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Committee Secretary
State Development, Natural Resources
and Agricultural Industry Development Committee
Parliament House George Street
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Submission by the Arid Lands Environment Centre to the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 inquiry

Dear Committee,

As you are aware Queensland is experiencing a boom in tree clearing – rates jumped 33% in 2016, in a region that is already considered a “global deforestation hotspot” in the developed world.

The most recent government report shows approximately 400,000 hectares of bushland was cleared in Queensland during 2015-16. The previous year 300,000 hectares were lost. Over five years more than one million hectares were cleared. Queensland accounts for more than half of Australia's total losses of native forest.

The latest SLATS report (2015-16) shows that, of the total land cleared, 138,000 hectares were categorised as remnant woody vegetation — that is, vegetation that has never been cleared previously. This represents 35 per cent of the total vegetation clearing. Furthermore, 158,000 hectares of trees were cleared in the Great Barrier Reef catchments, a 45 per cent increase on the year before.

Australia has one of the highest rates of land clearing in the world. More than 40 per cent of the country's forests and woodlands are estimated to have been cleared since European colonisation.

Excessive land clearing threatens biodiversity, impairs the functioning of marine, freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems, drives native wildlife to extinction and contributes to climate change by driving up greenhouse gas emissions.

The rate of land clearing in Queensland is of national concern. Queensland is the most polluting state in Australia, and is on track for a 35% rise in carbon emissions by 2030. 90% of Australia's emissions from deforestation come from Queensland.

Urgent action is required if Australia is to meet its Paris Climate commitments. There must be a significant decrease in deforestation in Queensland immediately.

The Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) is central Australia's peak environmental organisation advocating for the protection of nature and ecologically sustainable development in the arid lands since 1980.

ALEC is actively engaged in land management, conservation programs, assessment of Environmental Impact Statements, government submission processes and works with a range of partners towards our vision of 'healthy futures for arid lands and people'.

The Arid Lands Environment Centre acknowledges the improvements that are in this law: the end of permits for so-called High Value Agriculture, the removal of the main self-assessable code for thinning, the modification of the fodder self-assessable code, and the redefinition of High Value Regrowth to include regrowing forest and bushland that is 15 years of age and within 50 metres of watercourses in Great Barrier Reef catchments.

However, on the data that is publicly available, we understand that these changes do not meet the Queensland Government election commitment to “introduce legislation to protect remnant and high conservation value regrowth vegetation.”

- Thinning is still allowed via several means: (1) Development Approval; (2) existing Area Management Plans where a thinning notification has already been made—and there is no data on how much clearing of remnant is locked in under existing notifications; (3) Category C High Value Regrowth code; and (4) Category R Regrowth code. It is unknown how much clearing could occur under these loopholes.
- Fodder harvesting is still allowed under Self Assessment and is not linked to ‘necessity’ or ‘drought.’ It is allowable to clear an ‘of concern’ regional ecosystem under some circumstances (forest and bushland types where only 10%–30% of the original extent remains).
- Not all the promised changes to the definition of High Conservation Value Regrowth have been made. The election commitment explicitly stated it would be redefined to include “riparian areas, threatened species habitat and areas where landscape integrity is at risk.” However, riparian areas are not included and there are gaps in the protection of threatened species habitat protection.
- The area of regrown remnant and High Conservation Value Regrowth in exempt areas (known as ‘Category X’) is not known and is currently not protected.

Put simply the changes to these laws must end broad-scale clearing and protect all remnant and High Conservation Value regrowth forest and bushland in Queensland. We suggest the following improvements be made:

- Ensure that no threatened species habitat is to be cleared, and no “of concern” regional ecosystems are to be cleared.
- End all clearing of mature forest and bushland for ‘thinning’ (which will still be allowed under a Development Approval, existing Area Management Plans and self-assessable regrowth codes).
- End cleaing of mature forest and bushland for so-called ‘fodder harvesting’ unless it is lopping individual branches. At the very least, it should be proven to be necessary due to being a drought, and proven to be ‘low ecological impact.’
- Protect all regrowing forest and bushland that is threatened species habitat and that surrounds watercourses (riparian areas)
- Protect the regrown remnant and High Conservation Value Regrowth that is currently marked ‘exempt’ and is not protected in Category X on PMAVs.

The land clearing rates in Queensland are of national concern, and we urge the Committee to make the necessary recommendations to protect Australian wildlife, conserve our remnant forests and to reduce Queensland’s carbon emissions.

Yours Sincerely

Nicole Pietsch
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