



Speech by

Hon. LIDDY CLARK

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

Hansard 21 April 2004

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. E. A. CLARK (Clayfield—ALP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy) (3.48 p.m.): That is a hard act to follow, but I am going to give it my best shot. Queensland's irreplaceable biodiversity ranges from the unique coral reefs and rainforests of our far north to the mulga lands and desert landscapes of our western outback, all the way to the unique bushland that we are lucky enough to enjoy here in south-east Queensland. However, we know for a fact that all that is threatened. The science to prove that broadscale tree clearing hurts our natural environment is almost absolute.

Just last year 420 of the most respected ecologists from within Australia and around the world put pen to paper and signed the Brigalow Declaration beseeching the Premier and the Prime Minister to take this step. The Prime Minister has shown himself unwilling to listen to them, but the Premier of Queensland and this government have listened to them and we recognise that the time to act is now. To leave it any later would be lunacy and an act of negligence by a government that future generations would never forgive.

As we lose our trees salinity increases, water quality decreases, habitat for native fauna is lost and their numbers decline and pest animals thrive. By taking away what are truly the lungs of the earth, clearing contributes to global warming in the form of increased greenhouse gas emissions.

We have heard an enormous amount over the past two days, especially from members opposite, about thickening of vegetation and the corresponding thinning that is necessary. First, it is vital to give recognition to all those members of the regional vegetation management committees from all over Queensland from whose draft plans much of the groundwork for this aspect of the legislation has been drawn. Those dedicated committee members volunteered an enormous amount of their time and energy to develop the draft regional vegetation management plans. The government appreciates their efforts, particularly the rigour they brought to the task. These groups ensured that practical, on-the-ground experience and commonsense was blended with local knowledge and the best available scientific information to produce the advice they provided in the draft plans.

Those invaluable insights from the community itself have highlighted the need for recognition of thinning as an ongoing purpose in the legislation before the House today. There are areas in Queensland where the problem of thickening of remnant native vegetation has created serious changes in the local environment. Whether it is the consequence of farm management or of grazing, thickening is a significant problem for many, many land-holders. It can result in the loss of those open landscapes and their replacement with dense shrubs. Often this process results in a reduction in ground cover with a consequent increase in soil loss and, almost inevitably, erosion. This will eventually affect water catchments. It is a case of what becomes a problem in a small area has a negative impact on a wider scale.

For land-holders, the impact of thickening of vegetation is important. It not only represents a lost opportunity cost; it also represents costs in terms of the value of the land they manage. Thickening can result in an environment which is often vastly different ecologically from the original vegetation complex on which the land-holder depended. For that reason, the thinning

provisions of this legislation are critical. Specifically, they are to ensure that regional ecosystems are conserved and that land degradation and potential loss of biodiversity are prevented.

These are all important considerations for land-holders who want to remain in business and who want to have viable properties to pass on to future generations. These are also the purposes of the legislation—to prevent land degradation and prevent the loss of biodiversity. That is why we are ensuring that land-holders' legitimate concerns about vegetation thickening are met not just now but also into the future.

This legislation recognises thinning as an ongoing purpose. This is clear and unambiguous. Unfortunately, there are some misconceptions floating around about thinning. Honourable members will have no doubt heard claims that land-holders' ability to carry out thinning would be detrimentally affected by this legislation. That simply is not true. Thinning as defined in this legislation is to allow the restoration of a regional ecosystem to its typical range of densities. Land-holders will be able to carry out thinning which will allow a reintroduction of the range of vegetation, including grasses, which were a part of the original complex of an area. It will result ultimately in a balanced and sustainable landscape which will provide the dual benefits of environmental stability and grazing productivity. That, after all, is what we need to ensure the present and future sustainability of our diverse landscapes here in Queensland.

Under the requirements of a specific code for thinning, land-holders who are applying for a thinning permit will need to describe how they want the vegetation to look when they have finished the work. This will demonstrate how the thinning they propose carrying out will ensure the re-establishment of a range more typical of densities and species across a small area. The Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy will then examine this and assess it in the context of the broader landscape.

This legislation provides a fair and reasonable approach to the issues of thinning, but it does not simply end there. The Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy has undertaken to review the thinning codes that will be in place at proclamation of this legislation after there has been feedback from land-holders out there in the real world. So it is fair and it is reasonable. There is nothing unreasonable in the thinning provisions of this legislation. Even so, land-holders are being given another opportunity to provide feedback to improve the thinning codes after a reasonable period of use for assessment.

Once this legislation is proclaimed, land-holders will be able to apply for thinning immediately. This will ensure there is minimal disruption to the good management of the productive native vegetation resources of this state. With that, I commend this bill to the House.