




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR DALRYMPLE

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

 **Mr KNUTH** (Dalrymple—KAP) (8.05 pm): I would like to express my utmost disgust at the deplorable bill to change the vegetation management laws. The changes are designed to ban clearing for high-value agriculture, as well as reverse the onus of proof and impose retrospective penalties, making our prime producers criminals when their only crime is putting food on our table.

This is not a new fight for me or for Queensland farmers. I had the privilege of fighting against the tree-clearing laws back in 1999. I remember marching with the then member for Gregory and the member for Callide at that time. I remember being there when the landowners marched into the premier's building in 1999 when they introduced the ERMPs, the environment risk management plans. The impediments that the government imposed upon them at that time caused law-abiding landowners to prepare to break the law and march on the premier's office in desperation because they were sick and tired and gutted by consistent attacks by the Labor government. Likewise, we had the opportunity to march in Townsville this year and also on the parliament. There was one reason for that, and that is to march in support of fair laws for farmers.

These laws are disappointing. History shows us that farmers are a favourite to legislate beyond viability and virtually out of existence. Over the last six months the government has been actively running a misleading scare campaign, skewing the data and taking it out of context to push their own manipulative agenda. The government is claiming that trees are being cleared too quickly. What it is not making clear is that farmers in drought affected areas—80 per cent of Queensland—have been cutting down vegetation to feed their desperate stock, which is legal.

The Statewide Landcover and Trees Study report reveals that the clearing rate of woody vegetation has hardly risen since 2013, and 91 per cent of that clearing has been replaced by pasture. The report also revealed that the vegetation regrowth was occurring at a faster rate than clearing. What the government would like to do is, when a farmer clears trees, have it reported on every news bulletin across Queensland, showing the bulldozers and the chains. What they are not showing is us is after that when the land is stick raked and cleaned up, the good seed is sewn and all of a sudden the grass has grown—the legumes and the rhodes grass. Then we see the fat cattle and we see that the grass is holding the soil together so that when it does rain it is not running off to the Great Barrier Reef; it is actually protecting and holding the soil in place.

When a tree is knocked down, what happens is that the grass grows and it provides protection. What the government is not saying to people is that places like the Cape York Peninsula are 98 per cent remnant vegetation; the Einasleigh Uplands are 96 per cent; and the Gulf Plains are 98 per cent. There is a scare campaign that we are just knocking trees over, destroying the Great Barrier Reef, pumping rivers dry and all this nonsense that we are hearing, but what they are not saying is that this state is looking for development opportunities, particularly in the Cape York Peninsula with Indigenous people.

The biggest concern we heard from people at the public hearings in regard to these vegetation management laws was about the Indigenous people of Cape York Peninsula, because 98 per cent of that area is remnant vegetation. Only two per cent has been cleared. At the committee hearing the land council said to the committee, the government and the legislators that they need to have a choice. If these laws are passed, they said that it will put them on welfare. At this present moment they are looking finally at developing those regions. Those regions are not about ripping trees down everywhere so there will be no animals and death to all native wildlife. This is about sustainable management and sustainable development. This is about jobs for those Indigenous people.

I agree with the member for Hinchinbrook when he indicated that what is being cleared now has already been cleared. Broadscale land clearing is over. That happened in 2004. What landowners are doing now is reclearing vegetation that has already been cleared. When it comes to vegetation management, you have to be on the ball because you just cannot keep up. Once it is cleared, you have to try to keep on top of it, otherwise it will grow back and within two to three years it is back to the same state as it was previously. It is very difficult to stay on top of it, particularly when you are in drought and particularly when you have no money. There is no new clearing. As the SLATS report is saying, the regrowth is growing faster than the rate of land clearing. It is very illusionary.

There was an opportunity to clear land for high-value agriculture for which there is criteria. This is probably the only opportunity for Indigenous people to invest in, but this will be taken off them. In this legislation there is a reverse onus of proof—that is, they are criminals first before proven innocent. At the same time these laws are retrospective. Someone told me there are new maps out that look much prettier than they did before. What we saw was landowners had cleared land under mapping that was legal, but when the new mapping came out it was illegal. There are landowners now who are fearful that they have done something illegal. Because of the reverse onus of proof, they are guilty first of doing something that was legal under the previous mapping and the new mapping shows that it is illegal. That is one reason why we cannot support this bill. I can understand why the Queensland Law Society came out very passionately against this bill, because it is making criminals out of our law-abiding citizens and farmers who put food on the table.

At the public hearing in Cairns a landowner named Raylee Byrnes made a submission. They have a property in the Cape and they would like to clear 400 to 800 hectares to grow hay, because every year in the dry times they have to bring up hay from down south which costs an absolute fortune. The sad thing about it is they are frustrated because when they bring in hay they are bringing in noxious weeds and they are spreading pests. There is an opportunity for them to irrigate but they cannot irrigate and grow their own hay; they have to get it from 2,000 to 3,000 kilometres away and this brings in noxious weeds because they cannot clear their land.

There was an opportunity to put in an application for clearing for high-value agriculture, but this bill is going to take that opportunity away. As I was saying in regards to Indigenous people, their opportunity was about to come. They were about to find other means as to how they can achieve it, but the next minute this bill is introduced. As I was saying, there is 98 per cent remnant vegetation. The government recently said that no applications have been submitted to develop land by the Aboriginal corporation, but it would be illusionary to believe that because they were in the process of seizing the opportunity. Now we have these scare tactics. When there is a chance that this opportunity is going to be taken away, obviously there is going to be great concern.

I want to make this clear: broadscale land clearing is over. What they are clearing is regrowth that has already been cleared. We have only one opportunity, and that is to clear for high-value agriculture, and this is going to be taken away.

(Time expired)