Speech By

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MEMBER FOR TRAEGER

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT (CLEARING FOR RELEVANT PURPOSES) AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

Mr KATTER (Traeger—KAP) (6.43 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

We introduced the amendments in this bill before the government made the most recent changes to the Vegetation Management Act, but they are no less relevant and still very much have a purpose in the industry. The vegetation management laws affect the broadacre beef, sheep and grains industry in Queensland, which in 2016-17 generated about $8.2 billion in gross farm value production. The amendments in this bill are not just emotive arguments, they are not arguments about keeping industries alive; they are very much about preserving and, in some cases, allowing an industry to prosper, which is very much needed in this economic climate in Queensland.

Through the introduction of this bill we set out to, as always, not overreach, but try to find the middle ground and achieve a meaningful outcome by making what we regard as a massive compromise so that the government can deal with this issue relating to vegetation management. There is always an implied reference by the government that people in rural areas cannot be trusted and that it must legislate for the lowest common denominator and make things terribly restrictive and hard for everyone because someone might do the wrong thing. There will always be a small number of people who will do the wrong thing but, through vegetation management legislation, the government has hamstrung much economic activity in western areas that, although are far from this place, far from Alice Street in Brisbane, are still very relevant to our economy. I regard the two amendments contained in this bill as moderate. They should be regarded as a compromise in dealing with the very strong impact of the amendments to the vegetation management legislation that were brought into this parliament.

I have been informed—and I would love to be corrected on this—that so far there has been not one application for thinning under that legislation. Such applications were supposed to be easy, but not one application has been made. It is pretty easy to read into that that the application process is either prohibitive or there are machinations in the department that work against people who are trying to make these applications so much so that they throw their hands in the air. That is real evidence that the government has put a handbrake on prosperity in rural areas.

Clause 3 of the Vegetation Management (Clearing for Relevant Purposes) Amendment Bill 2017 amends section 22A to create an obligation on the chief executive to issue an information notice if an application for clearing as assessed under section 22A of the act has been rejected. People are spending tens of thousands and, in some cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars on applications. They are spending all of this money and taking all this time and effort in the belief that the government will act in good faith. I am dead certain that there is a culture in the department that started with the change of government of putting the handbrake on all of these applications. There is no obligation on anyone

to report back on the validity, or the progress of these applications. If you have someone spending $100,000 in good faith thinking, 'I'm doing everything right. I'm getting all of these approvals, soil tests, business cases, economic environmental impact studies and all of these things. Over the years the government has made regulations that makes it really hard to do any clearing, but I've done all of that in good faith. I've handed it in, but you won't even tell me if you're going to reject it or, if you are, why.' There is no obligation on the government to give feedback. I do not think that passes the fairness test.

There is a fair bit of history behind the second amendment that is proposed in this bill. This amendment removes grazing activities from the definition of high-value agricultural clearing to ensure that it is considered a relevant purpose in the chief executive's consideration of an application to clear under the act. Since the inception of the Vegetation Management Act 1999, I note that there have been 41 amendments. People are pleading for some certainty. As a result of those amendments to the act, the relevant purposes for clearing under that act ended up being thinning encroachment weeds and installing and maintaining necessary infrastructure. Grazing activities, with a focus on improved pastures and cropping, do not fit within that definition.

People who have approvals to clear will spend $100,000 on trying to get to the point where they can make their land more productive. In many cases I am talking about land that has been cleared already and people are applying for development approvals, but they cannot carry out certain activities on that land. The government could talk to natural resource management groups—it could talk to anyone it wants. There is no material difference between including these activities for improved pastures or cropping to any other fodder crop that is already listed in the act.

These amendments are really just getting rid of these silly anomalies that are in the act. By doing that, the industry has a vast array of activities it can conduct. The good news for everyone in this House is that that is better land management practice. It is always forgotten in debates on vegetation management that these applications to clear are not about a licence for broadscale clearing. Often, these applications allow people to manage their farm. If they can put in improved pasture, they are not holding on to the cattle in other paddocks when it is dry because they have improved pastures.

It gives them options to manage their property. They can rest a paddock and get higher productivity on another paddock when times are tough. The majority of people who are good land managers have an option to carry out better land management practices. These give people the keys to perform better land management practices. The upshot is that there is more economic benefit to the state because there is higher productivity, more soil control and less erosion and it allows for a more diverse operation. Everyone is a winner out of fixing this anomaly that includes those activities.

Most of these practices relate to applications made under section 22A. Going back to the point about notices, there is no legislative or regulatory trigger requiring the Department of Natural Resources and Mines to provide a formal response to the applicant. One can imagine how enormously frustrating this is, particularly in this political environment when there is so much pressure from environmental and green groups to lock this land up. Surely at the very least they have the right to feedback. That is an easy one that we should be able to tick off. I cannot believe why anyone in this House would argue with that. Whether you believe in tree clearing or not, you should have the right to receive feedback.

Let us fix up an anomaly in the legislation to improve soil condition and improve erosion. If we care about the reef, the way to improve erosion is to get more ground cover so people like Blair Knuth at Burdekin Downs, where there is false sandalwood country where nothing much grows, can put in improved pasture. This will provide grass cover and mean less run-off which I believe is what is trying to be achieved. I sometimes find it hard to understand what the government is trying to achieve in this space, but surely a worthwhile objective would be to try to improve ground cover. These are sensible amendments, they are very moderate and I implore the House to support them.