

## QUESTION ON NOTICE

No. 606

asked on Wednesday, 16 May 2018

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**MR L MILLAR** ASKED THE MINISTER FOR NATURAL RESOURCES, MINES AND ENERGY (HON DR A LYNHAM)—

QUESTION:

With reference to changes to the Vegetation Management Act 1999 to remove high value agriculture as a purpose for clearing and the increasing encroachment of solar farms, housing and mining developments onto agricultural land—

Will the Minister advise (a) how the government will support growth in Queensland's agricultural exports, the state's second largest export industry, (b) what criteria solar farm developments need to adhere to with regard to vegetation clearing and (c) how the government will support communities in my electorate of Gregory, whose economies are intrinsically tied to high value agriculture?

ANSWER:

- (a) The Queensland Government recognises the importance of agriculture to the state's economy. There are approximately 32 million hectares of category X areas in Queensland unaffected by the recent changes to vegetation clearing laws. Of this area, it is estimated there are about one million hectares of land highly suitable for cropping which is currently being used for grazing—about 300,000 hectares of this is in North Queensland. This land could be developed for cropping without the need to clear regulated vegetation.
- (b) Under the vegetation management framework, clearing in category X areas for solar farms, as for other purposes, does not require approval on most tenures. Clearing of high-value regrowth or in reef watercourse areas for solar farms is required to be undertaken in accordance with the relevant accepted development vegetation clearing code for managing category C or R areas.

Clearing category B areas (remnant vegetation) for solar farms requires a development approval. This is a two-step process. The first step requires the application to meet the requirements of the *Vegetation Management Act 1999*. Applications must demonstrate that the clearing is for a relevant purpose under section 22A of the Vegetation Management Act. The mostly likely purpose is for constructing necessary built infrastructure where the clearing cannot reasonably be avoided or minimised. If successful, applicants can then apply for a development approval under the *Planning Act 2016*. Application fees would generally range from \$6260 to \$12,518 depending on the type and scale of the project. The application is required to meet the requirements of *State code 16: Native vegetation clearing* of the State Development Assessment Provisions. The clearing must meet performance outcomes which, among other things, ensure watercourses, drainage features and wetlands are

protected; endangered and of concern regional ecosystems and essential habitat are maintained; and that clearing does not cause accelerated soil erosion. Clearing may require offsetting in accordance with the *Environmental Offsets Act 2014* to meet some performance outcomes. In addition, the development may also need approval under other regulations of Commonwealth, state or local governments.

(c) The Queensland Government supports agriculture across all of the state. Government records show that there were no applications for high-value or irrigated high-value agriculture made in the Gregory electorate since the provisions were introduced in 2013. As the member should be aware, landholders are able to undertake a wide range of activities to manage and sustainably develop their land to continue to produce high-quality food and fibre. In particular:

- In the Gregory electorate, there are approximately 1.5 million hectares of land which is category X, meaning that no approval is required under vegetation management laws to manage regrowth vegetation;
- Routine and essential property management activities, including clearing for firebreaks, fence lines, roadways and other forms of infrastructure, do not require approval under vegetation management laws;
- Under accepted development vegetation clearing codes and following notification to the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy, landholders are able to perform a range of activities, including harvesting of mulga for fodder, managing encroachment, improving the operational efficiency of existing agriculture, and undertaking clearing which is a necessary part of controlling weeds;
- Landholders can manage both high-value regrowth (category C vegetation) and regrowth vegetation along watercourses and drainage features in reef watercourse areas (category R vegetation) under accepted development vegetation clearing codes following notification; and
- Landholders can also clear any woody vegetation without approval under vegetation management laws in any of the exempt grassland regional ecosystems, which cover an extensive area of the Gregory electorate.