Speech By

Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (CLEARING FOR RELEVANT PURPOSES) AMENDMENT BILL

Mr LAST (Burdekin—LNP) (5.43 pm): I rise to speak to the Vegetation Management (Clearing for Relevant Purposes) Amendment Bill 2018. At the outset, can I say that the LNP will not be opposing this bill. I note that the policy objectives of the bill are to amend the Vegetation Management Act 1999 to—

Create an obligation on the chief executive to issue an information notice where an application for clearing, as assessed under section 22A of the Act, has been rejected; and—

Remove 'grazing activities' from the definition of high value agriculture clearing to ensure that it is considered a relevant purpose in the chief executive's consideration of an application to clear under the Act.

Having regard to the second objective, I note that on 17 May 2018 the honourable the Speaker ruled clause 4 of this bill out of order as it offended the same question rule under standing order 87(1). I note that the committee made two recommendations regarding this bill, including—

... that the Minister for Natural Resources, Mines and Energy examine the merits of providing an information notice to applicants under section 22A of the Vegetation Management Act 1999.

Clause 3 proposes to insert a new subsection into section 22A of the act, which would state—

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

Section 22A of the act deals with situations where applicants can apply for a development approval to clear vegetation on land. Before applying for a development approval, the chief executive of the department must be satisfied that the development is for a relevant purpose. Currently, there is no provision that states that the chief executive must give an applicant an information notice about a decision made under section 22A of the act. However, information notices are required under other sections of the act. Under the act, an information notice is defined to mean a notice stating each the following—

(a) the decision, and the reasons for it;

(b) the rights of review under this Act;

(c) the period in which any review under this Act must be started;

(d) how rights of review under this Act are to be exercised.

The provision of an information notice under this act is significant as it triggers the internal and external review processes that are available to applicants under part 4 division 1 and 1A of the act. At present, applicants whose applications are considered not to be for a relevant purpose under section 22A of the act, as determined by the chief executive, have no recourse to internal review of the decision under the act or external review of the decision to the Queensland Civil and Administrative Appeals Tribunal. Therein lies the problem. I note that the LGAQ in its submission on the bill to the committee stated—

The inclusion of this clause provides greater accountability and transparency around decision-making for landholders and councils.

AgForce in its submission stated—

A greater degree of transparency on s22A assessment and approval would have provided landholder applicants with a far better understanding of the prospects of their application being successful and most certainly would have reduced their need to resort to expensive court costs and legal proceedings simply to receive an answer from Queensland Government.

This amendment strikes at the heart of what those on this side of the House have been saying for some time and that is that this government is not interested in giving farmers a fair go. In fact, if nothing else, this term of government will be known for its attack on farmers and the introduction of the most draconian, anti-farmer vegetation management laws this state as has ever seen. For too long this government has betrayed the hardworking men and women who put food on our tables and clothes on our backs as environmental vandals. I take this opportunity to remind the House that 500 farmers protested outside this parliament, thousands of people attended hearings that were meant to be consultation, and 17,500 Queenslanders signed a petition protesting not only this government's legislation but also this government's blatant political stunt to demonise farmers in an attempt to prop up the member for South Brisbane.

This government may have chosen to conveniently forget its attacks on regional Queenslanders, but I can assure the members opposite that the members on this side of the House have not. I can assure them that my colleagues and I will make sure that this gross betrayal is never forgotten. Time after time, this government has engaged in sham consultation with primary producers. Time after time, this government has twisted the facts to appeal to inner-city voters at the expense of families in regional Queensland—families who have responsibly cared for their country for generations, families who today are fighting for the survival of their businesses in the face of one of the worst droughts in history.

Whilst this government continues to bombard us with virtue signalling about rights, primary producers are being denied the basic right to appeal or review a decision made by the department. The right of appeal is a common principle of law in this state and it is a principle that should apply to every Queenslander regardless of their occupation or where they live.

I cannot in all good faith stand in this place tonight without reminding those opposite of the impact their changes to the Vegetation Management Act have had on the agricultural sector in this state. In short, it has sledgehammered the industry. It has sent a shockwave through rural and regional Queensland that has fundamentally changed the way farmers manage their properties. I can assure those opposite that whilst they may have appeased their greenie mates they have not broken the spirit of the bush. We will continue to fight these laws to the next election and never miss an opportunity to remind Queenslanders of this government's outrageous and ill-conceived attacks on our farmers.

This government failed to tell Queenslanders that the so-called science they relied on cannot measure changes in regrowth. This government failed to tell Queenslanders that only 0.23 per cent of Queensland's land area was cleared in 2015-16. They failed to tell Queenslanders that two-thirds of that vegetation management was to control regrowth, remove invasive weeds, construct fences and harvest fodder for starving stock, to name just a few activities. This government failed to tell Queenslanders that, instead of a commonsense approach to vegetation management, primary producers would be subjected to a full development application process, including fees of $3,500 or more.

Whilst this government claims that changes to the Vegetation Management Act were based on science, they abandoned a system that actually took into account regional ecosystems, individual districts and individual property locations. Little to no consideration was given to the second order effects of this government's amendments. Not only did these laws affect primary producers; they also affected small businesses, they affected the ability of families to provide a good education for their children and undoubtedly they affected the mental health of many producers who were already doing it tough thanks to year after year of drought.

The amendments that those opposite rammed through this House were an insult to Queensland primary producers. They were a kick in the guts for entire communities in regional Queensland. I will not be opposing this bill because it is the first small step in restoring the balance. It is a step in acknowledging that Queensland primary producers are not environmental vandals and it is a step in acknowledging that Queensland primary producers deserve to be treated with respect. Neither the LNP nor Queensland primary producers advocated widescale unregulated land clearing. We advocated for a fair system based on real science, not a faulty system that did not even take into account that, after clearing, trees grow back. Yes, that is right: they actually grow back!

As I said, the primary producers of Queensland have been sold out for a few votes in the city while people in the city have not been given the full story. In short, this government is doing its best to turn Queenslanders against each other. I will not be opposing this bill because I, like those on this side of the House, are sick and tired of farmers being portrayed as environmental vandals. Most of all, I will

not be opposing this bill because I will proudly stand up for our hardworking farmers who are being unfairly targeted by a government with no interest in agriculture. I will not be opposing this bill because I stand shoulder to shoulder with our farmers who are the backbone of this state. I ask all members to join me and stand for a Queensland that is honest and provides a fair go for all—in particular, at the present time when 66 per cent of this state is drought declared and our farmers have their backs to the wall and are out there trying to make a living and in doing so are faced with a bureaucratic nightmare that they have never before experienced.