




Speech By  
**Hon. Andrew Powell**

**MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE**

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**VEGETATION MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Hon. AC POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection) (4.47 pm): I, too, rise to speak in support of the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013. As environment minister I am pleased to stand here today, confident that these reforms will protect Queensland, the Great Barrier Reef and the state's important natural ecosystems.

These amendments will support growth in agricultural production, provide jobs and boost regional economies but will ensure protections remain. From an environmental perspective, the reforms contained in the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013 do not allow a return to broadscale land clearing in Queensland. It is important to note that this bill will not erode environmental protections under other existing legislation, which will continue to apply.

I remind the House and the opposition that both the state's Nature Conservation Act 1992 and the Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 will continue to apply to threatened species be they cassowaries, mahogany gliders, koalas or others.

Let me expand on this. Threatened plants and animal species, including those I just mentioned, are regulated under Queensland's Nature Conservation Act, not the Vegetation Management Act. Under the Nature Conservation Act, proponents are required to obtain a permit for the taking of protected plants while proponents must obtain an authority to tamper or destroy an animal breeding place. Strong habitat protection provisions are also in place for koalas, particularly in South-East Queensland. The State Planning Policy 2/10: Koala Conservation in South East Queensland and the South East Queensland Koala Conservation State Planning Regulatory Provisions are implemented by both the local and state government through the Sustainable Planning Act. Under the state government's Biodiversity Offset Policy, offsets are required when an impact cannot be avoided or minimised for either the loss of habitat associated with threatened species or for the take of a protected plant under the current Biodiversity Offset Policy. Another mechanism available under the Nature Conservation Act is an interim conservation order. These orders are protection measures which can be issued to protect habitat until a longer term solution is developed. It has in the past been used for the protection of mahogany glider habitat.

As I said, under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, those same vulnerable species like the cassowary, like the mahogany glider and like the koala are listed by the Commonwealth government as being either of an endangered or vulnerable conservation status. Where a development will have a significant impact on a matter of national environmental significance such as these species, a proponent must refer their development to the Australian government for assessment. Where a significant impact will occur on the species, the Australian government may also require the provision of an offset consistent with its policy guiding the use of offsets under the EPBC Act, and nor will this bill allow broadscale clearing in Queensland. It is worth noting, as a number of other members have already done today, that this is even confirmed by members of WWF. At a recent hearing of the State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee, WWF was part of those hearings. When asked a question by the member for South Brisbane regarding the state of

environment report, which I did table in parliament last year, the question was asked of Mr Nick Heath—

With the figure in relation to clearing rates in Queensland, is it WWF's contention that if these laws go through we will go back to vegetation clearing rates similar to the 1999-2000 clearing rates as they are there?

Mr Heath's response—

It is not, no.

**Ms Trad:** Read it all.

**Mr POWELL:** He continues—

No, we do not feel that those rates will return, but we are very concerned about the values that will be lost. We actually do not think the economics support broadscale clearing anymore.

I could not have said it better myself. As for the concerns that Mr Heath has, I have already addressed some of those that are protected under the Nature Conservation Act in this state and under the Commonwealth EPBC Act.

**Ms Trad** interjected.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Miss Barton): Order! Member for South Brisbane, you are on the speaking list and you will have your chance to make your contribution then. The minister is not taking your interjections and I would ask that you please cease. The minister has the call.

**Mr POWELL:** Just to take the member's interjection, I am very clear in suggesting that WWF is also very clear that this will not see a return to broadscale clearing in this state. The Vegetation Management Act 1999 will continue to regulate the clearing of mapped remnant vegetation, including high-value regrowth on leasehold land for agricultural and grazing purposes. Under the Vegetation Management Act, impacts of assessable remnant vegetation clearing on watercourses and wetlands; endangered, of concern and threshold regional ecosystems; and connectivity of vegetation across the landscape will continue to be considered. Under the vegetation management framework, clearing of remnant vegetation that is mapped as essential habitat for threatened species will continue to be assessed. The essential habitat mapping applying to the Vegetation Management Act currently maps almost 2.5 million hectares of such vegetation. Specifically, the essential habitat mapping under the VMA will continue to apply to 757,000 hectares of remnant cassowary essential habitat, 119,000 hectares of remnant mahogany glider essential habitat and 445,000 hectares of remnant koala essential habitat. The proposed reforms do not change the existing essential habitat provisions under the vegetation management framework. Where clearing cannot be avoided and minimised, applicants must provide, as I have already mentioned, an environmental offset to replace the environmental values being lost consistent with the existing policy for vegetation management offsets.

The reforms do not change the existing provisions under the VMA relating to high-value regrowth on leasehold land used for agriculture or grazing purposes. Clearing of high-value regrowth will continue to be assessed against a self-assessable code, as it is now. The bill does remove the restrictions on clearing of high-value regrowth from freehold and Indigenous land. Lifting this restriction will present new opportunities for landholders to participate in offset markets. Landholders will be able to use this regrowth vegetation to gain financial and environmental benefits through environmental offset arrangements that may be sought by developers. A number of landholders have already taken the opportunity to add an income stream to their business by being paid by developers to protect vegetation on their land as an offset. In addition, the majority of landholders who attended recent meetings to discuss offsets for the Galilee Basin mining developments registered their interest in providing an offset on the land. This bill will also see the regrowth watercourse vegetation provisions within the existing vegetation management framework retained in priority Great Barrier Reef catchments which are the Wet Tropics, Burdekin and Mackay Whitsunday catchments. Clearing of native regrowth vegetation within 50 metres of mapped watercourses in priority catchments will remain regulated under the vegetation management framework. Retaining the regrowth watercourse vegetation provisions will assist in maintaining the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef and therefore support the tourism, fishing and other industries that rely on the reef.

The compliance and prosecution provisions under the vegetation management framework will be amended to ensure a fairer and more equitable approach to compliance and prosecution. This will include deferring to the sentencing principles provided for under the Penalties and Sentences Act 1992 for courts to determine appropriate penalties for unauthorised clearing. The monitoring of land cover change, which assists in determining unauthorised clearing, will continue through the government's Statewide Land Cover and Trees Study. Annual Statewide Land Cover and Trees Study reporting on the state's clearing trends will continue.

In the time remaining, I want to briefly touch on what the minister foreshadowed in terms of amendments and as mentioned by the Minister for National Parks. Allowing grazing in nature reserve, national reserve and national park is a sensible solution: one that will see a good environmental and

animal welfare outcome, one that has been acknowledged by the RSPCA—and I thank it for its support—one that will see a good community safety outcome in that there will be a fire reduction in those areas, and one that will see an environmental benefit in the reduction of buffel grass in those areas, preparing these areas for their ultimate conservation value. I ask those opposing these amendments to look at the facts, look at the strong legislative protections that will be in place, stop the rhetoric, stop the hysteria and support sensible, practical legislation that restores the balance for landholders across this great state.