



Speech by

**Dr LESLEY CLARK**

**MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER**

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Hansard 20 April 2004

**VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Dr LESLEY CLARK** (Barron River—ALP) (5.16 p.m.): I am proud to rise to speak in support of this historic legislation that will provide for the most important environmental reform by a Labor government in Queensland. It could be argued that the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill is in fact the most important piece of environmental legislation ever to have been introduced into the Queensland parliament. I commend the conservation movement for the role that it has played in raising community awareness of this issue.

The scientific case for ending broadscale land clearing of remnant vegetation is absolutely compelling and should be recognised by the National Party. The extent of land clearing in Queensland is probably still not appreciated by most people living in urban areas because it occurs far from where they live. Before clearing began in Queensland, 70 per cent of the state was covered in native woodlands and forests of varying density and 23 per cent was native grasslands. In 1999, three-quarters of the original woody vegetation remained as remnant. But in 1999 Australia had the sixth highest rate of land clearing in the world and approximately 85 per cent of that clearing occurred in Queensland.

The latest statewide land cover and tree study—SLATS—report released in January 2003 found that the Queensland average annual clearing rate from 1999 to 2001 was 577,000 hectares a year—an area three times the size of Fraser Island and which represented an area the size of three football fields being cleared every five minutes.

Since the Vegetation Management Act 1999 was proclaimed in September 2000, the Environmental Protection Agency's Queensland Herbarium has warned that continued clearing has resulted in 54 regional ecosystems being at a stage where any further significant clearing will cause a change in their conservation status. The majority of these ecosystems occur in highly cleared and heavily fragmented bioregions of the Brigalow Belt, south-east Queensland and the central Queensland coast. Yet the member for Callide attempted to portray this kind of clearing as insignificant. Obviously, I just cannot share that view, and neither do the majority of Queenslanders.

The impact of this rate of land clearing is creating major environmental problems that also have huge economic costs. Firstly, the loss of habitat is estimated to result in the death of some 100 million native animals every year, with some species of woodland birds facing extinction. Land clearing causes dryland salinity, which threatens our water quality and reduces agricultural productivity, as demonstrated by the salinity hazard maps produced by the Department of Natural Resources. Soil erosion adversely impacts on river ecology and the Great Barrier Reef.

The third major problem is that of greenhouse gas emissions caused by burning and rotting vegetation. Land clearing is responsible for 12 per cent of Australia's total greenhouse gas emissions, amounting to approximately 71 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> gas—almost as much as trucks and cars. Reducing the rate of broadscale land clearing will meet the specific provisions on land use change under the Kyoto protocol. The Australian Greenhouse Office has calculated that placing a cap on land clearing of 500,000 hectares and reducing it to zero by 2006 will in fact reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by between 20 million and 25 million tonnes a year.

The compelling arguments for reducing the rate of land clearing were the basis for the Beattie government's first attempt to act in the form of the 1999 Vegetation Management Act. But then the failure of the Commonwealth to support Queensland in funding assistance to compensate farmers led

to its amendment the following year, reducing the restrictions on land clearing to cover only remnant vegetation described as endangered and thereby significantly reducing the value of that legislation, much to my disappointment when I spoke on that in the House at that time.

The current legislation achieves the goals of the 1999 legislation and much more by protecting all remnant vegetation, capping clearing to no more than another 500,000 hectares and totally phasing out clearing by 2006. It was no longer tenable to wait for the Commonwealth, so Queensland is providing the entire \$150 million to assist farmers that was determined as appropriate and adequate by the Australian bureau of resource economics report, which was in fact commissioned by the Commonwealth government itself. The immediate imperative of the Howard federal government was to save National Party seats. That imperative won out over the imperative to protect the environment and secure long-term sustainability for the future of the farmers.

Whilst the greatest clearing has occurred in central and western Queensland, the Wet Tropics bioregion has also seen significant clearing of freehold land outside of the world heritage area in, for example, areas such as the Tablelands and Mission Beach. This poses a threat to native animals, particularly tree kangaroos and cassowaries.

One issue on which all members in this debate do agree is the need for accurate vegetation mapping. The current 1:100,000 scale maps do not provide sufficient accuracy and detail for the smaller blocks that are characteristic of much of the freehold in the Wet Tropics. New maps are being prepared at a finer scale of 1:50,000. There is a need for the finalisation of these maps as quickly as possible, particularly for the Cairns region, which is experiencing a development boom with new residential and tourism developments worth in excess of \$2 billion under way or on the drawing board. In my electorate of Barron River there are still many areas classified as regional endangered ecosystems in urban areas that can be protected under this legislation, and accurate fine scale maps are essential.

Whilst this legislation is primarily aimed at rural areas, there are important changes that will affect urban areas, such as in my electorate and in the area of Cairns generally. The definition of 'urban land' has been changed. As I have indicated, under the existing legislation the state does not regulate the clearing of freehold land in urban areas other than where the vegetation is classified as endangered. The current definition of 'urban area' includes all areas identified in local government planning schemes zoned for urban purposes, rural residential purposes and future urban purposes.

Though it removes rural residential zones from the urban area definition, reflecting the reality that local authorities treat them more like rural areas than urban, removing rural residential from the urban area classification means importantly that this land use will be subject to the same provisions as other rural land and all remnant vegetation will be protected. This will help prevent the high rates of clearing linked to land being converted from rural to rural residential.

Under the bill this definition will apply unless a local government has prepared a priority infrastructure plan or the chief executive of the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy has prepared a gazette notice for a particular local government area. Ultimately, the amended definition of 'urban area' will be tied to a local government's priority infrastructure area as identified in its priority infrastructure plan. Under the Integrated Planning Act, local authorities will have to prepare these plans by 2005, which will give us a much more accurate description of future urban land for the next 10 to 15 years of growth for residential, retail, commercial and industrial purposes. The introduction of these plans means that future growth will be much more tightly defined in planning schemes.

Where priority infrastructure plans have not been developed, areas within planning schemes can be defined as urban or non-urban by gazette notice. This option will be used where there is difficulty determining through the planning scheme whether an area is urban or non-urban. The gazetting of areas within a planning scheme as urban will only be done in consultation with local government and will only occur where the current zoning is ambiguous and requires clarification.

The bill also strengthens land clearing provisions relating to urban areas by specifying that the exemption from the need to apply for a permit extends only to clearing in an urban area for an urban purpose. This addresses an existing anomaly where broadscale clearing can occur without a permit in an urban area, even if the clearing is completely unrelated to an urban use. I congratulate the minister on fixing this anomaly, otherwise we would find ourselves in a situation where it would be possible to clear land without a permit for purposes that would require a permit elsewhere.

Importantly, the Department of Natural Resources will also have more power to protect vegetation where land use changes are proposed. Under the IPA the department will become a concurrence agency where applications for a material change of use are lodged with the local authority on land parcels greater than two hectares—a decrease from five hectares in the previous legislation.

In conclusion, this historic legislation presents the best opportunity yet to ensure sustainability of our primary industries into the future and the retention of Queensland's amazing biodiversity and it will assist Australia in playing its part in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

I commend the Liberal Party for its support of this legislation, despite failure during the election campaign to stick to the principles it has always had on this issue, as outlined by the member for Robina. The National Party's opposition to the legislation was predictable given its constituency, but there are in fact many good farmers who understand the need for this legislation. It is a pity that the National Party has not taken on a more constructive role in this debate. History will, I am sure, prove the Beattie government right to take this decisive step in phasing out broadscale land clearing by 2006. I am proud to commend this bill to the House.