




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 18 August 2016

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

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.07 pm): There we have it—the stark difference between the LNP and the Labor Party. With all the bitumen driveways and concrete floors we wonder why they would talk about vegetation management.

While this government is pushing ahead with its draconian laws, I want to give real examples in my own electorate of issues that were permitted under changes to the VMA in 2013, things that had been prevented previously by their out-of-touch laws, including by the agriculture minister who blindly followed the Deputy Premier and her disciples. There are real consequences and real people are destroyed.

A local pineapple farmer in Moore Park was desperate to clear a small section of vegetation. The property was already intersected by irrigation channels. He has now expanded his production, providing jobs and opportunities. A pineapple farmer in Bucca wanted to expand his operations. This man had a contract with Golden Circle. In 2013 they tripled production and he can now utilise his large property, keeping his family together on the same farm.

A sensible boundary alignment in Agnes Water was permitted which allowed someone to put a trigger referral in that was previously banned to allow a landowner to better use his lots. Labor's laws that they claim were wonderful and fine and they claimed allowed Queensland to prosper were a basket case. They want us to go back, as we have just heard from those opposite, to more bureaucratic nonsense.

In Childers, a rural residential estate was not progressing under those opposite; now it is a successful development providing jobs and opportunity. The property was zoned 'rural residential'. Under the Isis Shire Planning Scheme, it had vegetation management status. Remnant vegetation was of least concern. The overall development had to be cut back from 119 lots to 42 lots under those opposite. Thank goodness common sense prevailed in 2013.

Another issue was where remapping was done which introduces or reclassifies remnant vegetation over properties without any notification to the landowner. We have been seeing that happen since March under this government. This also happened with the Parklands estate near Bundaberg, but fortunately the mapping was able to be proven incorrect at a monetary and time cost to the owner which is obviously of no concern to those opposite.

Vegetation offsets are too complicated, onerous and expensive for landowners and they did not achieve the purpose of the VMA. They were more often than not piecemeal and relatively insignificant. Definitions need to be watertight and not open to interpretation. The current framework and legislation, which is being ignored, allows clearing to happen for irrigated high-value agriculture. The process to actually get a permit under the current legislation is very rigorous. Land suitability has to be

demonstrated. Where NRM has soil mapping, this is used. Elsewhere, land suitability studies have to be carried out in accordance with land evaluation frameworks. This is very intensive and specialist. It is very complicated. Only suitable land can be applied to be cleared. It is not a case of just clear anywhere.

The clearing occurring is not broadscale. In my region, the areas are relatively small, ranging from two hectares. For smaller businesses, two hectares is worthwhile being able to clear so they can expand their business. The media has focused on the broadscale clearing that has happened predominantly out west and up north; it has not happened around my area. Clearing for high-value agriculture in my region has been minimal. It is all in coastal bioregions, whereas the media has been focusing on activities on one farm in the cape. The media has reported land clearing comparisons which have been misleading. Land clearing has been shown to occur only on a broadscale level. This is certainly not the case in the South-East Queensland bioregion, where it is smaller operators trying to improve their businesses. They value the land and understand the environmental processes fully.

Unfortunately, the Palaszczuk Labor government and its ministers are again using the issue of vegetation clearing to shore up support from radical green sections. As part of this move, Labor is seeking to demonise Queensland farmers. Recently, Labor released reports that would have readers believe that Queensland farmlands were being stripped bare of tree cover and that Queensland farmers were responsible for massive increases in carbon dioxide releases, when the facts show otherwise. Respected independent agricultural and environmental scientist Dr Burrows has issued documents to politicians of all parties in an attempt to counter this misinformation. I would have thought that those opposite would have read those documents. In short, Dr Burrows says Queensland is in fact a 'carbon sink' resulting from woody vegetation thickening that has been occurring for decades on previously cleared land.

The Palaszczuk Labor government needs to stop demonising farmers and stick to the facts. Please be assured that the LNP is committed to protecting Queensland's environment through policies based on sound, scientific data. The LNP is also committed to retaining existing vegetation management regulations which have proved effective in allowing Queensland farmers to produce high-quality food and fibres for domestic and export markets.

Labor's environment minister, Steven Miles, has again tried to deliberately mislead Queenslanders on vegetation management rates in Queensland. Minister Miles issued a media statement on 29 February, deliberately designed to distort the truth. Minister Miles claimed land-clearing rates had dropped to approximately 80,000 hectares under Labor. In fact, the last time rates of woody vegetation clearing in Queensland occurred at that rate—around 78,000 hectares—was in 2009-10. They then steadily increased under Labor's rule.

The Palaszczuk Labor government has no shame in demonising farmers and graziers to please their extreme green and preferences friends. Steven Miles, the minister, has no credibility on these issues and is intent on holding Queensland agriculture back, with the help of the Queensland agriculture minister. We use the terms 'extreme green groups' or 'extreme ideology' but no longer is there a mask of secrecy or faceless members. It is now clear that the new evil face of extreme green policies is sitting opposite, with this minister, the agriculture minister and the Deputy Premier.

For those with investments or who live in regional Queensland, we have seen consistent media reports calling out this Palaszczuk government as 'deceitful and dishonest' when using vegetation data to justify this obscene bill. The government's own SLATS report has said that, while clearing rates increased to 296,000 hectares in 2013-14, the amount of tree coverage still increased by 500,000 hectares. Under our laws, graziers were able to carry out day-to-day vegetation management practices to maintain fence lines, pull fodder to feed stock and thin vegetation to maintain pastures and ground cover. Our laws provided people like the farmers in my region with a framework to manage their farms and their businesses in a fair and common-sense way. The last thing you need is to have the right to effectively manage your properties, your farm businesses, trashed by a minister only interested in green grandstanding. If Labor has its way, Queensland farmers will be regulated out of existence and unable to grow food production and income for the state. The bill that the Palaszczuk Labor government has brought to the state parliament will cost Queensland jobs and stifle much needed growth in our agriculture sector.

The Property Council of Australia, Queensland's second largest employer, has also joined the many stakeholders condemning this bill. To add to the insult, no consultation has been undertaken. One of the numerous serious concerns raised by the Property Council is the significant additional costs of thousands of dollars that is expected on all new housing as a result of the new environmental offsets requirements. Queensland deserves better than a vindictive government indebted to third parties with a short-sighted, one-track agenda.

The LNP is committed to protecting landholders' rights, protecting your rights, protecting your right to farm, and all members should support this policy objective as Labor distorts the truth on vegetation management. I thank AgForce and all of the stakeholders who joined the many concerned constituents of the Bundaberg-Burnett region who have shown strong support in speaking out on these issues.

There are many memorable and important statements that will resonate with the people of Bundaberg and Queensland after the well-orchestrated campaign of many interested stakeholders. One was from the fishing sector with a placard that read, 'The Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries wouldn't know the difference between a mullet and a mudflap.' I wonder how we can still vote for these draconian laws. In closing, another message that was heard right across Queensland was the message, 'Don't Trad on me.'