



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AMENDMENT BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (5.25 pm): I rise to speak to the Vegetation Management Amendment Bill 2008. The explanatory notes state that the objectives of the bill are to amend the Vegetation Management Act 1999 to—

Clarify the definitions of an endangered, of concern and not of concern regional ecosystem in the VM Act.

Validate retrospectively all past vegetation related decisions affected by the definition of an endangered, of concern and not of concern regional ecosystem in the VM Act.

This Vegetation Management Amendment Bill 2008 has been brought in because of an impending court challenge. In that challenge, an applicant for a tree-clearing permit has sought to clarify and challenge the methodology, citing that all regrowth ecosystems should be included in the calculation of the percentage remaining. No doubt the government recognised that those who are challenging and have challenged the department have good legal advice. The government has put this in place to cover its own hide.

What is dangerous about this legislation is that it is retrospective, which covers up legal loopholes dating back to when the vegetation management laws were first introduced. This is like reducing the speed limit from 60 to 50 kilometres per hour and then further fining anyone who has been booked for speeding over the past five years. It is disappointing that this government can amend the act to suit itself. As a result of this we are going to see the further removal of property rights.

At present, regional ecosystems are classified as endangered if less than 10 per cent of the preclearing extent remains, or 10 per cent to 30 per cent of the preclearing extent remains if the area of remnant vegetation is less than 10,000 hectares. They are classified as of concern if 10 per cent to 30 per cent of the preclearing extent remains, or more than 30 per cent of the preclearing extent remains if the area of remnant vegetation is less than 10,000 hectares. They are classified as not of concern if more than 30 per cent of the preclearing extent remains and the area of remnant vegetation is more than 10,000 hectares.

This amendment is not all about clarifying the definitions of an endangered regional ecosystem. The area that is not of concern will be pushed into the classifications of area of concern or endangered. In other words, the white areas on the maps are going to become red. So landowners across the state are now going to witness the regrowth of their land become touchable.

Over the years we have seen many of our property rights removed through this vegetation management legislation. It is probably one of the most draconian pieces of legislation that has ever been introduced to parliament. It takes away rights and freedoms and it destroys livelihoods. I will give honourable members an example of how this is going to affect those in my electorate. We have a number of people. They are not just landowners; they are rural workers; they are railway employees; they are miners. They have worked all their life. All they are doing is looking to invest in something that they know a little bit about. They know very little about the stock market. They do not have academic degrees. They are not barristers or lawyers. They are basically workers. They are looking to buy a 20-acre block, a 50-acre block or a 4,000-acre block. They are looking to put a fence around that block and build a home. They like

to clear the land to make it look clean and tidy and so that they can graze a few cattle. This bill will inhibit those people doing that; it will inhibit them bringing up their families and investing in this land. This Vegetation Management Amendment Bill will stop them doing that.

I believe that the Labor movement is all about creating a perception that land management is about bulldozers and chains and that trees are left lying on the ground to become a haven for feral animals—foxes and rabbits. This not the case. Labor creates the perception that those trees lying on the ground will stay there forever and that they are causing the ozone layer to deplete. This is absolute nonsense. This is the perception that the Labor government would like to create.

What the government does not show is the good seed that is sewn—the legumes that are grown or the sorghum that is grown. It does not show the cattle fat in the field or the kangaroos bouncing in the field or amongst the pastures. Sometimes there is even a koala in the tree. This is something that the government likes to hide. It tries to portray that farmers are pumping the rivers dry and destroying the Great Barrier Reef and that the ozone layer is depleting and the world is coming to an end and that we have to do something because they have caused this catastrophe. It is absolute nonsense. It is a load of garbage.

At one time DNRW was a service provider to rural and regional Queensland. Now, if someone from DNRW knocks on your door you virtually tremble. Now we have the dob-in-a-farmer hotlines, the spy-in-the-sky satellites and the tree police. So what was once a service provider to rural and regional Queensland has become a mini-Gestapo, just like the EPA.

We had one of the biggest potential environmental catastrophes in Charters Towers recently during the floods. Do members know how long it took the EPA to investigate? Twenty days. Do members know what the excuse was? The EPA could not get in because of the floods. There was a bitumen road right up to the mine site that could have been accessed in two days. But when it comes to someone chopping down a tree you can guarantee that the EPA will be knocking on their door. It is just like the bats in Charters Towers. They have been flapping around year in, year out and we have had EPA officers harassing, annoying and threatening residents of Charters Towers and using heavy-handed tactics. When we have one of the biggest environmental catastrophes to hit Charters Towers for as long as anyone can remember, we do not see the EPA. It becomes virtually invisible.

Land management is about sowing the good seed, producing the best crop, producing the best food and in the end putting the best rump or rib steak on the table to eat. That is what land management is all about.

Retrospective legislation seeks to make conduct that was lawful at the time it was undertaken unlawful and to subject a citizen to a penalty. This is dangerous legislation. This is panicked and rushed legislation. It is anti rural areas, it is anti jobs and it has the potential to destroy livelihoods. I vehemently oppose this legislation.