

Submission on Native Vegetation Laws.

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Submission:

As a result of the Native Vegetation laws our family has suffered a 30% loss of property value, decreased carrying capacity and a severe reduction in the ongoing viability of our property. Now independent valuers and banks would doubt the property's ability to provide a sustainable income for one family.

I often use the following metaphor to describe our predicament. A family buys a 4 bedroom house and later they are told they can only use 2 rooms.

My parents own a property which is a little over 6000 acres. They purchased in 1999. We believe with the arrival of the Native Vegetation Laws we lost the ability to develop a further 1000 acres. 2/3 of our property has been classified as remnant vegetation.

We appealed the original decision: that our 2437 ha property was only impacted by 110ha, of the department back when the act was announced, but our appeal was dismissed by the same department that made the decision. There was no independent body to appeal any decisions made against a landholder regarding the amount of land affected by the V.M.A. Our property had a history of previous cleared areas and logged areas that had been let go by some owners to large regrowth stage.

Compensation arrangements in Queensland were of a one size fits all approach and largely unsatisfactory across the range. \$110,000 inc GST was the maximum grant allowed under the enterprise assistance scheme regardless of the size of the property. For eg; comparing impacts on a small acreage; against impacts on a 10,000 acre property or larger. The landholder had to apply for the assistance and you could only receive funding in limited areas and on certain items. You did not get the ability to spend the money anyway you wanted.

Considering some examples of some monies we have spent developing our property; \$80,000 on 1 dam, \$50,000 on a piece of machinery to build 3 more dams and large fuel bills, it puts \$100,000 in a little better context.

The implementation of the act has been under resourced by government departments, underpinned by a faulty mapping system and layered in complex procedures that departmental staff and landholders have struggled to understand. This has resulted in a great deal of mistrust between the parties involved.

No satisfactory consideration has been given to the time that landholders have lost with moratoriums leaving our business and property development plans on hold for periods of 6 and 9 months. When you add these enforced moratoriums to that fact that you often do your work around either side of a wet season, this has caused significant financial impositions on our property and others.

One cannot review the impacts of this legislation without noting the stresses and hardships that landholders have felt because of the act. They have struggled to understand its complexity. There are many examples of the stress and heartache expressed by landholders at meetings but I will mention only one here. I was handing my families land

clearing ballot application in at the department office in Mackay and saw an elderly farmer trying to hand in an application that was rejected because it did not meet the application criteria. The man walked away in tears.

How many more farmers were out there like him; given the average age of today's Farmers? How many have slipped thru the cracks and been forgotten? Around that time I had a meeting with a Dept. Vege. Officer about our application and she apologetically told me that I probably had a better handle on the act than her. She went on to say that the N.R.M staff had not had enough time to learn the act, aside from their day to day roles; and were under resourced to deal with it. The stresses have been on staff as well as landholders.

Increased costs have been placed on landholders trying to comply with legislation and working within guidelines. Property Maps of Assessable Vegetation have cost landholders ranges of \$3000 to \$20,000. Lost productivity in times delays while incorrect maps are investigated and ground truthed and then amended. These added costs have been placed on some producers who have been battling drought.

On our property we have vegetation that was cleared years ago by previous owners but has now been classified as returned to remnant status. There are many examples of this vegetation on other properties as well. This type of vegetation is not a natural ecosystem. They are large monocultures of pioneer species and regrowth so thick that one cannot walk through let alone ride a horse. On foot with dogs is the best method to chase cattle out.

These areas are being fenced off from stock and left as they are. It will take a few years for leaf litter and fuel to build up underneath these trees. Then invariably it will happen as it does by nature (lightning strike) or by careless act of man in one dry season. A bushfire will go through the area; and it will be of higher intensity due to the nature of the vegetation and local circumstance and that vegetation and animal habitat will be destroyed. These areas that have been cleared in previous history, now classified as returned to remnant often lie beside true remnant forest and that will probably also go in these bushfires. 10m firebreaks will not stop any fire with high winds carrying the fire and high intensity at the wrong time of the year.

I do not say this maliciously, just a honest opinion of what I believe will happen to a lot of this specific type of vegetation and native forest beside it. In the wake of such a fire; the land, habitat and vegetation will take many years to rehabilitate and what gains will have been made.

In my previous employment I worked for the Mareeba Wetland Foundation for over 2 years and Conservation Volunteers Australia for nearly 7 years. I have worked on a lot of varied conservation projects in QLD ranging from Cooktown, Kuranda, Sarina, Yeppoon and out west to Winton. I like most farmers believe in environmentally sustainable agriculture. I want to look after our property for the future generations that will come after my family. I also like a lot of landholders aim to be known as a good manager who knows the lore of the land. It is a skill that is highly regarded amongst our profession. This act contains many flaws and one of its worst outcomes is the distrust between the departments and landholders. I hope the senate committee examines the act closely and gains an insight into how hard it can be to translate the complex laws from the guidelines on paper to complying out in the paddock.

I believe the senate should also ask that a change be made in this regard to improving

relations between stakeholders. The emphasis must go back onto the relevant department that they must find a landholder guilty of a breach of the act. Currently a person who is suspected of a breach must prove they are innocent. The current practice is unfair and unjust and un Australian.