




Speech By
Christopher Whiting

MEMBER FOR BANCROFT

Record of Proceedings, 1 May 2018

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr WHITING** (Bancroft—ALP) (12.57 pm): I am proud to stand here today to speak in favour of the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. It is clear to us on this side why we need this legislation. The figures show that we are clearing vegetation in Queensland at an unsustainable rate: 400,000 hectares a year, an increase of 33 per cent from 2014-15. It is the highest clearing rate since 2003-04. Most worryingly, the clearing rates in Great Barrier Reef catchments have increased by 45 per cent in 2015-16 at a time when both state and federal governments are committed to taking action to prevent UNESCO from declaring that the reef is in danger.

One of the things that I want to address today as the chair of the committee is the claim that has been made about consultation during this process. There has never been a better consultation process by a committee in this House. How do they explain nine public consultations—

Opposition members interjected.


Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Pugh): Order! Members on my left!

Mr WHITING: There are claims that the process was rushed, but the process was the same as for every other inquiry in this place. The LNP has said that it wanted more consultation, but how long did it want?

Mr Mickelberg: The LNP did not say it: the people out west said it!

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Buderim!

Mr WHITING: They said that more consultation is needed. Is it six months or 12 months? It does not matter how long: they were going to oppose it no matter how much consultation there was. If you read through what has been said it is clear why there has been no RIS and no economic modelling: panic clearing. That was admitted by the landholders themselves. At Gracemere Mr Gibson said, 'As soon as word gets out that there is a bit of discussion about more tree-clearing legislation, panic clearing sets in.' Mr Ryan at the same hearing said, 'I would not call it panic clearing; I would call it smart because they want to get it done.'

 **Mr WHITING** (Bancroft—ALP) (3.57 pm), continuing: As I said before, after conducting the consultation and hearings on this bill I did not hear anything to make me come to the conclusion that we needed to make any changes to this bill. No-one had any alternatives as to how to protect the reef from run-off and nutrients. The committee did not hear how we could abate the CO₂ emissions that are released by land clearing. There is nothing in the bill that will prevent farmers from doing their everyday business.

There has been a lot of misinformation peddled by the LNP and I want to address some of it. I think that misinformation was epitomised by the member for Burdekin. At a rally in Townsville the member for Burdekin said that people would not be able to clear a tree in Queensland again. I hear that he was made to walk back from that statement by Blair Knuth, the organiser of that rally. The member for Thuringowa called him out for it as well. I will not use the word that he used, but he said that it was not true, that it was rubbish. That is essentially what we have been hearing from the LNP on this issue.

We have heard a lot from the LNP members in their dissenting report and in their speeches about the codes. They have said that the codes would be unworkable, but they have not given any examples. They have only repeated opinions. We have learned from this process how the codes will work. The fodder code is still self-assessable. Under the old act farmers could clear all of their property for fodder. Under the change that we are proposing, farmers can clear 500 hectares and then self-audit and do another 500 hectares. They check in about what they have done. As one of the postdoctoral research witnesses said, that is enough fodder for cattle.

Farmers can clear for weeds in any category of vegetation if they do not take out any native vegetation. If they take out native vegetation, there is a self-assessable code for that. Category R in the riverine is still self-assessable. It does not apply if there is no native vegetation within that riparian zone. If there is encroachment by woody weeds that is not part of the ecosystem—for example, gidgee in some places—farmers can clear that weed under the encroachment code. It is a self-assessable process.

We have heard evidence of how the codes will work. There is nothing in the codes being proposed that will prevent landholders managing their land responsibly. The LNP will cling to any opinion that they want to believe. They will not address evidence that proves otherwise.

What we have seen in the dissenting report and speeches of those opposite is the tired old LNP tactic of casting doubt on the science. The member for Burdekin has said we are using shonky science, but it is their grasp of science that sets the shonky standard in this parliament. They claim the maps are inaccurate and there are more trees growing than ever. They claim trees actually cause erosion and we need more grassland to stop it. They did not even talk about the issue of climate change—not once. In fact, their denial of climate science is the shonkiest stance of all. The Leader of the Opposition said there is no other issue on which our differences are so stark. That is only partially true. The starkest difference that I can see is that the LNP does not believe in climate science. Those opposite do not believe we need to do anything about climate change. This bill is a crucial step in the struggle against climate change.

On the issue of mapping, the constant theme of those opposite is that you cannot trust the science of the mapping or the mapping itself. Dr Silcock, one of the post doctoral research fellows we heard from, made a great point: Queensland is the only state that does this regional ecosystem mapping. It is better than anywhere else in Australia. The Herbarium is working at updating the mapping all the time. We have heard often over the last two years that the mapping will much better account for regrowth in the future. Queensland has about 180 million hectares and there will be some mistakes, but we should be proud of what we have achieved with our mapping and proud of the continuous improvement that we are seeing.

The LNP members indulge themselves in the belief that there has been an increase in woody vegetation and trees throughout the state. It has been said you can see it in the SLATS 2012-14, which has an increase from 2011-2012 in woody vegetation of 400,000 hectares. The 2012-14 SLATS report, compared to 2005, shows a drop of 2.4 million hectares in woody vegetation. There has been a 57 per cent increase in brigalow clearing from 2014-15 to 2015-16 and 48 per cent of the Brigalow Belt has been cleared. Are we talking about an increase in trees? It may be an increase in actual foliage. Foliage protection cover varies from year to year. Authors of SLATS say foliage protection cover is a very unreliable way to measure an increase or decrease of woody vegetation.

The LNP also try to spin the line that having more trees means more erosion. The truth is, as we saw from expert testimony, that we need a combination of grassland and woody vegetation to prevent erosion. We heard from Professor John Brodie from James Cook University, with 300 peer reviewed papers to his name, who said that grasses are not very good at bank protection except in very small streams. Dr Seabrook rebutted the claim that excessive mulga and gidgee are causing erosion. In terms of science, I will listen to the scientists and not the LNP.

The LNP tried to use the line that this bill will limit the expansion of the agricultural sector. This is a thin argument and those opposite cannot sustain it. Indeed, I do not see them trying to sustain it.

Mr Mickelberg interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Member for Buderim, the member has the call.

Mr WHITING: The member for Buderim did not like to hear that there is one million hectares available to the agricultural industry for expansion. We heard in public hearings that there is one million hectares available for expansion with this act.

In terms of Cape York, we have heard the LNP say it would stop expansion. This bill will not stop agricultural growth as there are already many agricultural operations in the cape. There are many pastoral leases on the cape and we heard they are operating well. There are other expanding industries in the cape region. We have heard from Aboriginal corporations about their expanding tourism and carbon abatements operations as well. It is one of their best business opportunities. In fact, this bill gives them the foundation and the security to build on these industries. This bill provides a solid base for them to expand these businesses and give them economic opportunity. I reject the claim that this bill will stop economic growth and expansion in the north. In fact, I believe it will expand it.

At the conclusion of many of the hearings, as the chair I specifically asked landholders what message they wanted taken back to the minister. They said they wanted certainty and surety more than anything else. This legislation can deliver that for the long term. I urge the LNP to be a part of it and to accept this as the foundation for ongoing tree-clearing regulation into the future. Do not prolong the uncertainty for rural producers by saying they would ever change it; that is not what they want or need. I say to the LNP do not be on the wrong side of history with this issue. Those opposite will be judged in the future on what they did to protect the Great Barrier Reef, on what they did to help limit CO₂ emissions. I commend the recommendations of the committee and the bill to the House.