




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (2.09 pm): The proposed legislation is of real concern. The Palaszczuk Labor government's approach is not fair to the thousands of Queensland farmers who have invested in their land, livestock and farming equipment with the clear expectation of being able to manage their properties to generate returns to pay their bills and service borrowing costs, as in any normal business enterprise.

In the electorate of Burnett it is clear: Labor's proposed changes will make it nearly impossible to bring new land into high-value agriculture. That means we cannot supply more Queensland avocados, mangoes and macadamia nuts or increase sugarcane production, which we desperately need. These changes mean that Queensland will be forced to import more fruit, vegetables and nuts, even though we have the ability to grow even more here. That is because Labor is removing the exemptions for high-value agriculture, making it harder to grow more fruit, vegetables and nuts in Queensland. Labor wants to tie farmers up in red tape, with new development approval processes for new clearing permits for activities such as thinning. Labor is imposing new notification requirements on drought impacted farmers who are just trying to feed their cattle.

The Palaszczuk government's proposed regulations on native vegetation attack responsible farmers and threaten agricultural development in regional Queensland. The changes being considered here in this place reverse a policy that allows farmers to clear high-value agricultural land to put it to productive use. Those laws were a sensible attempt to find a balance between environmental conservation and agricultural development. They allowed farmers to extract value from their land while still requiring them to minimise overclearing by self-assessing their activities against codes of conduct that were strongly enforced. The proposed laws are a further step away from balance in favour of environmental extremists—the same extremists who unfortunately control this government. Labor's legislation is about Labor buying votes in Brisbane.

We are concerned that, at a time when Queensland needs sustainable growth opportunities, particularly in regional areas, which have suffered prolonged drought and loss of employment opportunities, farm management and development projects will be stymied by Labor's bill. The presumption underlying these extreme reforms regarding agricultural land clearing is that environmental protection cannot coexist with agricultural development, so we demonise our farmers once again. The legislation suggests that there is no situation in which the benefits of developing land could outweigh the costs of clearing shrubbery and trees from farmland.

The inclusion of regrowth that has not been cleared for 15 years will lock up over 862,000 hectares of land into the high-value regrowth classification. Furthermore, scientists have admitted that there is no mapping of regrowth. That makes a mockery of the Statewide Landcover and Trees Study, which has been talked about many times in this place. This is extreme and ignores the many economic benefits to farmers, the state and the nation of releasing land otherwise locked up by the government. It is not surprising that over the period 2012-13 to 2015-16 the gross value of agricultural commodities produced in Queensland increased by almost 30 per cent—almost double the national increase—and

we became Australia's most valuable agricultural state. By comparison, the gross value of agricultural production in New South Wales and Victoria over the same period increased by just eight per cent and 12.5 per cent respectively.

A number of other assumptions are clouding the land-clearing debate. Claims that land is being cleared at Brazil-like levels since 2013 are overblown, incorrect and disingenuous. In 2015-16 just a quarter of one per cent of Queensland's land area was cleared. About two-thirds of the vegetation management carried out by farmers is to control regrowth areas that had previously been cleared, for routine farm maintenance such as the erection of fences and the construction of tracks, and to stop the encroachment of trees and shrubs into naturally open grassland areas. This does not say anything about the extent of vegetation that has grown back since 2013. It has been reported that the department of science remote-sensing centre leader, Dan Tindall, has conceded that the satellite mapping of regrowth is a very difficult thing to do and that the possibility exists that more trees are growing back than are being cut down.

The reason land clearing has not been occurring at reckless rates under the laws enacted previously is that farmers know how to get the most out of their land in the least destructive way. This leads to other assumptions underlying environmental extremism: the idea that farmers do not know how to manage their land so it must be publicly managed. Governments need to get out of the road of these hardworking families.

We need to be acutely aware of the extreme policies of this Labor government—policies that now state that the public interest in environmental conservation means that private property rights are irrelevant. Property rights give landowners an incentive to care for their land. They know that their livelihoods depend on environmentally sustainable practices. This means economising land use or the use of more efficient and environmentally friendly machinery and technology. They certainly do not need city based bureaucrats, professional politicians or coastal activists telling them how to do their job.

The government also transfers the cost of protecting the environment from the public to the landowners. This distorts how people understand the costs of environmental protection regulations. For instance, the explanatory notes for the new proposals estimate the financial cost of administering the legislation to be cost neutral, but this ignores the real cost to farmers in lost agricultural production, a cost that flows to consumers right across Australia.

Locking up farmland may make the lefties feel good, but it makes life much harder for our farmers. It will not put food on the tables of families already struggling to keep up with the increasing cost of living. Research last month illustrated how government regulated and subsidised sectors are driving up the cost of living. Wage growth has slightly outpaced the increase in food prices since 1997, but this will be more difficult if governments continue to pile regulations on food producers. Labor red tape costs the national economy about \$176 billion each year in lost economic output. The Palaszczuk government needs to ignore the environmental ideological low-growth agenda and start cutting red tape to unleash prosperity for Queenslanders.

My region now has been included in the catchment. There are real problems with this legislation designed to protect the Great Barrier Reef. I remind the House that the Great Barrier Reef catchment is nearly 500,000 square kilometres in area. The catchment represents 25 per cent of Queensland's total area. Queensland's land mass comprises a mainland area of 1.7 million square kilometres and an island area of 6,700 square kilometres. Based on this information, approximately 74 per cent of Queensland's land mass is not part of the Great Barrier Reef catchment.

Along with my colleagues I remain committed to protecting landholders' rights and protecting my region's farmers' rights—protecting their right to farm—as Labor continues to distort the truth on vegetation management. I thank AgForce and all stakeholders including Bundaberg Canegrowers and Bundaberg Fruit & Vegetable Growers, who joined the many concerned industry members and constituents of the Bundaberg and Burnett region who have shown strong support in speaking out on these terrible laws.

In conclusion I want to read an open letter by Ms Bonnie Coolee, a farmer's daughter from my part of the world. It states—

I never thought the day would come where I would say that I could ever be ashamed to be Australian, but here it is!!!

I am absolutely outraged at the ignorance and lack of empathy from the leaders of our nation! I am sick and tired of our current ministers taking action in situations that are said to be delicate because they are scared to offend a minority group. Ministers that are too scared to stand up for Australians because they might be seen as politically incorrect or not diplomatic.

Maybe if our entire country's primary producers stopped their passion for even one week, maybe only then would you ball point pushers realise the damage you have caused by not even allowing an opportunity of negotiation.

The result of this is far more superior than your rules and protocol....

Now you will not have your luscious \$60+kg wagyu steaks to eat at your fine dining restaurants.

You will not have quality fruit and vegetables, rather spend ridiculous amounts importing foreign produce that has poor quality control.

You have now began to send the nation into financial deficit and heartache.

You WILL see increased statistics of SUICIDE, regardless of your claim for support, you have taken grazers livelihood and cut it in half.

You WILL see children becoming UNEDUCATED, because rural families will not be able to afford to send their children to school.

You will NOT reduce your carbon emissions in your CITY because your infrastructure continues to expand.... on fertile ground.

My list could go on for as long as word space would allow, but all I will say to end this here is.... Enough is Enough!

GOOD LUCK to your reinstatement in 2 years, if you still have a state left to vote you in!!

I thank Bonnie and all of the contributors to the committee's report. I think it is important that we all take a stand and vote against this legislation.