




Speech By  
**Stephen Bennett**

**MEMBER FOR BURNETT**

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**VEGETATION MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (7.50 pm): It is with great pleasure I rise to support the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill. What better way to support my long-suffering constituents than to reduce red tape on landholders and business, support this great state to allow confidence in the economy and maintain protection and management of Queensland's native vegetation. There is no doubt that the people of Queensland got it right with the election of the LNP. After listening to the disgraceful contributions from those opposite there can be no doubt they just do not get it. I find it insulting that the Labor Party has no trust in the men and women on the land who work hard to provide food and fibre for our great state.

The reforms will protect the Great Barrier Reef and other important ecosystems. They will also create opportunities for farming businesses to expand cropping operations in order to meet our target of doubling food production by 2040. Farmers across Queensland and in my electorate had their rights ripped away, mostly without their knowledge, by the previous government, with the support of the previous local member who did not care about farmers.

The provisions in the bill are supported by the 2004 Productivity Commission report on its inquiry into the impacts of native vegetation and biodiversity regulation. It stated that controls over clearing native vegetation on grazing and cropping properties have a direct impact on farmers' management strategies in several ways, including: preventing the expansion of some agricultural activities; preventing changes in land use; inhibiting the adoption of or limiting the full exploitation of on-farm efficiency gains by using new technologies such as global positioning systems; preventing the cost-effective routine management of vegetation regrowth and clearing of woodland thickening to maintain areas in production; and inhibiting the cost-effective management of weeds and vermin.

There are many examples in my electorate and in Queensland of the problems with the Vegetation Management Act 1999. I have local pineapple farmers, desperate to gain value and expand operations, who are unable to clear trees blown over in storms. I have growers with contracts with Golden Circle wanting to triple production, all hamstrung by the previous Labor government's legislation. I have cane farmers who are unable to clean up after the floods, property owners unable to maintain firebreaks and farmers forced to maintain highly productive land as remnant vegetation after disputes involving ineffective mapping have nearly sent these family farms broke.

The feedback locally in my electorate has been overwhelmingly that the proposed changes in the bill present a positive step forward for long-term sustainable land management and will enable the agricultural industry to prosper and to contribute to our Queensland economy. This is about land management and the family farm's ability to produce food in a sustainable way without being hindered by red tape and the Labor opposition.

There is research that verifies what we in rural electorates already knew—that is, that the agricultural sector plays an important role in managing native vegetation for environmental and production outcomes. Additionally, the research found that most farmers manage native vegetation for

both environmental and production outcomes, and many intended to do more to improve the condition and extent of native vegetation.

This bill addresses many issues for our rural landholders and producers by providing opportunities for high-value and irrigated high-value agriculture. I know the pineapple growers, the mango and avocado growers as well as the expanding macadamia industry welcome this legislation. With many generational families wanting to explore diversification of farming production, at least now there is hope.

The most significant benefits and opportunities in this bill are for the farmers and graziers, agricultural industries and regional and rural communities across Queensland. I have no doubt that the previous government forgot about regional communities like Childers, Rosedale and Moore Park—communities that rely on the farming sector for prosperity. The previous government forgot that the best custodians of the land are the farmers. I support the legislation and its sensible introduction. This is not a free-for-all. This is about farming development in a measured and sustainable way.

Before vegetation clearing applications for a high-value or irrigated high-value agriculture development proposal can even be assessed applicants will need to provide a development plan to the Department of Natural Resources and Mines. I have personally tested the proposed bill in many local circumstances and with farmers who have been affected by the ridiculous provision in the previous legislation—legislation drafted not for the wellbeing of Queensland, but for a short-sighted, restrictive attack on regional communities that provide the wealth of our state.

The development plan will need to demonstrate that the land is suitable for development in terms of soil, climate and topography, and that the development cannot be undertaken on already cleared land. The plan will also need to demonstrate that the proposed agricultural business activity will be viable. This will ensure that new agricultural development is targeted towards areas which are suitable for agriculture and most likely to be successful.

The bill contains minor amendments to the existing provisions under the Vegetation Management Act concerning area management plans to gain efficiencies in their development and implementation. Area management plans allow certain routine clearing activities for purposes such as fodder harvesting, weed control or thinning to be regulated at a regional level without the need for a vegetation clearing permit. While a permit is not needed, landholders are required to notify the department that they intend to clear. At present, an area management plan can be created over an area of any size, from one property to a regional council area to an even broader area. The reforms will ensure applications involving large areas or multiple properties are targeted to land of a similar nature to maximise efficiency of development and implementation.

In addition, the bill provides a power for the chief executive of the Department of Natural Resources and Mines to develop an area management plan. This reform will create opportunities for the department to make regional scale area management plans for regionally specific issues, such as a weed outbreak, that complement the clearing options available through the proposed state-wide self-assessable vegetation clearing codes and the property level development permits. These changes will benefit landholders, natural resource management groups and local governments by allowing them to be able to confidently complete integrated and coordinated clearing activities consistent with their approved area management plan.

The reforms provide landholders with the ability to appropriately and sustainably manage their land through self-assessable codes. Landholders wanting to clear for activities such as fodder harvesting, encroachment, necessary environmental clearing and vegetation thinning will need to comply with the notification requirements of the code for that activity. Similar codes have successfully existed for many years in the native timber harvesting industry, with recent surveys demonstrating a high level of compliance amongst landholders.

The department will continue to monitor compliance and take appropriate action against unlawful activities. Inappropriate vegetation management practices that show no regard for the environment will be readily detected through satellite monitoring.

The bill introduces a new head of power into the Vegetation Management Act to allow for the creation of self-assessable vegetation clearing codes. Many landholders find the current vegetation management laws confusing and difficult to apply. There are also concerns about the assessment process and lengthy approval time frames required for routine land management activities, such as weed control and thinning.

Currently, permits are required under the act for 10 different clearing purposes. Applying for a permit can be a costly exercise for landholders, especially when standardised conditions apply to most of the approvals issued. It is clear that vegetation thickening is a big issue for landholders in

Queensland and that the current vegetation management framework, which requires a number of development permits for property management, is a major impediment to landholders trying to manage their land.

A 2005 report on the cost of native vegetation preservation in Australia states that a more flexible approach to native vegetation conservation may achieve greater environmental outcomes at a lower cost to the farm sector than blanket regulation. Such an approach would recognise that both the environmental benefits to society and the costs to both farmers and society are likely to differ markedly across agricultural landscapes.

The reversal of the onus of proof has been addressed through the removal of section 67A of the VMA, which contained the presumption of guilt. The presumption of guilt raises issues with fundamental legislative principles and has the potential to see landholders wrongly accused of unlawful clearing where there is no evidence to suggest that it was not their fault.

This bill provides for self-assessable codes and will particularly benefit the rural sector and agricultural businesses by providing a flexible and simple means to conduct important property management activities such as thinning, weed and pest management, fodder harvesting and the construction of small scale infrastructure. There are also cost savings for the government by reducing the need for costly assessment of applications that generally results in approval with standard conditions.

To clear vegetation under one of these codes, landholders will need to ensure they meet the requirements in the relevant code, which include requirements to notify the department of their intention to clear. To avoid landholder confusion and complexity, each of the self-assessable codes will be aligned and streamlined as much as possible and promote consistency in their operation.

This bill provides significant improvements for landholders in my electorate and their ability to manage their land. It provides savings for landholders and the government, safeguards for the environment and it provides opportunities for agriculture to prosper in this great state of ours. In closing, I commend the minister for these sensible inclusions in the bill. I reiterate the importance of these changes. I commend this bill to the House.