




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MACKAY

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**VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (REINSTATEMENT) AND OTHER LEGISLATION
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mrs GILBERT** (Mackay—ALP) (3.30 pm): I rise to speak to the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2016. I, too, would like to thank my fellow committee members for the spirit in which we worked through this bill. I also thank our parliamentary secretariat. Their support was invaluable.

The policy objectives of this bill are to reinstate a responsible vegetation management framework to more effectively manage vegetation clearing in Queensland, thereby reducing clearing rates and consequential carbon emissions; to guard against excessive clearing of riparian vegetation, especially in the Great Barrier Reef catchments; to amend the Water Act 2000 to reinstate the application of the riverine protection permit framework to the destruction of vegetation in a watercourse, lake or spring; and to amend the Environmental Offsets Act 2014 to reinstate environmental offset requirements that ensure adequate conservation outcomes for prescribed environmental matters.

The Palaszczuk government made several 2015 election commitments to protect the Great Barrier Reef. This bill meets those commitments to the Queensland community. The Agriculture and Environment Committee travelled throughout the state to hear opinions from landholders, Indigenous groups, developers and environmentalists. We also held public hearings in Brisbane and sought departmental briefings.

The main consensus from the information gathered is that Queenslanders want to preserve the natural beauty, ecosystems of flora and fauna of our state and protect the Great Barrier Reef. The sticking point, however, is how this is best done to meet the interests of each group. The community wants to see legislation that will be constant and not changed with the changing of government. Each group wants certainty into the future so they can plan their businesses. This bill will provide that certainty.

A constant complaint from landholders is the PMAV, a map used to show the categories of land use. As a committee, we were presented with a number of maps with wrong information. The DNRM accepted that inaccuracies have occurred in the mapping. The department explained that for those with obvious errors if there is no native woody vegetation present then it does not affect their activities. There is no total prohibition in those areas.

They also advised that inaccuracies in the regulated vegetation management map or the proposed vegetation management map may be addressed through the PMAV process. DNRM stated that, if there are obvious errors—for example, pasture shown as high-value regrowth—they can be fixed for free. Applicants who disagree with the PMAV may apply, free of charge, to DNRM for an internal review of the decision. If dissatisfied with this outcome, they can apply to the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal for an external review.

The sugar industry in Mackay is already in a reef catchment area. Mr Kealley, the Senior Manager of Environment and Sustainability for Canegrowers, appeared before one of our hearings. I asked if there were any ill effects on sugar farmers already farming in a reef catchment area. Mr Kealley quoted Paul Schembri—

... the drivers of the environment and economics are aligned. You cannot have a successful business or profitable business unless you manage those two things effectively. The cane industry has its Smartcane BMP, best management practice program. We now have 58 per cent of the area under cane benchmarked in that program in just over two years. I think that is a pretty good outcome. Almost 100 growers are accredited in that program which demonstrates their social silence but also productivity profitability.

The challenges we face is continued water quality and the impact on the Great Barrier Reef. Managing our vegetation is part of that, as well as managing our farm inputs and production on farm and chemicals and fertiliser use. Riparian zones are all part of our BMP program. There are things in place to manage that.

In terms of adverse effects, it comes back to how you manage the edges of your farm. If a farm is cleared it is managed for cane, but then you have your riparian areas. It is how you manage that. Some of the challenges we face coming out of these areas is managing pigs, weeds and those sorts of things. That management is for the public good. It does not necessarily get recognised in the community the benefit growers put back into the community.

The protection of regrowth vegetation along watercourses in the Burdekin, Mackay and Wet Tropics catchments have been in place since 2009. This bill will extend the protection of regrowth vegetation along watercourses in all reef catchment areas. New areas will extend to the Burnett-Mary, eastern Cape York and Fitzroy catchments. Canegrowers in the Mackay-Whitsunday area have successfully worked to protect the reef and manage their farms with high production on their land.

During our travels we heard a lot from farmers. There was a lot of emotion, and they spoke of how they care for their land. The committee also held hearings in Brisbane and had an expert briefing from eminent professors who are world leading in their area of environmental expertise. Professor Bunn, Professor Catterall, Associate Professor Maron, Professor Possingham, and Dr Reside represented a group of 28 senior environmental scientists from institutions across Queensland. They collectively represented a group of 14 professors, three ARC laureate fellows and directors of eight research institutes and centres that are focused on environmental science around terrestrial, marine and freshwater ecosystems, carbon accounting, remote sensing, conservation and natural resource management. Associate Professor Maron believed—

The aim of the Vegetation Management Act is to protect native vegetation biodiversity, manage ecosystem processes, avoid land degradation and reduce carbon emissions, but instead the current version of the act is seeing over 100,000 hectares of native ecosystems being cleared each year including endangered ecosystems. Run-off from terrestrial land uses is reducing water quality and increasing the stress on the Great Barrier Reef. Biodiversity is continuing to decline and opportunities for the recovery of threatened species and ecosystems are being foreclosed.

Professor Catterall was able to explain the use of the SLATS report. The SLATS report was widely quoted at regional hearings and at the Brisbane hearings. SLATS is the Statewide Landcover and Trees Study. Professor Catterall questioned whether the information that was being bandied about was being interpreted correctly. She said that it would appear there is an increase of about 500,000 hectares of wooded vegetation. She pointed out that this information was scientifically false information. She stated—

It does not necessarily represent any increase in the amount of wooded vegetation. The reason is that the way in which the SLATS data is obtained is through a very technical and complex process involving satellite imagery and its analysis, which is described in about 10 pages in the SLATS report in its full detail. The bottom line is that when you have some wet years you get an increase in the growth of grass and herbs and weeds as well as an increase in the foliage density of existing trees, so a little spindly tree can become a tree with lots of leaves. That gives what is essentially a false reading of increased vegetation cover.

She explained that she would need to go into a lot of data to be able to show that the SLATS data could not be argued as an increase in vegetation.

Many landowners argued a case that it is better to have grass instead of trees to reduce erosion and soil run-off. I want to quote from Professor Bunn, whom the member for Gladstone also spoke about. Professor Bunn stated—

... in nearly every catchment that you look at, whether it is the Gulf of Carpentaria or from the Normanby all the way down to Brisbane, most of the sediment that gets into the channel, channel network and then out into the coastal zone comes from the channel network ... 'most' is greater than 90-95 per cent of the sediment load.

...

... when you clear vegetation you increase amount of surface run-off that gets concentrated down into the channel network and increase the power of the stream to cause erosion. That is exacerbated when the vegetation clearing goes into those gully networks and the riparian zones as well. Not only do you decrease what they call the roughness, the slowing down of water in those landscapes, but you also reduce the resistance of the ground to erosion from that event. Those two things work in unison to create a greater erosion potential. What we see then is the generation of increased channel erosion, further concentration of

the flow into the channel network ... slope gullies or alluvial gullies. Certainly when you look at where the big erosion problems are across the Queensland coast, these are usually in places where those events, gullying and channel erosion, have occurred.

The silt build-up downstream equates with the first of the land clearing and the first recorded major floods. The solution is to regrow and revegetate sensitive areas.

Farmers at our public forums in the region spoke about their care of the land and the clearing of paddocks for pastures and cropping. The landowners kept some clumps of trees and kept some paddocks virtually uncleared. Landholders in general have put a lot of effort into keeping their properties as much as possible clear of weeds and in good condition for cropping and grazing. The farmers were very emotional about their farms and they have poured a lot of their life into them.

Dr Reside reported that we also need to look after the biodiversity of our ecosystems. Queensland has the highest number of endemic animals of any state in Australia—animals found nowhere else on the planet. We are still finding and describing new species every year, species that have never been seen before. These are geckos, frogs, skinks and lizards. Many of these are in North Queensland. This remarkable biodiversity is under threat from tree clearing. Dr Reside did not say to stop clearing all land but to regulate to protect our biodiversity. Some of these species are found only on private land. We need intact ecosystems—the systems that are most likely to withstand climate change. Intact ecosystems are essential.

Professor Possingham left the committee with some thoughts. He said—

It is a fact that extinction rates are 100 to 1,000 times the background rate. Triple-bottom-line sustainable eco-systems would mean that ultimately everything should be stable—the economy, social issues and the environment—and they should all be going flat or up ... At the moment we are losing on the biodiversity side. The fact is that we are losing species at 100 to 1,000 times the normal historical rates.

Land clearing is the biggest threat to rural communities and a big threat to agricultural profitability. This bill gives balance to our sustainable ecosystems and agriculture. I commend the bill to the House.