




Speech By  
**Michael Berkman**

**MEMBER FOR MAIWAR**

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## **VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (6.15 pm): Vegetation management has become Queensland's greatest political football. It is the issue that seems to most polarise the people within this chamber, and that division is often reflected within elements of the Queensland community. Both sides of this chamber are guilty of having treated the agricultural and conservation sectors as political pawns, creating division between sectors that should be working together. We again risk trading positive policy outcomes for cheap electoral pointscoring.

Whilst laying the blame on the agricultural sector or the environmental sector for all the environmental or economic ills of this state, both Labor and the LNP have ignored what both of these sectors have been saying: that the swings and roundabouts, the perpetual policy uncertainty, drives the worst outcomes for both farmers and the environment. This kind of political brinkmanship cannot be expected to protect the Great Barrier Reef, support strong rural communities, position Queensland as a leader on climate change, reverse our declining biodiversity or manage the drought that still afflicts two-thirds of the state.

It has not quite been 19 years since the Vegetation Management Act was passed, yet that act has been amended 39 times. This bill would make 40—40 versions of the act in about as much time as it takes for a tree to reach maturity. For all the noise and fury in this chamber, Queensland still bears the shame of being a world leader in tree clearing. Each cycle of reregulation by Labor results in a spike in clearing rates, or panic clearing. The LNP appears to embrace the polarisation and holds onto this fight as its saving grace in rural seats and perpetuates the uncertainty that plagues farmers. Both parties have sold communities down the river to mining interests and economic frameworks that favour big business over mum-and-dad farmers and the social services around them.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the debate on this bill is the ongoing politicisation of science. Science knows no politics. Brash claims about the supposedly 'fundamentally flawed' science neglects that this is our best evidence to guide policy. As with climate science, it is plain arrogance to dismiss the work of scientists and experts and suggest that we know better. It has been implied by opposition members that since we do not have good data on recent regrowth, there might really have been an increase in vegetation cover. Not only is it incredibly far-fetched to think that may in fact be the case, but it is farcical to compare the ecological value of new regrowth to remnant vegetation. Of course, honourable members could be forgiven for thinking, based on the political rhetoric, that it is only farmers that cut down trees in Queensland. Clearing also occurs for property development, for roads and powerlines, for mines and for numerous other purposes that appear to garner little attention.

Agriculture is our state's predominant land use and accounts for most of the clearing rates that, no matter which way you cut it, even with regard to our history of settlement and land use, are staggeringly, heartbreakingly high. We must always be clear in this debate that farmers are not villains and the vast majority of farmers are outstanding stewards of their land. However, regulation is clearly required to reverse these trends and bring us in line with agricultural producers across the developed

world. To the extent that this bill achieves that outcome, I support it. However, Labor's bill will only slow a fraction of that clearing whilst reinforcing the inequity between sectors and land uses and areas of the state. When a tree is felled, whether it is replaced with a road, a mine shaft or a banana plantation, the loss of that tree and the carbon it has stored and the habitat it has provided is felt the same. I believe Queensland can and should be a world leader in environmental protection. I have fought for our environment for years before entering this chamber, and I will continue to do so during my time here.

Labor's proposed laws, or even those they had in 2012, are not world leading despite their claims. There is nothing world leading about policy that changes on average twice a year. There is nothing world leading about a policy framework that so divides this parliament or the community to which it applies. There is nothing world leading about policy that puts politics ahead of outcomes. There is certainly nothing world leading about flogging the same dead horse and claiming that it will address all of the ills that afflict our reef, our climate and our koala habitat.

Labor's proposed bill does not resolve the division between two sectors that I dearly believe should be working in unity. By the LNP's account, this bill has no hope of ending the biannual reform churn. I have met with, and listened to, advocates on all sides of the debate. I went out to the front of parliament yesterday to listen to the farmers, much to the chagrin of the member for Whitsunday. I have attended hearings and briefings, read submissions and considered proposed amendments, and within the scope of the government's bill I will bring some of those amendments forward.

I will move to limit the range of purposes for which an accepted development vegetation code can be made to prevent the provision of exemptions by stealth. I will move to expand the definition of high-value regrowth vegetation so that it applies to a broader range of tenures and land uses. I will move to retain substantially tightened provisions for high-value agriculture and irrigated high-value agriculture. These amendments would allow minimal, sensible, but tightly regulated and targeted agricultural development by allowing this kind of development only on land already identified as a priority agricultural area that is a least concern ecosystem, amongst other constraints. I will also move to retain limited provisions for area management plans for the purposes of controlling non-native vegetation and declared pests and for ecological restoration.

Let me be the first to acknowledge that my amendments to the bill do not yet address the inequities between land uses and the concerning loss of biodiversity corridors, koala habitat, green space and the creation of heat islands in our urban and peri-urban areas. These amendments address a tiny fraction of the changes to vegetation protection that I would like to see and that various interest groups on all sides have been calling for. Most importantly, they do not and cannot address the 23 million hectares of land classified as category X that Labor's bill will leave completely unregulated. There is much outside the scope of this bill that I cannot propose to amend now but that I encourage the government to address through subordinate legislation or policy implementation.

I encourage the government to incorporate a requirement that a drought declaration is a precursor for clearing to be accepted development under the fodder harvesting code. I encourage the removal of the words 'managing thickened vegetation' from self-assessable codes relating to category C and category R vegetation, thus ensuring that all such clearing remains assessable. I encourage the government to annually map total native vegetation cover, including native regrowth, to provide more comprehensive information on carbon sequestration and to support the assessment and compliance of clearing to manage thickened vegetation. I encourage the government to remove exemptions for activities relating to urban development and the resource sector. I encourage the government to properly invest in extension to support sustainable agricultural land management across the state.

I encourage the government to invest in the science of understanding riparian buffer zones and the protection needs of different stream orders. I then encourage the government to apply that science in extending riparian vegetation protections to all land uses and all Queensland catchments, not just to agriculture near the Great Barrier Reef. I encourage the government to provide property maps of assessable vegetation to all landholders on a five-year rolling-term basis without application or payment and to provide with those maps supporting information that empowers landholders to manage their land legally and for the good of Queensland's environment.

I encourage the government to better protect our wondrous biodiversity by broadening the requirements for flora and fauna services prior to development approval being granted and for spotters and species relocation to be factored into clearing activities. I encourage the government to prevent any further land being mapped as category X or being made otherwise exempt and instead implement a best management practice program or similar voluntary codes to apply to significant areas of non-regulated vegetation across the state and encourage the retention of native vegetation.

Queensland is calling out for significant reform of both our environmental laws and the way that our democracy operates. I thank the committee for its consideration of this bill in the unconscionably short period allocated, although we must question the effectiveness of the committee system as a replacement for the proper checks and balances of an upper house. Rather than consensus decision-making and evidence based public policy, we rely on minimalistic processes and dissenting reports that have little to no effect on the parliamentary outcome.

I would also like to thank the thousands of Queenslanders who wrote submissions and signed petitions and even those who have been protesting outside this week. This gives me faith that there is a public that wants to improve our democracy. For the good of us all—for the reef and for investment in rural communities—I sincerely hope that we can this time pass a bill that actually puts outcomes above party politics. I hope that we are not back here next month, next year, or in 2020 debating the same ground as this House of parliament has been for nearly 20 years.