




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR MOUNT ISA

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (5.21 pm): I rise to speak to the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013. I consider myself very fortunate to be on the committee that dealt with this bill, because certainly the bill piqued my curiosity. This is an issue about which I feel very strongly as it relates very much to my working life experience and my electorate. I believe this bill primarily gives to vegetation management a similar set of guidelines as existed prior to 2004. It is a terrific improvement on the poor legislation that transpired after that time and that provided hardship and another nail in the coffin for existing agricultural industries.

The bill proposes to remove the restrictions on clearing high-value regrowth from freehold land and Indigenous land and regrowth vegetation that has not been cleared since 31 December 1989. Restrictions on clearing this type of vegetation were introduced in October 2009. Amongst other things, the bill allows self-assessable codes for fence lines, internal roads, pipelines, et cetera. This is common-sense stuff. Those are normal operating activities and, in my experience, I cannot recall them ever having been exploited prior to the introduction of the existing act. It is a completely unnecessary level of bureaucracy and its only purpose is to make it difficult for our primary producers to operate. The bill allows codes for self-assessable activities such as controlling non-native plants or declared pests. Certainly we have our fair share of those in the Mount Isa electorate. Activities include relevant infrastructure, fodder harvesting as I alluded to before, thinning, clearing of encroachment, clearing for extractive industries, necessary environmental clearing and others. The bill allows self-assessable codes for fodder harvesting, which speaks for itself. Those things are normal operating activities for many producers.

Submitters to the committee raised the issue that the timing was very difficult because everything was so bureaucratic. For example, if you had cattle that looked like they were going to perish, you might try to knock over your mulga to provide them with some sustenance and keep them alive. That mulga would grow back in a year or two after being knocked over. However, farmers were not able to do that in a timely fashion. Therefore, it is excellent that they have been given back the ability to do that.


The problem of gidgee encroachment is very relevant in my area. A number of people have come to me to say that on their property they had natural open Mitchell grasslands that are continually being encroached upon by gidgee. It is not viable for them to hook into it that often, but they would like the opportunity to be able to do that. It depends on the window of time that we are trying to preserve in this whole process. People will oppose this bill, saying that we need to preserve everything. However, gidgee keeps encroaching on the Mitchell grass plains so do they want Mitchell grass plains or do they want gidgee forest? I can tell the House that not much grass grows in a gidgee forest and a lot of erosion occurs under it. That change can be considered only a good thing for the environment.

The bill will not allow broadscale clearing. Most people would challenge the commercial viability of that under the current environment. It is a misconception that any amendments to this act will see bulldozers rushing off at 100 miles an hour through the brigalow. So much misinformation has been

spread about the issue that it makes me angry and it makes a lot of people involved in the industry angry. For instance, recently I attended a grazing seminar in the Etheridge Shire where some advisers certainly were no friends to the graziers and said a lot of things that they did not like. One interesting observation is that, with upgraded techniques for doing stocktakes on the vegetation in an area, they have realised that vegetation is a lot thicker since settlement and that, progressively, there has been a lot more vegetation in the area. Admittedly, there is not a lot of clearing there, but much of the debate does not take into account the fact that there are areas in Queensland where vegetation is naturally thickening. I was lucky enough to attend a talk by the DPI about its discovery of a technique to identify the level of vegetation in the Burdekin River catchment prior to settlement in Australia. They found that the level of vegetation was actually much heavier now than prior to settlement. There are so many misconceptions that are rubbish, but that have driven a lot of the poor decision making that brought us the act that we are now dealing with.

I attended a week-long course at the Toorak research station, which was sold off recently—thanks very much. It had collected information on 50 years of stock trials for sheep. They had five different paddocks with different carrying capacities in them. The one that had the second highest carrying capacity had the best vegetation and growth. The one that had the least amount of vegetation was almost the same as the one with the highest carrying capacity. That tells you that the stuff that had little use had weeds and erosion and was a lot worse off. I am trying to create a picture that shows that so much misinformation is pedalled about this whole issue.

Another little analogy I will throw in is that in my electorate there is a national park where they have turned back on the artificial waters. Presumably, someone has identified the fact that the area was a lot better when those waters were turned on. Again, many people who oppose this bill rely on the many misconceptions that surround the issue of tree clearing.

 **Mr KATTER** (Mount Isa—KAP) (7.30 pm), continuing: This bill provides some balance in terms of vegetation management. There are many misconceptions under the act as it currently stands. In my experience many of the battling landholders who are subject to the existing act are, in the most part, a collection of the best land custodians the national interest could hope for. These amendments, however, fall short of providing relief to leaseholders, who in many cases run identical operations to freehold landowners, and make up approximately 70 per cent of Queensland. They derive limited benefit from this legislation. That is one area where the legislation could be better.

Mapping is a big issue in this bill. In some cases the inaccuracies with the mapping have been farcical. It has been an enormous job for people working in those departments to get right. Often it has been grossly inaccurate which has caused a lot of anxiety amongst landholders. They have had to deal with six maps in the past. That number has now been reduced. That is an excellent initiative. The aspect of locking it in with consultation to true things up will go a long way to removing much of the conflict in that area.

If opponents to this amendment bill put as much energy into positive real environmental outcomes the national interest would be much better served. So much time and money gets spent on the stick approach with these landholders, constantly hovering over them to make sure they are doing the right thing, when in most cases people will apply the same attitudes to the land as they always have. The outcomes often are not that different except that they are threatened all the time with penalties. If a small portion of the money that was spent on these efforts was diverted to treating prickly acacia, lantana, feral pests and cleaning up national parks I think the national interest would be much better served and the net environmental benefit would be better.

I believe many opponents to this amendment bill are absent curious observers who look from a long distance and do not live on the land and I am convinced do not have the same connection to it as people who live on it. The people who live on the land have a genuine interest in preserving the value of the land. They enjoy the biodiversity that they strive to maintain. People in metropolitan areas cursing these actions should go and live with these people for a while to appreciate how much concern they have.

The existing legislation works off the premise that these landholders are vandals. It is a misconception that has driven mistrust and poor decision making from many of these advocacy groups that have commented on this bill. Unfortunately, we all have to occupy this planet somewhere. From time to time we have to disturb it. We need to feed ourselves and we need to have industry. These are small concessions to get out of the road of the people who battle away, usually on very poor profitability, to provide us with that opportunity.

High-value agriculture is a strong part of this bill. A very positive intention of this bill is to release those areas of high-value agriculture. It is very relevant to the efforts being made in the Etheridge shire where that is required to promote irrigation. I am very appreciative and highly commend this government for allowing that to happen. It is a big thing for that area. I hope that this

unlocks that area for irrigation projects that are planned there at the moment. I do question the head of power declaring certain areas as high-value agriculture. I think it is something that needs to be monitored. I question how that will be determined in the future. There is a farm in my electorate near Caulfield, which is probably 100 kilometres from what is generally identified as the farming footprint of the Flinders River Agricultural Precinct. One of the most successful farmers in the mid-west has been operating there for about 10 years. Perhaps that would not be considered a suitable farming area. I urge the minister to keep that in mind. Declaration of high-value agriculture areas is something that needs to be monitored.

How offences are dealt with in this bill is an excellent initiative. The onus of proof being taken away from the landholder is excellent. There are many stories in relation to this. I have an example. One of my in-laws was clearing a strip that they were permitted to clear along the roadway near a farm. It is now a haulage road. It left a strip half a metre to a metre wide that went for a couple of hundred metres so he cleaned that up because it looked ridiculous to leave it there. He was then challenged by an officer who had randomly sighted that. He was threatened with tens of thousands of dollars in fines. I think that is unreasonable and does not represent good government. I do not believe that is providing any positive outcome. That is what the existing act delivered to us. These amendments are a positive change.

We are very supportive of this amendment bill. To give credit where credit is due, the government has done a good job. It is a step in the right direction. It would be good to see this extended to leaseholders, even though I acknowledge the opportunities for leaseholders is very limited. In my electorate where the majority of land is leasehold there is not actually much clearing. It would be good to consider that in the future. I would urge the minister to keep an eye on how high-value agriculture is defined and plays out because there are some areas that might not fit that description that would require some clearing to get irrigation going. We are very supportive of this bill. It is a good initiative. I am proud to be associated with the committee that considered it. Well done.