

Senate Environment and Communications Reference Committee

Inquiry into Australia's faunal extinction crisis

Hearing on Monday, 8 October 2018

'Fact check' of false and/or misleading statements provided in evidence:

Mr Knudson (page 38, Hansard): What I can say that I think is important to note is, when we take a look at land clearing in the entire country, the rates of land clearing have actually declined, and indeed we're seeing more regrowth than we are clearing. The clearing that's happening is of regrowth forests; it's not old-growth forests. Those are important contextual pieces, and in Queensland we're seeing very much the same sort of progression: we're actually having more growth than we are having land clearing et cetera, but—

Senator URQUHART: Because there's nothing left to land clear—is that—

Mr Knudson: Senator, there's an absolute decline in clearing in Queensland, and we can provide those statistics on notice.

FACT CHECK: False

Mr Knudson's statements that "rates of land clearing have actually declined" and "we're seeing more regrowth than we are clearing" are both incorrect, based on both the Federal Government and the Queensland Government's own data.

There are two sources of land clearing data, for Australia and Queensland respectively:

The activity tables produced by the National Carbon Accounting System current to 2016, available at: <http://ageis.climatechange.gov.au/QueryAppendixTable.aspx>

The report on land clearing issued by Queensland SLATS (Statewide Land and Tree Study) current to 2015-16, available at: <https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/land-cover-change-in-queensland-2015-16/resource/60a7902d-7a9d-49a7-90b1-a54686fbcef5>

According to the Department of Environment National Carbon Accounting System (NCAS) official activity table for forest areas cleared, areas cleared increased from 408,000 hectares in 2015 to 455,400 hectares in 2016. Moreover, the area of primary (mature, remnant, intact or old growth) forest clearing increased from 58,100 to 60,200 hectares.

The activity tables also show an increase of areas cleared in Queensland from 253,600 to 301,000, while primary forest clearing went from 34,800 to 36,400 hectares over the same period.

Further, the federal figures are significantly lower than the more rigorous clearing estimates published by the Queensland Government.

The graph from the latest 2015-16 SLATS report is reproduced below:

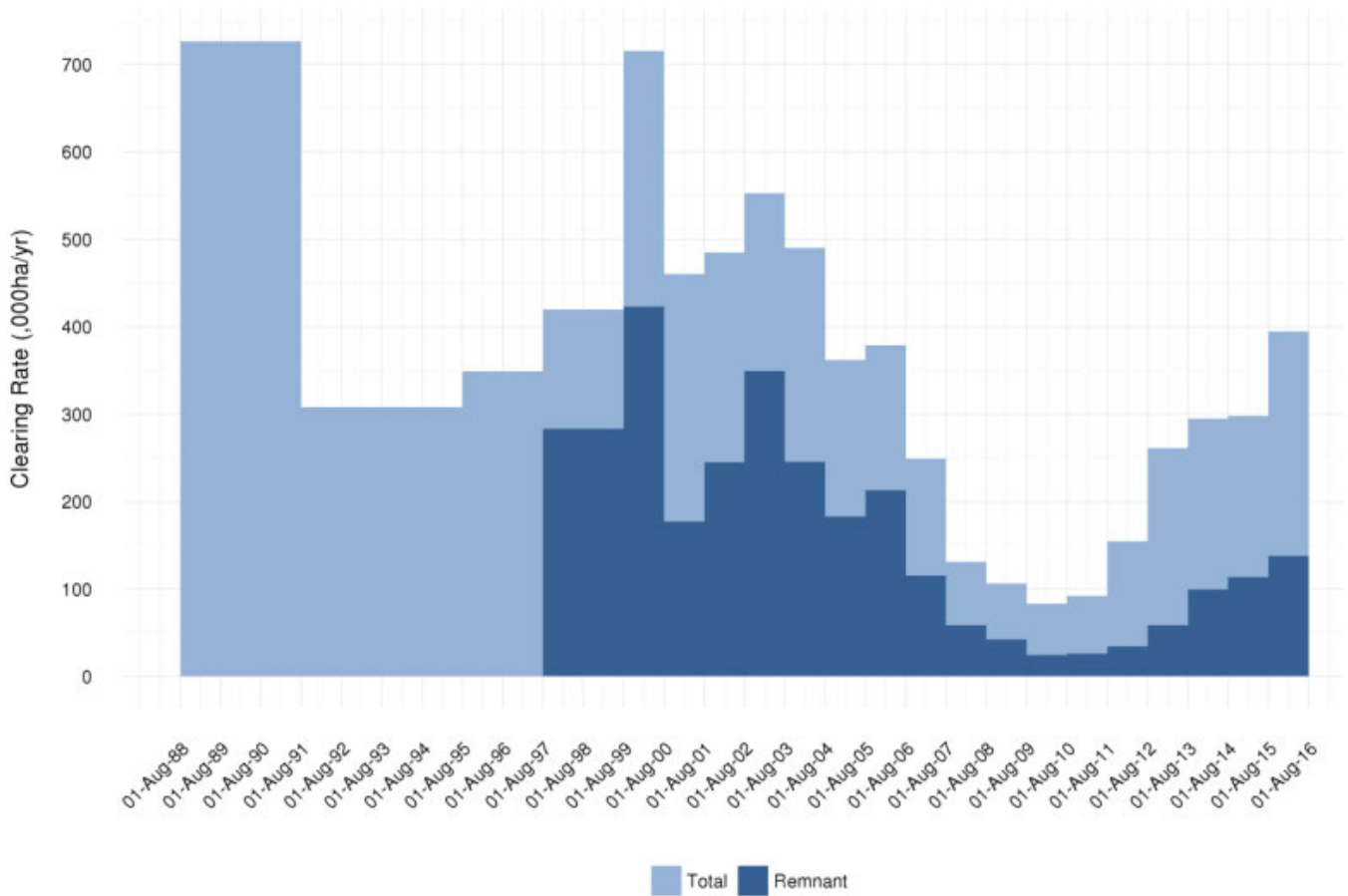


Figure 1: Annual woody vegetation clearing rate in Queensland (1988–2016)¹

This demonstrates that annual land clearing rates in Queensland have increased every year since 2009. There has not been a single year in which clearing rates have gone down over that period. Moreover, clearing of both remnant forests and woodlands (the equivalent of primary conversion in the NCAS Activity Tables) and of regrowth (the equivalent of re-clearing in the NCAS Activity Tables) has increased every year since 2009. The areas of primary or remnant clearing estimated by SLATS (138,000 hectares in 2015-16) far exceed that estimated by NCAS Activity tables (only 36,400 hectares in 2016), suggesting that NCAS may not be reliably detecting clearing in Queensland.

Mr Knudson’s claims that “*when we take a look at land clearing in the entire country, the rates of land clearing have actually declined*” and that “*there’s an absolute decline in clearing in Queensland*” have both been proven conclusively false by the Federal Government’s own data and by the Queensland Government data.

Turning to Mr Knudson’s claim that “*we’re seeing more regrowth than we are clearing*”. This is contradicted by the Australian Government’s own greenhouse accounts.

An area of non-forest returning to forest means in practice that saplings have regrown sufficiently to tip foliage cover over 20%. This in no way compensates in a biological sense for the loss of primary forest full of tall old-growth trees. The two are not commensurate. This is reflected in the emissions accounts, which take account of the volume and age of vegetation, that show a current and projected excess of deforestation emissions over reforestation/afforestation emissions.

NET emissions are projected to decline slowly, but NET emissions are not negative, which they would have to be for Mr Knudson’s claim to be true. Table 8 from the Australian Government

Department of Environment report 'Australian Land Use, Land Use-Change and Forestry emissions projections to 2035' demonstrating this is reproduced below.

Table 8 Forest conversions and Deforestation, Australia, 1990-2035

	UNFCCC classification	Kyoto Protocol classifications		
	Forest conversion	Deforestation	Grazing land and cropland management	Total
	Net emissions			
	Mt CO ₂ -e / year			
1990	136	-	-	136
2000	80	-	-	80
2008-12	52	49	4	52
2013-20	52	46	6	52
2020	54	47	7	54
2021-30	49	44	5	49
2030	47	42	4	47
2035	43	40	3	43

Ms Collins (page 38, Hansard): *There are a few questions that you raised there, but I'll start with the department's approach to its compliance activity. The department takes a risk based and intelligence-led approach to compliance, and we work very much in terms of our compliance policy which is published in accordance with the legislation. It's very important to note, right across Australia, that the states and territories are the primary regulators of land use activity in each of those states, and the Commonwealth has a very limited jurisdiction in terms of where any activity might have a significant impact on the listed matters of national environmental significance. It's really only a small subset of clearing activity where the Commonwealth might have a role. We do have quite a range of compliance tools that we use. We use everything from formal investigations, as I said, and intelligence that we have access to. We've got routine auditing and monitoring programs. We monitor through a range of mechanisms, including the department's own geographic information systems, publicly available information systems. We talk a lot with our state and territory co-regulators and regulators at a Commonwealth level. We also receive allegations from the public, and we respond to those. There are a whole range of areas where we monitor and receive information. We have a range of enforcement tools available to us. Quite often, people are aware of the prosecution tools, but there are a range of other tools which we might use, such as enforceable undertakings, remediation directions and just warnings or advice about how the act might apply to certain circumstances.*

FACT CHECK: False

WWF's independent analysis has found that there was 298,707 hectares of unreferral, and thus, unauthorised destruction of matters of national significance. This includes impacts on threatened species and deforestation within catchments of the Great Barrier Reef. This is a subset of a total of 931,919 hectares of land cleared over the period 2013-16 in Queensland alone.

The Australian Governments significant impact guidelines clearly state the circumstances in which impacts on threatened species should be considered significant and require referral and assessment. These include where there is an action that may:

- *lead to a long-term decrease in the size of a population*
- *reduce the area of occupancy of the species*
- *fragment an existing population into two or more populations*
- *adversely affect habitat critical to the survival of a species*
- *disrupt the breeding cycle of a population*
- *modify, destroy, remove, isolate or decrease the availability or quality of habitat to the extent that the species is likely to decline*
- *result in invasive species that are harmful to a critically endangered or endangered species becoming established in the endangered or critically endangered species' habitat*
- *introduce disease that may cause the species to decline, or*
- *interfere with the recovery of the species.*¹

Land clearing contributes significantly to the majority of these criterion.

The Australian Government guidelines on the significant impacts on the outstanding universal value of the Great Barrier Reef clearly state that there is a high risk of significant impact and that referral is recommended for:

- *Substantive land use change in the catchments of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area*²

¹ Pages 8 – 10, Matters of National Environmental Significance Significant impact guidelines 1.1 Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/42f84df4-720b-4dcf-b262-48679a3aba58/files/nes-guidelines_1.pdf

²Page 19, EPBC Act referral guidelines for the Outstanding Universal Value of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area

http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/e8e47508-5ea4-457b-aded-b9c1364e9bec/files/referral-guidelines-great-barrier-reef_0.pdf

The conversion of hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest to agriculture within the catchments of the GBR clearly meet this definition.

There is no reasonable criterion or policy by which this massive scale of destruction of nearly 300,000 hectares of matters of national significance over three years can be called “only a small subset of clearing activity where the Commonwealth might have a role”.

The full details of WWF’s analysis are available here:

<https://sites.google.com/view/pervasiveinaction>