order. The member did recognise me earlier and then when I had something to say she did not want to take me on.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Poole): Order! There is no point of order.

Mrs REILLY: The majority of land-holders recognise that their long-term future depends on environmentally sustainable land management now—and they must be commended for that. It is only a very small minority of law-breakers who illegally clear native vegetation and kill, threaten and endanger species out of pure spite or sheer bloody-mindedness or fear or ignorance—whatever it might be, because that is what panic clearing is—who will be affected by this legislation and the new provisions it introduces. Law-abiding, insightful and intelligent land-holders have nothing to fear from this legislation, nor should the opposition. I am pleased to commend the bill to the House.