




Speech By
Michael Hart

MEMBER FOR BURLEIGH

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr HART** (Burleigh—LNP) (3.50 pm): I stand as a proud former Liberal member. I am very happy to support this legislation and commend the minister for bringing it forward to this House. Years ago my grandfather was a farmer in the southern part of New South Wales. I am aware of how farmers feel about their land, how they nurture and care for it and the fact that they love it and know more about it than any greenie living in a metropolitan unit somewhere watching TV and thinking that they know everything about the world. This is the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill. It is not vegetation protection; it is vegetation management. Management means a whole lot of different things. It means that we are taking care of our vegetation, we are utilising our vegetation and in some instances we may be clearing our vegetation in order to make the earth a better place.

It is important to recognise that this legislation brings sustainable balance to vegetation legislation for our primary producers. It also reduces burdensome red and green tape. It simplifies an incredibly complex process. We heard that from many of the farmers who gave evidence to our committee. It brings back the balance of sustainable production with conservation and environmental outcomes. It streamlines processes. It removes impediments to increased agricultural production. There are key reforms proposed under the Vegetation Management Framework Bill 2013 and they include the introduction of new clearing purposes under the act for high-value agriculture and environmental works such as land rehabilitation; the removal of regrowth regulations on freehold and Indigenous land but the retention of controls on regrowth on leasehold land and in reef catchments; new provisions to allow for the creation of self-assessable codes for routine management activities such as weed and pest management, fodder harvesting and thinning; the creation of a simplified state-wide vegetation map to clearly define areas where regulations will apply; and the removal of the guide to sentencing under the existing Vegetation Management Act to ensure more consistent and equitable penalties in the case of inappropriate clearing.

I am a member of the State Development, Infrastructure and Industry Committee. The committee notes and supports the government's policy objectives to reduce red tape, support the four-pillar economy and maintain protection and management of Queensland's native vegetation. The committee considers that its proposed amendments relating to wild rivers fulfil these objectives. The committee notes the concerns raised by the submitters but considers that the proposed amendments will benefit landholders and that the act's codes will provide sufficient protection for vegetation. I note that the committee made seven recommendations, the first one being that the legislation should be passed. I am very happy to hear from the minister that he agrees with the majority of those recommendations. As we have heard from the minister already, he has clarified a number of the points that the committee did seek clarification on, including what is happening with maps, and I will talk more about that later. I would like to thank the other members of the committee for their consideration of this particular piece of legislation and, in particular, thank the committee staff, Kathy,

Margaret, Mary and Dianne. They do a wonderful job in our committee and we would be lost without them.

During consultation on this bill we received 155 written submissions. A large percentage of the written submissions were in support of the legislation. The committee also received oral and teleconference evidence at public hearings in Brisbane. The committee heard from a variety of witnesses who provided written submissions in support of as well as opposition to the reforms.

The electorate of Burleigh is home to many retired farmers. The Gold Coast is a great place to live and retire. One only has to stand in the street in Burleigh, as I do quite often, and former farmers will come up and say, 'Gee, I'm glad I'm not on the land anymore. Gee, I'm glad I've left it to my children to deal with the red and green tape.'

During the submissions that the committee received we heard from several witnesses some really scary things that they had to put up with over a number of years as a result of the 2009 legislation, which was clearly an abomination. We heard from one particular lady, I think in the Daintree, who had had a tree fall into a river on her property and 10 years down the track she could not remove that tree and had lost a further three acres of her land. It is unbelievable that one tree that falls down in a river can wash away three acres of land because she could not take that tree out of the river. It is just ridiculous.

We heard from some of the peak bodies. AgForce was one of those. It is strongly in favour of the self-assessable codes. It will mean that farmers can remove vegetation from their fence lines. We had some ridiculous situations where the distance between the clearing that was allowed from their fence lines might be only a metre and a half to three metres on either side of the fence. There will be trees growing up either side of that fence touching above the fence line. As one can imagine, a strong wind could blow down a part of that tree and take out the fence or a fire could come along three metres from the fence and burn the fence down. What is the point in putting up a fence to start with? We have to be more sensible about these things. That is what this legislation introduced by our minister will allow us to do.

The World Wildlife Fund made a series of claims which I absolutely reject. They are ill-informed alarmists, spreading untruths in a desperate attempt to remain relevant. We heard from the committee chair earlier today in relation to a point made by Mr Heath from the WWF. The member for South Brisbane provided him with a State of the environment report. She asked Mr Heath to have a quick look at it and then asked him—

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 answered—

It is not, no. 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.

That is quite true. Our farmers will tell you exactly the same thing. It does not make sense to broadscale clear any more. They just need to clean up the vegetation that has grown back in some of these areas. That is what they are asking us to do.

We also heard from Mr McDonnell, a councillor of the Logan City Council. I was quite pleasantly surprised with some of the questions that the member for South Brisbane did ask. It almost seemed she might be in support of this legislation. She asked some very sensible and correct questions. One of those that was not so sensible was whether this legislation would have an impact on koala populations. As we all know there is a big koala population in Logan. We have all heard in the past of the koala highway. The koala stopped a major road from being built, and rightly so. Mr McDonnell responded to that and said—

We have protection over it at the local government level.

He was not worried at all about koala habitats. In fact, he said—

We have to deliver a net gain in koala habitat under the changes in relation to the protection of koalas, and we take that seriously.

I am sure that we can all be very happy that the Logan City Council takes seriously its responsibility with regard to koalas.

The reforms in this bill provide a sensible approach that ensures the environment continues to be protected, but that development is undertaken in a sustainable way and that landholders' needs to effectively manage their lands are met. This bill does not open the way for a return to broadscale vegetation clearing in Queensland. I repeat that: this legislation does not leave the door open for broadscale vegetation clearing in Queensland. The changes to allow clearing for high-value agriculture and irrigated high-value agriculture are not without appropriate safeguards provided for in this bill. In the bill, the power for the declaration of a restricted high-value agricultural area provides a further safeguard to mitigate the risk of inappropriate clearing and certain activities that may lead to environmental degradation.

At the committee hearings those who gave evidence constantly spoke about the lack of accuracy in the mapping system. I am very glad to hear from the department that they will not be relying on that mapping system for any court action that they may take in the future. To start with, it will be purely a reference until the maps can be brought up-to-date. For most of Queensland, the vegetation maps are prepared by the Queensland Herbarium. They are at a scale of 1:100,000. Basically, that means that one centimetre on a map equals one kilometre on the ground. One can imagine that there may be some protected habitat that we need to take care of. Let us remember that on the map one centimetre equals one kilometre. There may be 100 metres of vegetation that needs protection, but the maps do not zoom in close enough to determine where exactly that 100 metres is. We say, broadly, it is one kilometre around there, it is five kilometres there or it is 10 kilometres there. Many farmers who gave evidence said that, in fact, the maps are extremely inaccurate. I think even the Herbarium said that the maps are only 80 per cent accurate. We need to do something about that. Obviously, the committee recognises that on-ground inspections to confirm the maps will be a very expensive exercise and we would not expect that to happen straight away. However, over time we should work towards getting those maps right.

We heard from Mr Angus Ryrie, who is an AgForce member. He said that he does not mind working within the guidelines and the maps, as long as the things are right. They have to be right or we are wasting our time if we rely on them, especially when it comes to court action. You cannot rely on an inaccurate map if you are taking someone to court, especially if the onus of proof is reversed as it was in the 2009 amendment passed by the Labor Party. In that situation, you could be charging somebody with an offence based on information that is completely incorrect and they would have no defence to that. This legislation reverses that situation and puts the onus of proof where it really belongs, fixing that issue. However, we need to work on the maps.

We heard from Mr James McDonald, the environment and sustainability manager at the Logan City Council. With respect to the Park Ridge development area, he said—

I think 40 per cent of the mapping was in error and of that 10 per cent of it needed to go up in classification but the other 30 per cent needed to go down in classification.

It is all over the place. Mr Arthur Dingle stated—

... 95 per cent of people are wanting to improve their country and leave it in a better state than what we first started ...

That is clear when we talk to our farmers. They love their country. I am sure that all members of the committee will remember Arthur Dingle. He really made an impact on most of us. I do not know for how long he has been farming, but he is an old gentleman; he is older than I am and that is old. He has been farming for generations. He loves his land. The 2009 amendment was getting in his way. Every time he turned around, it was getting in his way. That man is ecstatic that we are doing this to help him. In my office, I have received numerous emails about this particular subject. I have received 110 emails in support of this legislation and only one against it. Labor Party members can come in here and tell us that this is bad legislation and that we are doing something that we should not be doing, but the people in the community do not feel like that. They are ecstatic that we are bringing forward this legislation.

I finish by quoting a few of the farmers who came and talked to us. As I said, Mr Arthur Dingle stated—

... 95 per cent of people are wanting to improve their country and leave it in a better state than what we first started with when we first bought it. People forget that that is our biggest asset we have ever owned, so why would we want to destroy it?

That is exactly right: why would we? Charles Burke, the CEO of AgForce, said—

We certainly strongly are of the view that productive agriculture and environmental outcomes are not mutually exclusive.

One could not say a truer word. Mr Angus Ryrie, another AgForce member, said that the landholder, as opposed to the department, is best placed to make timely decisions about fodder because the bloke who owns the property is the best judge of the situation. I thoroughly agree with him.

In conclusion, overall this bill represents a package of reforms that maintain environmental protection, contribute to the appropriate economic development opportunities of this great state, especially for the agricultural sector, and improve outcomes for landholders in managing their land and their business. I thank the minister and the government for bringing this legislation forward so quickly. I move that the debate be now adjourned.