




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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LAND AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (12.28 pm): Thank you for those kind words, Chair. Stock routes are very important to Queensland. They play a significant role in animal welfare and also in increasing our agricultural abilities through tough times and drought.

Before addressing the contents of this omnibus bill, I want to draw the attention of the House to the concerns of the Transport and Resources Committee with the explanatory notes. As deputy chair of that committee, I share the concerns of all committee members with the poor quality of these explanatory notes. They made it difficult for the committee because the explanatory notes and the relevant clause numbers do not correctly align with the clauses being explained. This made it so difficult to clearly assess the effects of the bill that at our 4 May meeting last year the committee was in the unusual position of having to request the explanatory notes be corrected. This is not the professional standard that Queenslanders have a right to expect.

The bill makes substantial changes to the operation of Queensland stock routes and, like AgForce and the Local Government Association of Queensland, I welcome these amendments. Queensland's stock route network consists of 72,000 kilometres of roads, reserves and dedicated corridors across pastoral leases and unallocated state land. Together with the dedicated reserves for travelling stock, they make up the 2.6 million hectares we call the Queensland stock route network.

At the 2012 election Labor premier Anna Bligh proposed the entire 2.6 million hectares be declared for nature conservation. This would have been an economic disaster on an unseen scale. Fortunately this did not happen because the Labor government was swept from office in an historic political defeat. By the skin of our teeth Queensland did not lose its stock routes in 2012 just as the epic drought commenced its slow creep across Queensland from west to east. The whole episode showed that the Labor government at the time did not understand the purpose or the value of Queensland's stock routes. They had spent decades trying to shift the maintenance of the stock routes to local governments while grabbing the fees collected from drovers. In doing so they neglected the maintenance of the stock routes: the fencing, the water points and even the mapping. Of equal concern was the abrogation of the state government's duty to coordinate the movement of travelling stock across some 48 local government areas.

For the benefit of those members who may not know how it works, the concept is that if you can keep the state's herds and flocks from diminishing during drought, especially the breeding stock, then recovery is much faster when the drought ends. During droughts stock is walked on foot, cared for by drovers, from areas with decreasing feed to areas of Queensland still receiving rain and producing pasture. The eastern pastures are a destination and the central parts are a linking corridor. You have to prevent these corridors from being eaten out or cattle would be starved on the way. That is why the management was vested in the state government. The state was supposed to operate the network with a statewide overview.

The last 10 years of drought have shown the true cost of that neglect. Western shires suffering the economic and social impact of the drought were struggling to repair the vital watering points along part of that network. To the east, shires like the Central Highlands found themselves acting as key crossroads as cattle moved from the drought-stricken inland to the coast. Before crossing into a new shire, the drover needs a permit from the shire. The shire will not issue the permit if they do not have the pasture to support that travelling mob. In recent desperate times staff at the Central Highlands Regional Council were having to ring neighbouring councils to the east to ensure that if they allowed the mob in they would be able to keep them moving east, not back. They did a wonderful job at that. They were doing the state government's job, but they were only permitted to keep 50 per cent of the fees by the users. The bill will resolve a lot of those issues and I congratulate the minister on that achievement. The fees going back to the local government do not even pay for the person sitting on the phone and doing the paperwork. It is a burden on those local governments. Those local governments we are talking about, as the member for Warrego will know, are in financial stress, and to cover the state government's job puts more stress on those local governments.

Managing the industry through the epic drought has proven once again that the long paddock is, indeed, a long-sighted vision, as vital today as it was when our forefathers established it. The amendments will empower local governments to better manage their part of the network. I also welcome the modernisation of the delegation of stock route declaration and amendment of the mapping power. I sincerely hope it is an indication that local governments will be able to adjust the mapping in their shires to better reflect the current state of development. In the Central Highlands this is desperately needed as progress has seen parts of the stock route overbuilt by roads and rail to support the mining industry. Some landholders find they have isolated pockets of land that are still designated as a stock route but they do not connect to anything else. Canny campers can set themselves up on such land and the landholder has no right to move them on. I hope these amendments will allow landholders to discuss with their local government how to fix these kinds of mapping issues.

I move now to the amendments to the Land Act 1994. I appreciate the department's need to streamline the administration of Queensland's very complex system of land tenure. I pay tribute to the work undertaken by former minister Andrew Cripps to encourage the conversion of perpetual leases to freehold. I hope the intention of these changes is to continue that trend by allowing the chief executive officer to offer a conversion to freehold even when no application has been made. However, I do have concerns around landholders' rights because in a real sense it allows the decisions of unelected bureaucrats to become law.

The chief executive may decide not to renew a lease before receiving a renewal application. The lessee only has the right to appeal such a decision if it is made on the grounds that they failed to comply with the conditions of their lease, but the chief executive may decide not to renew the lease on completely different grounds such as wanting to change the designation of the land to national park or nature conservation. This is a policy matter, not one of land management. Queensland has many grazing leases of historic standing, including over adjoining areas designated national parks. Such lessees have a time-tested record of improving the management of our central and western landscapes. They also generate value to the landholder, the local economy and Queensland's GDP. The Labor Party's policy of converting such leases to protected estate will cause much anxiety and lessees will have extremely limited rights of appeal against such a decision made on an environmental or conservation policy ground.

I am up against the clock, but I must make mention of those amendments to the vegetation management legislation affecting regional grasslands. The effect of clauses 94, 97 and 107 moves the management of our regional grasslands ecosystems from a state of certainty to one of constant change. The amendments allow the regional ecosystem to be identified through the Vegetation Management Regional Ecosystem Description Database rather than through the Vegetation Management Regulation 2012. The database is maintained by the Queensland Herbarium, and many landholders have already learned that correcting mapping errors on this database can be very difficult. Under these amendments many Gregory landholders will find themselves dealing with a database that can be easily and rapidly changed without parliamentary oversight.

The joint submission from the Environmental Defenders Office and the Wilderness Society blasted the change as one that reduces transparency, accountability and rigour for vegetation management. AgForce expressed their concerns that these clauses introduced the large possibility of rapid change in the mapping interfering with the longer-term business planning of agricultural and land managers. They pointed out to the committee that the ability of an agricultural enterprise to obtain finance could hinge on this rapidly changing database. In recognition of these concerns, the committee recommended that clause 94 not be passed as part of the bill but that the minister revisit these amendments.

As the chair of the Transport and Resources Committee says, I do love stock routes. I love stock routes and agriculture in general. They do play an important role in making sure that we have animal welfare when it comes to drought. In a drought the stock that you need to keep is your breeding stock. If you do not have your breeding stock you cannot start back up as quickly. Drought still exists in Queensland. Yesterday the Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities revoked the drought declaration from the Central Highlands and eastern parts of the Barcaldine shire. I hope we get a good season and I hope we continue to see that season continue. There are some parts of this state which are still affected by drought and we need to make sure that we have our stock routes right to go. We need to make sure that the weeds and the pests are cleared up, watering points are brought up to standard and that people can use these stock routes for the purpose they were established for so many years ago to keep Queensland's economy growing.