




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR TRAEGER

Record of Proceedings, 21 March 2018

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (CLEARING FOR RELEVANT PURPOSES) AMENDMENT BILL

Introduction

 **Mr KATTER** (Traeger—KAP) (12.42 pm): I present a bill for an act to amend the Vegetation Management Act 1999 for particular purposes. I table the bill and explanatory notes. I nominate the State Development, Natural Resources and Agricultural Industry Development Committee to consider the bill.

Tabled paper: Vegetation Management (Clearing for Relevant Purposes) Amendment Bill 2018 [\[394\]](#).

Tabled paper: Vegetation Management (Clearing for Relevant Purposes) Amendment Bill 2018, explanatory notes [\[395\]](#).

There has been a sustained attack by the government on rural Queensland with regard to the activities included in this bill. I speak not just about farmers and cattle producers but also people in the towns who rely on the surrounding agricultural industry to survive. People who live out there are at the forefront of this issue. On the back of four or five years of drought those people can ill afford any disruption to the way they manage their farms and cattle stations. We are proposing sensible and rather discreet amendments to provide a sensible alternative to the existing regime. We are asking members of this House to consider amendments to the Vegetation Management Act that have come from people who live out there and work in the industry, not from another ideological pursuit from the south-east corner. I think that is a sensible option to offer members of this House.

The bill seeks to amend the act by inserting these words—

If the chief executive decides the development applied for is not development mentioned in subsection (2)(a) to (1), the chief executive must give the applicant an information notice about the decision.

That first amendment gives people the right to appeal. In many cases it seems terribly unfair that when people are trying to achieve the outcome that everyone wants in terms of sustainable development, a judgement is made that people disagree with and there is no right to appeal. I think that makes for a poor piece of legislation, no matter the issue, and it needs to be addressed. That is the first amendment we would like to make.

The second is a fairly discreet change to the definition so that high-value agricultural clearing is defined to include grazing activities. At the moment if someone in Cape York has a million acres and wants to put 300 acres of that into highly productive hay paddocks or fodder crops from which their cattle can eat, if that is not irrigated it is not classed as high-value agriculture. However, they would have performed all the duties they normally would for an irrigated crop except for irrigating. We believe that the definition of grazing still fits the purpose of high-value agriculture.

Honourable members need to bear in mind that we confront huge issues which I am of the strong view come from the imposition of government and regulations as to how water is made available to us from river systems. This makes it very difficult for us to irrigate some of this land that we are allowed to clear. However, we are not allowed to let cattle graze on that land. We can grow fodder for that crop,

bale the hay, take that hay into the paddock next door and give it to the cattle. We can clear for that purpose, but under this definition we cannot grow that same crop and let the cattle go into that paddock and graze on it. This is an anomaly within the existing rules.

This amendment is a sensible way to tidy things up and allow for the effective operation of the original intent of this legislation, which, I might argue, both sides of the House have accepted in the past. These are quite sensible amendments and they cut to the core of the issue of sensible vegetation management. This has been aggressively approached in this House many times. We are trying to provide some discreet and sensible solutions derived from the areas that are most affected by the legislation.

In relation to the studies and science that we often hear quoted—and one is the SLATS report—the data is terribly misleading to someone on the ground who can see how this is applied. Yesterday in an interview I was asked if I acknowledged that 300,000 hectares of clearing has been undertaken since the last changes to vegetation management and I acknowledged that. I also acknowledged that there are 430,000 hectares in addition to that 300,000 that is regrowth. There were some 700,000 hectares of regrowth, 300,000 hectares of which was cleared, but there was still a net gain of 400,000 hectares of trees. That is the figure that is thrown around. The media questioned me about it as early as yesterday. That is the belief that is propagated and I believe the premise on which a lot of these laws are predicated, and it is very misleading science. There needs to be some adequate debate and sensible decision-making upon applying these laws. That is what we are trying to achieve through these amendments that I am introducing today.

The SLATS data that is so often referred to in this House has been vulnerable to manipulation and misuse in quite mischievous ways to achieve a political outcome. Opponents of what we are trying to achieve would say that the use of clearing data for reasonable clearing is also extremely questionable. In recent times it has been almost impossible to find any data on regrowth. That is why it is very difficult to make informed judgements on any of the evidence that has been brought before us in arriving at these decisions. In our view that certainly needs to be challenged.

Another issue that will come up in this debate is the impact on the Great Barrier Reef, which is invoked just about every time we talk about vegetation management issues. This is of great interest to me because almost my entire electorate, which is almost 25 per cent of Queensland, flows into the gulf. None of it flows into the reef. If that were a large driver of our amendments then it should not be subject to areas that flow into the gulf. We often hear the Great Barrier Reef invoked in these discussions, I think quite irresponsibly, when the vast majority of the land affected will have zero impact on the Great Barrier Reef.

Unreasonable restrictions on land clearing deny economic opportunities to parts of North Queensland and Western Queensland, especially places like the Einasleigh uplands, gulf plains, Cape York desert uplands, north-west highlands, mulga land, Mitchell grass downs and Channel Country. In moving these amendments we are mindful of the fact that in the history of our state there has been a lot of development in southern Queensland. As we move up to Central Queensland there was the Brigalow Belt clearing scheme. A lot of good work was done there, but when we move up to North Queensland hardly anything has happened. The laws have now been changed and we are being denied even minor opportunities to develop that land.

I recall a discussion that I had recently—I do not think he would mind me using his name—with Alister McClymont, who is one of the champion gulf cattlemen in north-west Queensland. I said, 'Alister, if you had a million hectares up there in the cape would you benefit from one or two per cent clearing?' He said, 'That would be fantastic. I could feed my weaners and I could manage things better in a drought and have better control in the markets. I would produce a lot more revenue for Queensland in terms of taxes and growth.' You and I would not notice that flying over in a plane. Over a million hectares, one or two per cent, is a pinprick on the map.

I would remind the House that an estimated 95 per cent of the forest in the gulf and Cape York is remnant forest, and that is why we have the amendment with regard to using it for grazing purposes and high-value agriculture. It would make an enormous difference and it could make or break some of these operations. Taking only a tiny little bit makes an amazing difference, but that gets lost in these discussions. When there is misleading use of the data it clouds the overall vision of what we can do with just a little bit of a concession that can be managed quite well.

What also needs to be taken into account in the discussion of these amendments is the historical nature of the land we are talking about. Since we have been following it with satellite mapping, the amount of regrowth that has occurred over the history of white man's settlement in these areas is in some cases phenomenal. The landscape has changed dramatically. I recall driving around Charters Towers and asking my father why these places were called Fanning Downs and Burdekin Downs when

they were moderately to heavily timbered large cattle stations. That is because they were downs property. When the white man went out there and settled in those areas it was open country, but the landscape changes dramatically and we keep trying to redefine it.

The principle behind the amendments we are proposing to the House is that those people who live out there amongst it are in the best position to judge. They should be listened to very closely with regard to how we manage it going forward. I think it is rather condescending and paternalistic of this House to impose laws without having great input from people in those areas, and that is why we have engaged them in the consultation process with regard to these amendments.

We feel that we can send a positive signal to those people in rural Queensland who are coming off the back of five years of some of the worst drought Queensland has ever experienced. We are just getting back on our feet, and we need to have sensible changes and amendments to the Vegetation Management Act. We do not need to be slapped in the face and knocked back down. We can ill afford that in our towns, and I am sure that farmers and producers themselves can ill afford it.

First Reading

Mr KATTER (Traeger—KAP) (12.54 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a first time.

Question put—That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Bill read a first time.

Referral to State Development, Natural Resources and Agricultural Industry Development Committee

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Stewart): In accordance with standing order 131, the bill is now referred to the State Development, Natural Resources and Agricultural Industry Development Committee.