




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (CLEARING CODES) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT REGULATION

Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (5.28 pm): I move—

That the Vegetation Management (Clearing Codes) and Other Legislation Amendment Regulation 2018, subordinate legislation No. 24 of 2018, tabled in the House on 20 March 2018, be disallowed.

I move this disallowance motion because what this Labor government is doing to our farmers is appalling. The first objective of the Vegetation Management (Clearing Codes) and Other Legislation Amendment Regulation 2018 was to give effect to the new version of the State Development Assessment Provisions with amendments to 'State code 16: Native vegetation clearing' to reflect the accepted development vegetation clearing codes 'managing thickened vegetation' and 'managing fodder harvesting' and other minor amendments to provisions of other state codes.

The second objective was to give effect to the remade accepted development vegetation clearing codes; namely, managing thickened vegetation, managing fodder harvesting and managing category C regrowth vegetation.

These regulations, if they were to come into effect, would have a devastating impact on our farmers and the agricultural sector in general. There are good and valid reasons for moving this disallowance motion. First and foremost, unlike those members opposite, LNP members have actually been out talking to our farmers to find out how these new regulations will impact upon them, and it is not a pretty story.

Last week with the member for Warrego, I visited Charleville where I met and spoke with around 50 farmers about the impact these regulations will have on their livelihood. I actually took the time to inspect their properties and view firsthand livestock feeding on mulga which had been harvested that morning. The minister can put all the spin he likes on these regulations, but let me say unequivocally here tonight that they do nothing but add a mountain of bureaucratic bullshit to a process that should be simple and straightforward.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Stewart): Order!

Mr LAST: I withdraw.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Burdekin, if you use language like that again, you will be warned under the standing orders.

Mr LAST: They add bureaucratic red tape to a process that should be simple and straightforward. Our farmers in these drought-affected areas have their backs to the wall, and they are stressed enough without having to wade through a laborious and onerous approval process to obtain a permit to harvest mulga.

There is not a one-size-fits-all when it comes to mulga harvesting, and I want to outline the impracticality of the new regulations. The fodder code limits fodder harvesting in category B areas to 500 hectares per notification. However, the 500 hectares covers both the actual harvested area and the associated retained area, so for each approved 500 hectares, farmers are only harvesting less than half that area. That is right. For every 50-metre strip harvested, a 75-metre strip of retained vegetation is required to be left either side of the cleared strip of mulga. Then, to add insult to injury, fodder harvesting must not occur in vegetation that has been harvested in the last 10 years, and even then the retention areas must contain fodder species with an average height of at least four metres.

We start to appreciate how difficult it has become to meet the requirements of this new legislation. One farmer said to me last week, 'With the 500 hectare limits and strip requirements it is geometrically and practically impossible to keep feed up to 750 to 1,000 head, let alone meet the time and compliance requirements of renotifying every fortnight or less, with five hours spent in the office and one to two hours doing GPS coordinates.'

In addition, 500 hectares per lot discriminates against those graziers with large properties. What this means is that the 500 hectare limit per application applies equally to blocks of 80,000 hectares as it does to a 3,000 hectare block. If that is extrapolated to the numbers of cattle, it can mean a difference of several thousand head that graziers are trying to keep alive on a daily basis. Let me tell members that the logistics of trying to keep alive several thousand head of cattle are enormous. If our farmers destock, they face selling cattle on a depressed market. Of course, when the season breaks, they will be forced to purchase replacement stock at significantly higher prices—hence, the need to retain their stock through this drought.

As was pointed out to me last week in Charleville, by harvesting in strips, cattle are forced to walk longer distances back to water. In times of drought, farmers do not want their cattle walking any further than about two to three kilometres to access water, so clearing in strips and leaving retained areas means they are pushing stock further away from watering points, which then forces the grazier to incur additional costs running poly pipe and installing troughs. In the past, it was financially viable to pipe water for stock, but with these rules it is impossible, especially for distributing grazing pressure across a paddock. A mobile water truck is too hard and too expensive to operate, and that is the practicality.

Mulga is a shrub that can grow up to 15 metres high, with the leaves providing a valuable fodder source, particularly in times of drought, as they are palatable to stock and provide up to 12 per cent crude protein. As they say, there is a bale of hay in every tree. If mulga is not controlled, it will grow so dense that stock will not be able to walk through it, let alone feed on it. As one grazier said to me last week in Charleville, 'If you leave mulga untouched, it will create a perpetual drought because grass won't grow beneath the canopy and as a consequence livestock won't have anything to eat.'

I actually inspected a stand of virgin mulga country which locals refer to as the dead zone. They call it this because there are no wallabies, lizards, bilbies, birds or other wildlife in this area because the mulga is so dense that it has choked out all other forms of vegetation, including grass. When you walk into this dead zone, it is completely silent because nothing lives there. One grazier said—

Since the wool floor price collapsed in the mid 1990's and sheep left, wild dog numbers have increased dramatically, even the goats have depleted. This has let young mulga regrowth virtually take over all the red country that already didn't have older grown mulga on it. So now we are heading towards a mono-culture of pure mulga. There isn't a blade of grass left and a lot of country won't have the grass it had originally because of the mulga density.

The use of mulga as fodder is a vital part of drought management for our farmers, and we should be making it easier to harvest, not more difficult. Mulga is highly resilient and drought tolerant. When mulga is cleared, it grows back like the grass in your lawn after it has been mown. If the regrowth is not controlled, the country becomes unusable. They can buy all the hay they want, but if access to mulga is taken away, livestock would starve and our graziers would go broke. Quite simply, without access to this feed source, we would have no cattle or sheep industry in Western Queensland. As the mayor of the Paroo Shire Council, Lindsay Godfrey, said—

Mulga is one of the reliable tools that we have for a lot of the area to get us through droughts, the more you push it down the more it grows.

Under the LNP, laws for fodder harvesting during times of drought were self-assessable. Labor's antifarming laws remove this self-assessability and add another layer of red tape, significantly slowing down the approval process. Our farmers are in the battle of their lives. In some cases, they have not had decent rain for seven years, and the last thing they need is to be spending hours and hours trying

to meet stringent compliance requirements around mapping, including GPS coordinates, photographs and reporting. As Grant Maudsley, the AgForce president, said—

The tightening of the fodder harvesting code and the removal of the thinning code have meant more red tape for farmers to navigate and made it more difficult to grow grass to feed livestock.

Further—

The whole process is much more time consuming and complicated at a time when drought-stricken farmers are working around the clock just to keep their stock alive.

The minister said last week, 'The Palaszczuk government is backing farmers and drought affected communities.' I hope the minister is listening here tonight because the regulations are not working and stock are dying because of it. The minister said that graziers can harvest up to 50 per cent of their regulated mulga, but that mulga must be untouched for 10 years and it must be an average height of four metres. That is not easy in a long-running drought. Farmers need to be given the flexibility to harvest mulga as they see fit. Nice neat strips in rectangular level paddocks sound good in theory, but the reality is that farmers want to harvest mulga around watering points. They want to harvest mulga where they can get the most benefit, and these new regulations are taking that away from them.

The cover and density of mulga stands can be quite varied. If a grazier pushes a stand of mulga that has a much lower density, he is still restricted to a 500 hectare total area. For instance, in thicker stands, the feed value is 100 per cent, another stand which has medium cover is 50 per cent, whereas low density stands may only have 25 per cent. What this means is that graziers are being forced to target thicker stands of mulga to get the maximum benefit from each permit application, which may not necessarily be good for the land. As one grazier said when trying to meet his compliance requirements—

The current approach has us driving a machine with one hand and holding the phone (GPS) and following a blue dot while trying to avoid gullies and breakaways. This is all quite dangerous.

Again—

It is impossible to get the planning right on the online mapping tool—the Google earth imagery does not show the on-ground variation, with gullies, breakaways and jump-ups not evident.

These are the reflections and comments from real people. These are the graziers and their families on the land battling for survival in one of the worst droughts in this nation's history—farmers who have been living on the land in some cases for generations. All of a sudden they have had the shackles put on them by this government. There is a real risk that if these laws are passed today without amendment we will see farmers going broke, livestock dying in increasing numbers and the agricultural industry in Western Queensland decimated. We have the opportunity here tonight to fix that.

I will move on to the tree-thinning laws or, as it is now known, the managing thickened vegetation regulations—and what a debacle this has been. These are the guidelines. That is right: 82 pages of bureaucratic red tape that have become a nightmare for our farmers. Let me explain how this works. Farmers are required to leave remnant trees with a diameter of 200 millimetres in situ. Furthermore, they are required to leave a five-metre buffer zone around each remnant tree. I want to table a photo taken last week at Charleville to illustrate my point.

Tabled paper: Photograph depicting mulga growth [\[1281\]](#).

As members can see by that photo, the mulga regrowth is so dense in this area that people can barely walk through it, yet it cannot be cleared because of the number of remnant trees in the area. What happens? The mulga gets thicker and thicker until such time as there is no grass left and stock have no feed. When we combine a \$3,100 application fee and an estimated \$10,000 consultant fee to complete the development application forms, honourable members begin to understand why graziers are not bothering to apply for these permits.

Despite what those on that side of the House might think, our graziers are not environmental vandals. In fact, it is quite the opposite. If they were to go out and knock over all the mulga on their properties, they would have nothing left for the future in terms of drought fodder. We need to trust our farmers to do the right thing; we need to get out of their way and allow them to manage their properties as they see fit. Sure, we can keep an eye on what they are doing, but that is what extension officers are for. There should be more of those officers working individually with farmers on the ground to provide the necessary advice and guidance.

I will move quickly on to the managing category C regrowth vegetation code, which is being remade to meet this government's election commitment to protect what they are calling high conservation value regrown vegetation. What this regulation does, however, is remove the agriculture and grazing section of the code. These changes were made without consultation, and I note that the remade code will be in place temporarily while advice on the appropriateness of its measures is

obtained from the Queensland Herbarium and the CSIRO. I certainly hope that consultation extends to our farmers and the decision is not made in the Greens' office here in Brisbane because managing regrowth, as I have explained here today, is vitally important to the sustainability of our agricultural sector going forward. As one grazier said last week—

The rules are the problems. There is a complete lack of trust, we have no belief and they have taken away our certainty. It seems like we are dealing with a Government that is driven by the Greenies.

We have heard from the Premier, the minister and a number of MPs from that side of the House how they support the drought appeal and associated campaign to help our farmers. Talk is cheap. I now say to those members that it is time to walk the walk. If they are fair dinkum about supporting our farmers, if they are genuine in their offer to make a difference, if they want to see our farmers survive in the mulga lands in Western Queensland, they will support this disallowance motion here tonight and allow our farmers to do what they do best: manage their properties and survive this drought.