



STATE DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND INDUSTRY COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr DF Gibson MP (Chair)
Mr MJ Hart MP
Mr SA Holswich MP
Mr R Katter MP
Ms KN Millard MP
Ms J Trad MP
Mr BC Young MP

Staff present:

Dr K Munro (Research Director)
Ms M Telford (Principal Research Officer)
Ms M Westcott (Principal Research Officer)

INQUIRY INTO THE VEGETATION MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK AMENDMENT BILL

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 22 APRIL 2013

Brisbane

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Committee met at 1.02 pm

CHAIR: Good afternoon, everyone. I declare open the public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013. I thank everyone who has phoned in and for those MPs who are here in person today.

My name is David Gibson. I am the member for Gympie and chair of the committee. The other committee members we have here are Mr Michael Hart, member for Burleigh; Mr Seath Holswich, member for Pine Rivers; we are expecting Mr Rob Katter, member for Mount Isa, to come in via telephone; Mr Bruce Young, member for Keppel, via telephone; and Ms Jackie Trad, member for South Brisbane, who is replacing Tim Mulherin, the deputy chair, the member for Mackay. She is here in person. The committee is a committee of the Queensland parliament and, as such, represents the parliament. It is an all-party committee which adopts a non-partisan approach to its hearings.

The hearings today form part of the committee's examination of the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013. The Parliament of Queensland Act requires the committee to examine the bill to consider the policy effect given by the bill and the application of fundamental legislative principles.

Gentlemen, we have you on the phone for the next hour if we need it, but we do not need to take that full amount of time. Then we will have a break and form another teleconference for other groups that are coming through.

Although the committee is not swearing in witnesses, I remind all witnesses that this hearing is a formal process of the parliament and, as such, any person intentionally misleading the committee is committing a serious offence.

For the benefit of Hansard I would ask all witnesses to identify themselves when they first speak—particularly from a teleconference perspective that is important—and to speak clearly and at a reasonable pace. If you can maintain a good volume, that will assist us at this end. It is the committee's intention that a transcript of the hearing be published. Before we commence, I would ask that all mobile phones and pagers be switched off or put on to silent mode.

HOARE, Mr Barry, Member, AgForce

PRICE, Mr Michael, Member, AgForce

RYRIE, Mr Angus, Member, AgForce

VERRI, Mr Peter, Member, AgForce

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

CHAIR: Gentlemen, just for ease, so not everyone is talking over each other, we might just move through in a certain order. I would like to give you the opportunity to make a two-minute opening statement. We do have your submissions here, so do not feel the need to restate those, but perhaps you could cover some of the key points that you feel this bill does or does not address. That would be of benefit. We will go through in the following order: Mr Peter Verri, then Mr Angus Ryrie, Mr Michael Price and Mr Barry Hoare. Peter, if we could commence with you.

Mr Verri: Peter Verri is my name. I am from Mossman. I am a cattleman as well as a canegrower. I am a member of AgForce and also a member of Canegrowers. You virtually want me to just pick out a topic or something from my submission?

CHAIR: If you could, Peter. Just give us a couple of minutes of just those key points that you feel are important.

Mr Verri: A couple of the key points. I have listed five, predominantly what I could make out of what I could gather. In terms of area planning, as you know there is a big difference in the state of Queensland. The AMPs I presume will be on a district basis. As it says in my submission, I would

like to see that it is not just run by bureaucrats but that there is a fair assessment of other people that can look into it.

In terms of clearing applications, I state, 'The understanding of the new clearing proposal for high value agricultural clearing in section 22.' I take it that is saying that high agricultural land has to have irrigation proposals for its use. Well, in the tropics we do not need irrigation, so I would hope that our lands would be also looked at under that regime.

My submission states that a key change to the mapping framework is locking in non-assessable vegetation as category X. The only problem I think I have with that is: does it include blocks that do not have a PMAV value that are currently shaded in white and will they be category X? The other question I had there was: what will happen to areas in green that are mapped incorrectly in the case of my property? Will they be locked in or will they be corrected first?

The main thing I want to talk about is the terminology of the vegetation where we have 'high value' and 'endangered' regrowth. With regrowth, as you would rightfully know, in our country nothing grows underneath it. Like I have stated, it takes a long time before all that sort of country dies off. Regrowth is regrowth as far as I am concerned. Having all these things like '70 per cent of the height' and coverage and what have you, which is currently under the vegetation map, does not really do any good.

What I would like to add to that submission of mine relating to regrowth, if it is at all possible, is: regrowth areas classified as 'remnant not of concern', shaded in green on the current maps, should be made into category X under the mapping framework as a lock-in. I think that would also help landowners give something back, production of our land would be able to be increased and, where necessary, where probably some of that shaded area might be too big a slope, maybe the landowner will utilise that for future carbon credits. At the moment that land of ours has been locked up. It has been devalued as far as I am concerned. Rates and insurance and duties of care all have to be taken into consideration. And the community has enjoyed vegetation management at no cost but at our cost.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Peter. We will be coming back to all witnesses with some questions. I will now move to Angus. Would you like to give us a potted summary of your key points of concern?

Mr Ryrie: Certainly. I would have to say from the outset: as a freehold landowner I have paid for the timber on my country in the process of freeholding it. If the government wishes to impose restrictions on that asset they must compensate me. Now, to date that has not happened.

The second point I make—this is my opinion: it is pointless attempting to change the vegetation legislation without reorganising and redirecting the department and staff. The department is more focused on penalising and hindering landholders than on promoting and assisting primary production. As I understood it, the department was there to assist primary producers. I am a stock owner, a landholder. I have a very deep affinity with both my stock and my land, and I endeavour to maintain both in the best of health. My conscience and financial future depend on that fact. As such, my opinion should be weighted. I stress 'be weighted'. It strikes me that minority groups that squeal and wave banners are given far more attention than primary producers such as myself that have a vested interest in this process.

I will just go through some of the points of my submission. I mention the overly complex process to obtain a development application/permit for vegetation management. The department needs to recognise the thickening, which is a natural process, of gidgee and brigalow on the Downs. That is in this Western Queensland country. It is quite a problem. To date it has been a hell of a job to get that recognised, mainly because of the classification of 'endangered'.

Second I mention the time taken to obtain a development permit or a fodder permit. From 2001 to about 2004 I had a mulga block north-west of Charleville. In some of that harder mulga country, fodder harvesting is an ongoing process. When it takes up to four months to get a fodder permit, that is just not acceptable. Some people were in dire straits in the early days with this process. I just make the point that these applications have to be expedited. It is the same with development permits. On that lower Langlo country which I am conversant with—I still have country down there—surrounding neighbours all had a similar theme of four to six months for permits. That is just not acceptable.

The third point is the length of time to utilise a permit. That needs to be extended to 10 years. At the moment it is five years. It does not allow for very wet years and drought years. That will throw your routine maintenance program clean out the window. As an example, at Mount Pleasant, a place I have east of Tambo, we try to control regrowth, if you like. We do about 2,000 acres a year. That is reverse pulling. The last three summers have been excellent, which is great, but that has thrown the control program clean out the window, because the regrowth that we had controlled is now basically the same height as some of the old regrowth. So it is absolutely paramount that that permit time be extended to 10 years.

I also mention incorrect mapping. We had a lot of problems with PMAVs. The department did not seem to be able to differentiate between regrowth and virgin timber. The other problem was: the department was incorrectly identifying timber species. They were getting belah mixed up with lancewood, which anyone who is from the land will know are two completely different timbers. They were wrongly classifying ironbark as endangered. That begs the question about the competency of some of the staff.

CHAIR: Angus, thanks for that. We might move onto Michael.

Mr Price: Thank you for inviting my comments on vegetation management and I commend you for your proposed changes. I hope and trust that the necessary code changes to achieve a viable, sustainable and equitable vegetation management regime will be delivered. It is vital, in my opinion, that those code changes come through so that there can be some real change.

The most crucial factor to be recognised in this debate is the dynamics of woody vegetation within many ecosystems. Seedling recruitment and growth in the better seasons is phenomenal. Land that was described by surveyors in 1928 as a gidgee forest, generally fairly well grassed, is now an extremely dense thicket with pastures reduced to non-existent in some areas after good gidgee seedling recruitment in the 1950s, 1970s and again in the last good seasons we have had.

This is not a healthy or pristine environment. Tree density definitely needs to be managed. If the prolific germination and growth are accounted for, as we must account for them, we need to be able to thin many ecosystems to wider spacing than they would have been naturally because they will be thicker than natural again in a few short years. We need economical ways of thinning to keep our pasture healthy and improve production.

If tree spacings were thinned to 40 metres between small groups of mature and immature trees we would be addressing everyone's concerns. With the 40 metre spacings between groups as well as all of the very small seedlings that survive the thinning treatment, the integrity of the forest would be guaranteed and also at 40 metres the thinning could be carried out economically and the pasture would receive enough sunlight and soil space to regenerate, especially with the protection provided by the tree debris from the thinning operation.

Broadscale clearing is still my preferred option, but I do not think that is likely to happen. A thinning regime that allows us to thin all regional ecosystems that have thickened in an economical and practical way is on the conservative side of middle ground. I know from 20 years experience on our first western property that good tree and pasture management provide sustainable, viable properties that can produce necessary food for domestic and export demand.

If anyone is interested, after everyone has made their presentation, I have a few figures on tree density. Thank you very much for listening to my comments.

CHAIR: Thank you, Michael. I now ask Barry to say a few words.

Mr Hoare: I am a 38-year-old beef cattle grazer and I operate four different types of tenure. Whilst I believe that this bill is tremendously good for landholders with regard to vegetation management laws, I admit to not fully understanding the whole bill as I am a layperson. For the benefit of these laws to be fully realised, the negative culture that is within the former DNR and has evolved over two decades of green sentiment has to be brought back to normality. A great amount of effort will be required for this idealism to be reduced or removed. Without this culture being changed, however, tangible benefits of this legislation will not be allowed to progress. To illustrate this further, in the time I spent on the Capricorn Dawson vegetation management committee as a river catchment representative, I noticed a general feeling of resignation from industry representatives and also, surprisingly, scientific advisories to the panel.

To some more specific points: I believe there should be recognition of the term 'virgin' for forest scrub, rainforest et cetera which is defined as being separate from remnant. This is extremely important going forward, I believe. Prior to the year 2000 there was no remnant in anyone's vocabulary. There was just virgin and regrowth. This has to be looked at in the longer term and beyond this term of government.

PMAVs should be retained to allow for continuity between different forms of legislation into the future. It provides certainty and with certainty comes investment and a feeling of ownership over developed land. There should be a clear path for the implementation of the legislation for both the departmental staff and landholders who can get on and improve agricultural productivity in both the short and long term.

However, the costs involved in obtaining a certified PMAV are prohibitive. Self-assessable codes are preferable in my opinion. The codes themselves need to be descriptive enough to ensure landholders do not inadvertently clear vegetation illegally. In other words, we need to have definitions that are very clear. A review of this legislation should be undertaken within a time frame of no more than two years to ensure refinements that are required to the legislation are enacted. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Barry. What we will do now is ask a series of questions. If we direct them to an individual that will probably make it easier. If it is a general question then the first person who wants to weigh into it should state their name. Rob and Bruce, if you wish to chime in at any point just speak up and we will obviously default to you guys. I will start with the questioning. I would like to pick up on the point that Michael made with regard to the spacing of 40 metres between trees. I am curious as to how you have come to that determination. Do you say that from a practical perspective? Does that enable machinery to get around? Is there some science that you have come across that determines that 40 metres is a good distance?

Mr Price: There are two reasons. It certainly is a width that means you can economically perform the operation. The trees will bounce back. If you are not careful you can spend a lot of money thinning to very narrow widths and the trees that you have left are going to gain and grow rather than the pasture being able to utilise that space. At least at 40 metres you have room for sunlight, soil space and the pastures can regenerate.

I did some sums and worked on a five per cent survival rate within that 40 metres. I point out that that would be an extremely effective kill, if I could use that word. Thirty per cent would be the more likely outcome. Even though you might treat to 40 metres you are still going to have young seedlings survive over the total width.

Mr HART: Can you give us some details about your issues with the mapping system? I think one of you said that your property was identified incorrectly in terms of mapping? Do you have any specific concerns with the present mapping system?

Mr Hoare: I spent 2½ years on the vegetation management committee for the area west of Rockhampton. I had an in-depth knowledge of ridiculous things occurring. Lands were classified as lancewood and river blue gums were getting mistaken for blackbutt. Trees damaged for any number of reasons were being identified as essential habitat—possum habitat. It bordered on the point of being ridiculous.

CHAIR: Thank you, Barry. Would anyone else like to make a comment?

Mr Verri: I have that problem with some of the mapping on my place. It is incorrect because there has been some clearing and they have it shaded in under the green. What concerns me is if we have this new lock in process will that be locked in as green? It is not; it is cleared.

I agree with some of the other gentlemen. I know they are not in the Wet Tropics like I am, but I do not think some people really know what some of the species of trees are. For argument sake, if I look at my neighbour's property, he has the same colour trees as I have overall and yet he is in the white and I am in the green. You can look across to the heavy rainforest that has never been cleared and it is a different colour again. This has to be sorted out somehow.

CHAIR: Are there any issues with regard to the scale on the maps that are used?

Mr Hoare: There is no set pattern. I actually did some consultancy for about four years and re-did people's maps. Some of the mapping went from one to 10,000. Some of it went right out to almost one to 250,000. Getting on-ground knowledge using GPSs was almost impossible. The onus was always on the landholder to get it right. If he got it wrong, he was the one who had to bear the brunt.

CHAIR: Are there any other comments from any of the other gentlemen with regard to mapping?

Mr Ryrie: I requested an on-property inspection and that was denied. This mapping is obviously done in an office. In the case of one paddock on Mount Pleasant—country that had a train over of it on three occasions—it was deemed to be virgin. I had a hell of a job convincing the department that they were wrong. There have to be more on-property inspections and the people who come out should know what they are talking about. One character came out to a neighbour and said that he had a good body of grass and, for God's sake, it was spinifex.

CHAIR: Angus, how did you put forward your case to department and get them to reassess and make changes?

Mr Ryrie: Basically, by just insisting that I have an on-property inspection. In the end they did not do that and they amended the PMAV to what I had asked for.

CHAIR: So they amended it without an on-property inspection and just based it on the information you had provided to them?

Mr Ryrie: That is correct, bearing in mind it did not happen in five minutes.

CHAIR: I am sure.

Ms TRAD: Mr Hoare, I think you said you had four different types of lease arrangements? I am wondering if you or any of the other gentlemen on the line would like to talk about the distinction being drawn between leasehold and freehold in this bill?

Mr Hoare: I operate some freehold, some camp and water reserve, some state forest lease and a big section of grazing homestead perpetual lease. When the initial laws came in in 2000 I put in an application for—I am on leasehold land—grazing homestead perpetual lease and the rest of my neighbours were freehold. They had their permits within four months. It took me 3½ years to get my permit and I was given to two years to enact the permit. It took 20 months of those two years for the state forestry department to harvest usable timber out of the property. I had no drama with that in the initial agreement. I thought it was a good idea to remove any decent timber. I had no objection to it. I was given four months out of six years to do my tree clearing. It was very frustrating.

CHAIR: Are there other examples from any other gentlemen?

Mr Price: I had applied for a complex PMAV, complex PMAV meaning that instead of just a straight lock-in there were obvious problems with the mapping and that I needed inspection and change. I did eventually get an on-ground inspection and change, but it was certainly over two years. Certainly there have been some long time spans. I agree with Barry: I think we certainly are entitled to more time to perform our permits after government and so on can take so long to issue them.

CHAIR: Is anyone else on leasehold or has leasehold land who may wish to share their views with the committee?

Mr Price: That was leasehold.

CHAIR: Okay, thank you, Michael. Angus and Peter, you are both freehold?

Mr Ryrie: Freehold.

Mr Hoare: Freehold.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. Rob and Bruce, would either of you like to ask a question at this stage?

Mr KATTER: Yes. In the submission, Barry, you talked about reduction in weeds and feral animals in areas of remnant vegetation. Would you mind telling us a little bit about that?

Mr Hoare: We operate two cattle properties. One is basically a breeder block. We have another one located on the Dawson River to the east of us and it is basically background value added property. On it is a section of remnant brigalow softwood scrub. It is right next to a big lagoon. Obviously, I cannot do anything with it. It is probably only 50 acres, I would say. It is rife with rubber vine, lantana—you name it, it is in there—parthenium; everything known to man. Any chemical that I want to use is going to inhibit that, basically. Any chemical that you can think of is going to kill some of the remnant vegetation there and it is getting worse by the year. Two floods

have gone through it over the last two years and it has brought up even more. It is very frustrating. You cannot get cattle out of it. It harbours pigs and dingoes. It is very, very frustrating.

CHAIR: Does anyone else have any examples with regards to weeds and feral animals?

Mr Verri: Yes. I am growing sugarcane as well as cattle up on that rainforest type country. I have had to ringlock virtually all my cane to keep the feral pigs out. I have engaged professional hunters to control pigs. That can be a very costly program, especially in sugarcane, as you could appreciate. It is very hard. I like my flora and fauna, probably like every other person does, but unfortunately I have had to ringlock it to try to control, predominantly, feral pigs. That makes a big handicap for corridors and anything like that for other animals. Up here in the north, these pigs are getting worse. As far as pastures go, I do not even bother discing any more. I let them fellows do the job and then throw the seeds out and that seems to be doing a bit better. Yes, I agree with the other speakers: weeds and what have you, it is an ongoing thing.

CHAIR: Angus and Michael, do you have any comments?

Mr YOUNG: David, I just want to acknowledge Peter's statement earlier, in and around that there is no irrigation required for his high-ag land. I think that we need to make note of that.

CHAIR: That is a fair point, thank you. Jackie has another question, gentlemen.

Ms TRAD: Mr Ryrie and Mr Hoare, I think you both mentioned that law changes are one thing; the cultural practices of the department are another. I am just wondering if you can both expand on that? What are your particular criticisms in relation to the department? I have heard that perhaps some of them do not actually understand a lot of the vegetation that they are trying to categorise, that probably there are not enough on the ground in order to do some of the necessary field work for the mapping exercises. What are some of the other issues you have with the department?

Mr Ryrie: I would have to say experience and attitude are the two things that come to mind with departmental staff. My experience is that a lot of staff that we do eventually get out here, bearing in mind I am halfway between Longreach and Charleville, are very inexperienced. Some of them are just out of university. They have a head full of theory and, basically, no practical knowledge. With that comes mistakes. As I say in my submission, they get belah mixed up with lancewood. They start categorising ironbark as endangered. Another character with his spinifex and buffel. These simple mistakes initially create major headaches down the track when it comes to categories for your regrowth. Experience is a big thing and having competent people to do these inspections.

CHAIR: Any other comments from any of the other gentlemen?

Mr Verri: Early when the Vegetation Management Act was implemented, I was probably one of the very few guys who was lucky enough to have a mapping adjustment done, which was sent to me as a legal document. We spent some time doing it with government department people. They probably gave us 90 per cent of what we asked for, which was great to a degree. But without further ado down the track, and remembering you do not have all the money in the world to go and clear stuff or whatever, I had to put it in place when I could get machinery and what have you. By the time I got around to wanting to do it, they had reversed it back into the green again. I agree with some of the blokes talking. It becomes very frustrating and very stressful for us growers. We are flat out working our properties and trying to do the right thing. We do not need this heartache. One of those things with the department went on for four years. I do not need that any more, not at 65 years of age, that's for sure.

CHAIR: Thank you, Peter. Any other comments?

Mr Hoare: Just in relation to the question before about departmental staff, I will give you two quick examples. The bloke who we had here assessing one application I had earlier in the piece, basically freely admitted that he came straight from the valuations department in Brisbane. He was transferred to Rockhampton. They found no place for him, so they put him in as a vegetation management officer straightaway. He came out here within one week of getting his job and with absolutely no training. He did not know what the soils were, he did not know what the grass types were, he did not know what the veg. types he was looking at were.

The second example was when I was on the vegetation management committee and trying to bring these new laws in with some relevance 12 years ago. The bloke who was put on our Brisbane

committee from the Environmental Protection Agency was actually a vet. He had no training in vegetation or land types at all and freely admitted it. He was on the committee for his scientific opinion; he had absolutely no scientific knowledge at all.

CHAIR: Barry, was there any movement perhaps in recognition that his skill set was not ideal and that perhaps someone else would have come onto that committee? Was there any discussion at all?

Mr Hoare: To put it in simple terms, I put in a formal complaint because they had two very good people, one from the Lands Department and one from the DPI. They were very good with their knowledge. As soon as I spoke against this chap, I was not allowed access to the minister at the time. I was supposed to represent the committee to the ministerial advisory committee and I was removed.

Ms TRAD: Mr Hoare, can I just ask: was the vet a departmental officer or a departmental nominee?

Mr Hoare: He was on the committee representing the Environmental Protection Agency—

Ms TRAD: In an official capacity?

Mr Hoare:—in a specific role. He was to advise us exactly what tree types were. He had about 10 books with him all the time and he was looking them up. He was annoying.

CHAIR: The good thing is he had 10 books with him.

Mr HOLSWICH: I direct my question to Angus. You talked about the length of time that it takes to obtain an approval or permit. I think you said four to six months. I guess this is a twofold question. What are the tangible negative impacts on you of it taking that long and what would be a more acceptable time frame to your mind?

Mr Ryrie: Firstly, with fodder permits, and this is for mulga country, that should have priority over any other application, mainly because of the fact that stock are dependent on mulga. What the majority of people do not realise is that in the south-west there is some very, very hard mulga country. In other words, it grows very little grass and is basically of no use as far as grazing goes, unless you get a really top season. So your stock are reliant on the leaf of the mulga tree. That mulga tree needs to be pushed over once the closest leaf to the ground gets above 10 feet. A beast cannot even reach it; even then it is too high. So you need to push those mulga trees over. Doing that starts young mulga seedlings and they come up like hairs on a cat's back. Once you have those young seedlings coming up, you have solved the problem.

In some cases, in a severe drought, those mulga seedlings will die and people are then dependent and are going back to pushing the mature trees. If you have a program, which in the heart of mulga country some of it is almost a year-around activity, you cannot afford to wait. When I had Baykool, north-west of Charleville, as soon as you started the tractor cattle would just appear out of the scrub from everywhere. The stock are dependent on that fresh leaf for survival.

What I am saying is there should be a maximum period, if you like, in days for approval for a fodder permit. A development permit, that is a different kettle of fish. But staff should not go using the excuse of silly little things such as the GPS coordinates are one point out or so-and-so is on holiday or there are not enough staff or whatever. I get back to the point with fodder permits; that must be a priority.

CHAIR: Angus, if I can just pick up on that. You would be of the view that, specifically with regards to fodder permits, if they were self assessable whereby the landholder could make that decision within specified terms, you believe that would be a timely response?

Mr Ryrie: One hundred per cent; I agree with that, because the bloke who owns the property is the best judge of what the situation is. They are not worried about going on holidays next week or whatever; they are worried about the welfare of their stock.

CHAIR: Okay.

Mr Ryrie: So long as the guidelines are there, there is no problem. That would be the preferred option, 100 per cent self assessable.

CHAIR: Angus, just for the benefit of the committee, and I appreciate it will depend on conditions, how long from seedling to when the leaf is at the point where it is out of the reach of the cattle? What sort of time frame are we looking at there? Is that something that occurs fairly quickly or does it take an extensive period to reach that height?

Mr Ryrie: No, it does take a while. If you put the chain over country, depending on what sort of rain you get, et cetera, you will normally have evidence of seedlings appearing within 12 months. Depending, once again, on the seasons, if you get a run of good seasons, your seedlings are up and going and your stock can access the leaf. I would have to say you would be looking at 12 to 15 years, I suppose, before that leaf would get beyond the reach of most stock.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. Bruce and Rob, any questions from you?

Mr YOUNG: I agree. I have a bit of a history of feeding with mulga. He is right on the money there. We have to acknowledge that. I think that there are some good points in there. Especially in and around drought, Dave, when drought happens you just cannot wait for four months for a permit. That is ludicrous. I cannot believe it.

CHAIR: Fair point and taken. Michael has another question.

Mr HART: With regard to the self-assessed codes, is there anything else that the government should be looking to add to those self-assessed codes, from your point of view?

Mr Price: Yes. I would like to reiterate my concerns. As far as the codes go, with some vegetation communities, at present you are not allowed to apply for a thinning permit, despite some of these ecosystems having been reduced to thickets, actually. The pasture has gone. In 1928, surveyors described it as 'open forest, well grassed', but now it is back to thickets of woody mass. At present, you cannot get a permit to thin those ecosystems. I think that that is absolutely vitally important that those codes be addressed so we can get some equity and better sustainable land use.

CHAIR: Are there any other comments from anyone else?

Mr Hoare: I will bring up the point that I made with the self-assessable codes before. My opinion from the dealings I have had over the last 12 or 13 years with different landholders doing PMAVs is that if they are as concise as they can possibly be and with as small a grey area as possible then people are not going to push the boundaries. They are going to operate within them because the less they have to do with departmental officials to get permits or anything else will, one, make their job easier; two, make it quicker and more economic—they can get in and do something as long as it fits in the boundaries of what they are quite sure was quite safe—and, three, mean fewer avenues for the business that has been generated out of this, which is consultancy services. Consultancy services—myself included a few years ago—have been skimming thousands and thousands of dollars from landholders for no economic benefit to the landholder at the end of the day. All they are doing is abiding by the paperwork.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for that, Barry. Are there any other comments?

Mr Ryrie: Can I say in closing that, in my opinion, the legislation must be redrafted with a focus on production and the welfare of primary producers and so restore a balance.

CHAIR: Angus, can I pick up on that point? Are you making reference to the current bill that is proposed or just generally with regard to the legislation?

Mr Ryrie: I am talking about the one in existence at the moment.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. To pick up on the self-assessable codes, we heard evidence earlier last week, as we held other hearings. I will put forward a statement which I would be keen to hear your views on. There is a view that the industry—graziers et cetera—has reached a point now, where it has existed and operated under the current laws, that it would be better educated now with regard to self-assessable codes and it would be able to hold itself to a higher standard.

Mr Verri: The simple answer is yes.

Mr Hoare: I would probably agree with that, too.

Mr Price: I would agree with it also.

CHAIR: Gentlemen, are there any final points that any of you would care to make? Is there anything that perhaps we have not touched on that you feel is important to be brought to the committee's attention?

Mr Verri: There is one point and that is area management. I presume there is going to be a group of people doing local area assessments; is that correct?

CHAIR: We only look at the legislation. We do not talk about how the department will operate it.

Mr Verri: I see.

CHAIR: You put forward your concern or your issue, Peter.

Mr Verri: I would like to see those AMPs that are doing the group assessment have someone from the concerned area, such as a farmer from the concerned area. If they are going to be working in the Wet Tropics, they should grab someone that has a farm in the Wet Tropics or even someone from the public who has an input so it is a fair method to put across to all stakeholders. I have heard some comments made about bureaucrats who sit in an office and draw up these things. They might be doing their best but, unfortunately, they do not have local knowledge. As I just heard someone say—I think it was Angus—the farmer knows best his own land. That is a true statement. That is what I would like to see if at all possible. If we do have these groups, they need to put local people on them and they should be paid out-of-pocket expenses as well.

CHAIR: Thank you for that, Peter. Are there any other comments that people would like to make on issues that perhaps we have not had an opportunity to address so far?

Mr Hoare: This is probably digressing a little from the initial point, but I think the committee should recognise the fact that the average age of the person on the land these days is 60, I believe, which is a crying shame. I am only 38.

CHAIR: That makes you a young whippersnapper.

Mr Hoare: Yes. As time goes on, I have seen it with my own parents. They get less and less interested in the land because it is difficult to keep up with the paperwork. The more emphasis on keeping things simple and operative, the better it will be because it will give them a feeling that they can pass something on to the next generation with genuine ownership. It is an issue that is being lost more and more from the bush.

Mr Verri: Can I add to that comment?

CHAIR: Yes, please.

Mr Verri: He is 38. I am 65, as I have said, and I am getting a bit long in the tooth but what I have noticed, being computer illiterate, is that us old fellas are not used to all of that. It becomes very hard and very stressful to make decisions and find out things. Might I also add that where we had opportunities to get things done by the time we found out about some of the issues we lost those opportunities. I agree that if we do not start changing our thoughts who is going to take over our farms? That is what worries me. I have two sons and at the moment if I gave them my farm they would probably sue me for child abuse.

CHAIR: Peter, I would love to put that comment into the report but I do not think I will.

Mr Verri: I think a little bit of humour would not go astray.

CHAIR: Are there any other comments from anyone else before we wrap up?

Mr Verri: I would just like to thank you for at least listening to everyone's concerns.

CHAIR: That is our job. I believe one of the great strengths of the committee system now is that certainly in my time in the parliament we are doing a much better job of engaging than we did previously. A point has just been made to me. Peter, you talked about lost opportunities that you were not made aware of. Is that really just a communication issue; that there was a chance for a review but you did not find out about it until after the closing date?

Mr Verri: Well, I did have that problem. Like I said, I had a mapping adjustment done early in the piece. I did get to a minister. Unfortunately, I thought I was unjustly treated. I needed a yes or no answer from that minister on the day. I asked him if he was the boss and he said, 'Yes,' and I said, 'Well give me a yes or no answer so I can get on with my life and your people can devote their time to somebody else's problems.' It is very frustrating. They are the sorts of problems and understanding some of the jargon. As I stated, remnant and non-remnant. What is regrowth is regrowth as far as I am concerned.

CHAIR: Thank you for that.

Mr Hoare: There is one more point I would like to make which I forgot to mention before. I am not quite sure whether committee members are aware of this. I spoke to an operating consultant this morning who is quite well known. He charges a flat rate of between \$5,000 and \$8,000 for a complex PMAV. For a simple one he charges \$1,500 to \$2,000. While that probably does not sound like a lot of money, people on the land are struggling at the moment and this is basically something for nothing. It is just a piece of paper. It is starting to hurt.

CHAIR: Thank you for that evidence, Barry. Rob and Bruce, are there any final things from your perspectives?

Mr YOUNG: Gentlemen, I would like to thank you for your time. There have certainly been some very valid points made. I just want to pass on my thanks.

Mr KATTER: I have a final question. Are there any areas where you would like to see it go further? Are there some future aspirational issues to do with vegetation management?

Mr Price: Rob, thanks for that. No matter how good your legislation is, if the codes are not changed in some ecosystems at the departmental level it will not bring any improvements at all for many landholders. I am sure the reason for your legislative changes is to make it fairer and more equitable. From a ministerial point of view, we need to make sure that those code changes occur so that this change can flow through.

CHAIR: Thank you for that. Gentlemen, I want to thank you for your time. I appreciate that you probably had other things that you could have been doing but the time you took out to give evidence to our committee is genuinely appreciated. We do not often have the opportunity to travel as much as we would like, and to get you on the phone and provide this information for us assists us in our deliberations on the bill. Thank you all for your time today.

Mr Price: Thank you.

Mr Verri: Thank you for listening.

Mr Hoare: Thank you.

CHAIR: The time allocated for this session has now expired. I thank all members for their participation so far.

Proceedings suspended from 1.55 pm to 2.15 pm

McGUIRE, Ms Anna, Coordinator, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre

MOORHOUSE, Ms Margaret, Spokesperson, Alliance to Save Hinchinbrook Inc.

YORKSTON, Mr Hugh, Director, Coastal Ecosystems and Water Quality, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

CHAIR: I welcome everyone back to the public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013. I thank everyone for their attendance here today. For the benefit of Hansard can I ask all witnesses to identify themselves each time they speak—it is very important that you do that on a teleconference—and to speak clearly and at a reasonable pace and volume. For the record, I will ask if you could each state your name and the capacity in which you appear before the committee and if you would like to make a two-minute opening statement we will move through, starting with you Hugh, then we will follow with Anna and then Margaret. Then after you have made those opening statements the committee will have the opportunity to engage with you in conversation and questioning.

Mr Yorkston: Okay, thank you. In 2003 the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, through its outlook report, identified a number of key high risks to the Great Barrier Reef which included climate change, water quality and the impacts of coastal development on coastal ecosystems. What we know, and what the governments know, is that water quality is a critical issue for the Great Barrier Reef. That is why the governments have a joint Reef Water Quality Protection Plan which began in 2009 with a goal of halting and reversing the decline in water quality. Vegetation protection is a key plank of reducing impacts on water quality. In 2009 a consensus statement was prepared with the best science and understanding at the time. I just wanted to read one of the key statements from the consensus statement which is related to vegetation management—

Whilst vegetation management through maintenance or rehabilitation of vegetated areas is considered to be a beneficial practice for water quality outcomes, direct measurements of long-term outcomes are difficult to find. However, vegetation management in Queensland is probably one of the few examples of documented evidence of the effectiveness of a management action in Queensland through introduction of the Vegetation Management Act 1999. The legislation restricted the amount of tree clearing that could be undertaken on freehold and leasehold land. Figures from the Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) showed the statewide average annual rate for clearing of woody vegetation in 2004-05 was 351,000 hectares. This is 27 per cent lower than in 2003-04 (482,000 ha) and 54 per cent lower than the peak measured clearing rate in 1999-2000 (758,000 ha). Reductions in clearing of more environmentally significant remnant woody vegetation are even greater—35 per cent, down from 267,000 ha in 2003-04 to 172,000 ha in 2004-05...These figures demonstrate the effectiveness of the introduction of the legislation and in the short-term, assumptions are made about the outcomes in terms of water quality and biodiversity values.

I just wanted to read that in the context of the importance of vegetation management because vegetation, when it is in place, helps to protect soil from erosion. Sediment is one of the key issues in terms of the loads coming out of the catchment and impacting on the reef. This is particularly a wet season issue particularly where you get concentrations of sediments coming down that are 50 to 100 times that in normal ambient conditions. An excess sediment can affect a whole range of ecosystems in the Great Barrier Reef, coral and seagrasses in particular, through actions like burying and turbidity. Many species, particularly in ecosystems like corals and seagrass, are very reliant on clean, clear water to receive the light to photosynthesise and grow and survive and breed and sediment is one of the pollutants in excess that we see that has a significant impact on those species.

Since 2009 we have seen a whole range of changes still in the Great Barrier Reef's biodiversity largely affecting inshore areas in the southern and central parts of the Great Barrier Reef, so south of Port Douglas. We have seen a 50 per cent decline in coral across those areas in the Great Barrier Reef and we have seen a continual decline in seagrass and loss of species, some species like sawfish shark, which are species that live up into the catchment. In 2011 we saw some even more significant declines in several species, particularly dugongs and turtles and seagrass associated with—

Mr KATTER: Hello, Mr Chair, it is just Rob Katter dialling in.

CHAIR: Thank you, Rob. We have just got Hugh giving an opening statement. I might use this opportunity to point out that we can come back to these key points. There will be other opportunities. Is there anything else you would like to briefly allude to in your opening remarks then we might move on to a couple of the other members.

Mr Yorkston: Just one or two other things. I guess the important issue is that we have seen these declines in particular in the difference between what we see in terms of intact systems north of Port Douglas and what we see in terms of modified and changed systems south of Port Douglas and these are very closely related to significant changes in the vegetation cover across those different communities. I sent some material in earlier in the day that draws to the attention of the committee some work that we have done over the last couple of years.

CHAIR: I am just going to check with the staff if we have received that material if you sent it through earlier today. Hugh, there is a process in which we can table those documents. They have been printed off. Are you happy for those documents to be tabled for the committee?

Mr Yorkston: Yes

CHAIR: Committee members, is leave granted? Rob and Bruce, are you happy with that?

Mr YOUNG: Yeah, mate, I'm easy.

CHAIR: We will table the document. Continue, Hugh. I promise you we will come back and give you the opportunity but these are just the opening statements, that is all.

Mr Yorkston: That is all right. I guess the last part of the opening statement was just highlighting the importance of vegetation management in maintaining soil and ground cover. The other feature that I wanted to highlight is that maintaining these systems is far more efficient and cost effective than trying to restore them. It looks like we are about to enter into a bit of a program looking at the whole restoration of some of these systems that have been modified south of Port Douglas.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Hugh. Anna, if we could move to you for an opening statement.

Ms McGuire: The Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill causes us to have serious concerns for the future of Queensland's terrestrial biodiversity, as well as concerns about the long-term sustainability of Queensland's agricultural sector and the future health of the Great Barrier Reef. We believe that this bill should be rejected for the sake of maintaining our soil and waterway health, protecting biodiversity and safeguarding the future prosperity of our regional and rural communities. This sentiment is also reflected across the environment sector with national, state and local groups, as I am sure you are aware, being appalled by what would be the biggest wind back of environmental protection laws in Queensland's history.

Many of the amendments are not in the long-term interests of Queensland communities and are in direct conflict with the purpose of the Vegetation Management Act which is to make land use more sustainable by preserving biodiversity and maintaining ecological processes. I would just like to quickly reiterate that, as Hugh was just referring to, it is not only important to protect native vegetation to preserve endangered plants and ecosystems but also to ensure intergenerational equity and access to resources and to allow prosperity for future generations. In other words, protecting vegetation is critical for maintaining the fundamental ecosystem services that our regional, rural and urban communities rely on.

It is also important to remember that maintaining native vegetation cover is a fundamental aspect of ensuring the ongoing prosperity of our agricultural sector. Vegetation obviously protects topsoil, maintains water quality in waterways and it is really necessary for sustainable agricultural production in the long-term. Further clearing of marginal farmlands will not make farming on that land more viable. Unfortunately the outcome will be a degradation of that farmland. As topsoil is lost, riverbanks erode and water quality decreases.

To quickly summarise our major concerns, obviously we are concerned about the future of Queensland's biodiversity if the bill is passed. The amendments insert an economic imperative that would take priority over ecological concerns in allowing for the clearing of endangered regional ecosystems. It would also lead to further fragmentation of an already fragmented landscape resulting in species decline and loss of ecosystem function. We believe that the addition of the allowed for sustainable land use, section 3 part 1, is not in line with the purpose of the act and also that sustainable land use needs to be defined. It needs to also be defined in a way that is in line with quadruple bottom line sustainability principles otherwise that should be omitted because it is actually not in line with the purpose of the act.

Two more major concerns are regarding the policing and enforcement of the act. The removal of the capacity for judicial review in section 68CB and placing decision making entirely in

the hands of the chief executive we believe would be removing a fundamental democratic check. Finally, we are also concerned about the degradation of waterways, including wild rivers, that would follow from these amendments and about the resulting impacts of the decrease in water quality on the Great Barrier Reef. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Anna. Margaret, if I could now ask you to make an opening statement?

Ms Moorhouse: As a group and as individuals we have a long history, going back to the 1980s, in understanding the impact of legislation or the lack of it on the natural world. ASH grew out of a campaign to protect the world heritage listed Hinchinbrook Channel and Island Region from inappropriate coastal development. I have a special interest in world heritage and have sat on the Wet Tropics Management Authority Conservation Sector Liaison Group for about 14 years. Prior to moving to Queensland in 1984 I was actually a farmer in New South Wales. ASH rejects the entire package of the proposed amendments for the following reasons: there is no evidence presented for the claims made in support of them. In focusing on the desire of the land users for greater convenience, profitability and so on, the view of the common good, including generational equity, has been lost. There has been no public consultation appropriate to this bill which affects the future of every Queensland child. Time frames have prevented proper detailed analysis, including the relationship to other legislation and the long-term consequences for Queensland's biodiversity and agriculture. Mapping is virtually inaccessible, being limited to either lot number identification or large-scale for which you require GIS capabilities and that has made it impossible for me in the time frame to present some facts of specific topics in our area of interest.

Habitats of endangered species, such as mahogany glider in the Southern Cassowary, those world heritage values and the continuing degradation of the Johnstone River which is just like many rivers with cleared banks, are already feeding great plumes into the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage area. The stakeholder status has been limited to land user groups, denying public interest groups any input at that stage. The proposed compliance regime we think is just shameful. In a democratic country you hardly expect to go back to such an archaic unenlightened way of locking out public accountability and enshrining that in legislation.

The introduction of the Vegetation Management Act originally halted what was previously unbridled clearing and it allowed a new process of linking broken habitats for the seriously diminished populations of cassowaries and mahogany gliders, protecting what you might call the survivability factor inherent in having wide genetic variability within each species and without which the species would not survive long into the future.

The ongoing work and expenditure of a multitude of organisations, companies and government departments who have been working towards linking the scattered habitat groups will be lost overnight if this bill is passed. I have a list of companies or organisations, if anyone is interested, who have been doing that work for mahogany gliders. It goes from tourism, construction and forestry, groups like Terrain and conservation volunteers, the Giringun Aboriginal Corporation and so on. These projects rely totally on the management and protection of the little habitat that we have and then building on that to make the existing habitat corridor safe and to expand on that corridor system. Without that, this species will not survive in the wild if the amendments go through. That is what is going to happen.

CHAIR: All right. Thank you for that, Margaret. For the benefit of the committee, you made reference to a 2009 consensus statement. You were quoting from that statement. For the benefit of the committee, are you able to reference for us who made that consensus statement? Hugh, are you still there?

Mr Yorkston: Yes, sorry. The consensus statement was made by a number of peak scientists—a whole group of them—who was part of the preparation for the review of the reef plan in 2009. I can email a PDF of the document to you.

CHAIR: That would be wonderful. Thanks for that. From the committee's perspective, it will help us. Margaret, can I start with a question to you. You made reference to mapping. The committee has heard during other hearings that it has held about the frustration that a wide group of people have had with the inaccuracies in the mapping. The evidence I think is that the Herbarium's maps are in the vicinity of about 80 per cent accurate, although in some cases I think we heard that that may drop as low as 50 per cent. Would you care to make a comment on the accuracy of the mapping that has been undertaken to date?

Ms Moorhouse: I understand the frustrations about mapping. One of the things that happens with mapping is that things on the ground can move and getting that mapping actually ground

truthed is a long and painstaking process. What I was referring to just now was what is put on the internet is what was available to people who want to put in a submission and the best I could get was a screen print from a staff member here in Townsville who kindly forwarded that to me. But trying to make sense of it is another story.

CHAIR: If I could then specifically ask you about the experience today under the existing mapping arrangements. Have you found them as frustrating or have you been able to work effectively with the current maps?

Ms Moorhouse: Both.

CHAIR: You are a talented woman.

Ms Moorhouse: We, too, find it frustrating when the mapping does not show the true extent of where a habitat has reaches to. There are lines on paper that seem to develop a concrete reality, even though what is on the ground tells you something different. But that is going to happen with any mapping system, because it is not set in concrete. It is a huge undertaking to do the kind of mapping that is required. I think it is much harder now, because of the amount of clearing, trying to find out where the remnants of important vegetation need to be linked up and rehabilitated. We do not hear much about that, except from the groups that are struggling to do that.

CHAIR: Sure.

Ms Moorhouse: To actually recreate in the right place where the habitat was to link up to what is there now so that a species like the mahogany glider and the cassowary—they are not going to have a future in the end if we do not do this. The mahogany glider has already lost something like 80 per cent of its habitat.

CHAIR: Thank you for that, Margaret. I might now invite the member for South Brisbane to ask a question.

Ms TRAD: Mr Yorkston, obviously, there are diametrically opposed views about this legislation. We have heard from landowners earlier today about why these amendments are necessary for their agricultural production or grazing needs. I know that the Paddock to Reef program has been somewhat successful in terms of reducing the run-off into the reef. Is there any way within this legislation that landowners and environmentalists or environmental peak organisations can come together around this framework amendment bill to mitigate the effects of vegetation clearing?

Mr Yorkston: I think there is in the context that one of the things that we have done with our work in recent times is try to look at the functionality of the systems, which is what we have modified, I guess, through things like vegetation management and intensive agricultural activities—those sorts of things. We have not taken account of the changes and those modifications in the functions of the systems, which comes back down to a bit of that discussion earlier about the ecosystem services that we take for granted. There are lots of opportunities through programs like Reef Rescue to restore habitat connections. There has been money that has been spent on doing that through riparian rehabilitation and wetland protection. But I guess the main issue here is that often those are much less effective and much more costly than just maintaining systems in a healthy, functional way. There is lots of work that was done earlier on in the vegetation management planning program that looked at that issue of functionality and maintaining functions in the landscape.

I guess that is one of the unknowns in some of the potential changes to the legislation and how that will affect those maintaining functionality. A good example is some of the issues raised earlier about ensuring that we maintain riparian areas that help to maintain healthy streambank systems that help to ensure that vegetation is in place to minimise erosion. So there are a range of actions that people know and have been doing that will support healthy, productive agricultural systems but also maintain the biodiversity of the environment in which those activities are taking place.

Ms TRAD: Unfortunately, I think there are moves afoot to remove those provisions from the Water Act in terms of the riparian vegetation permits. So that, of course, would be of concern. I think I heard your submission to the AREC parliamentary committee, which I sit on.

Mr Yorkston: Yes, that is right. Those are key areas that will be important if the government, in its commitment to maintain and halt and reverse the decline in water quality, is going to be able to achieve that.

Ms TRAD: Yes.

CHAIR: I do not have the notes here with me, but I believe in the minister's second reading speech he made some reference that there would be continued protection around riparian areas. I think we are talking 50 to 100 metres that would be in place. I remember some submissions where cane growers were making some concerns about those remaining in place. Could I get your views as to whether that is sufficient, whether it is effective, or whether that needs to be changed?

Mr Yorkston: Would you like me to start?

CHAIR: Yes, if you could. That would be okay.

Mr Yorkston: In my position I have been involved with a whole range of wetland and riparian discussions over the last few years. In fact, through that joint Queensland and Australian government Queensland Wetlands Program a lot of work has been done on identifying and quantifying those buffers, because they depend on the nature of the system and the nature of the environment that you are in. So the critical elements, obviously, are where you would have steeper slopes. But there are differences, if you like, between the riparian areas in a rainforest system and riparian areas in a dryland system. That was the original thinking around the riparian limits that were placed in that they were looking specifically at those different ecosystems. Work has been done on being able to quantify the nature of those riparian areas and buffers. So there is some fairly good science around it, but it is different in different locations and different vegetation communities.

CHAIR: So where this bill retains those buffers, you are of the view that that is an appropriate mechanism?

Mr Yorkston: I think it is a critical element for maintaining our healthy, or trying to maintain health, in our river systems.

CHAIR: Okay. Thank you for that.

Ms TRAD: I might just ask CFNEC. Anna, we heard earlier from landowners in relation to the self-assessable vegetation clearing codes. The bill provides the minister with a head of power essentially to make these codes. What is your organisation's perspective on that?

Ms McGuire: We have concerns about any kind of self-policing of vegetation clearing. We are concerned obviously that the onus is on the landowners to report and to manage—

CHAIR: Anna, are you able to speak any louder?

Ms McGuire: Yes, sure. It might be our phone line. Is that better?

CHAIR: That is sounding much better.

Ms McGuire: Yes, so we have concerns about that, because that would mean self-policing on the part of landowners, whereas they may not be aware if there is an endangered plant or an endangered ecosystem on their land. We believe that there needs to be some kind of oversight of that process rather than leaving that up to landowners. Was that your question?

Ms TRAD: Yes. We have also heard from landowners about the necessity during times of drought for the ability to harvest for fodder and that the obtaining of permits is a very long process that really does give them a level of frustration. Does anyone have any comments to make about that?

Ms Moorhouse: About harvesting for fodder?

Ms TRAD: Yes.

Ms Moorhouse: Look, you have to take a really long-range view on this. The climate is changing. I was a farmer, too. From the outset I had a drought plan and when the drought came I saw my cherished projects go one by one. But we got through it without doing any damage to the land that we had, because I always had that understanding that you cannot just keep robbing the future to pay now, because we are not really sure what that robbing is doing. In this case, we know that the climate is changing and that some areas are going to continue to get drier. When people are farming marginal land, I know that it is heartbreaking when you are faced with, 'Look, maybe this isn't viable anymore' or 'Maybe we need to do something different,' but you cannot go on carrying that many stock in the hope that you can get them through the next year or two on harvested fodder. When you say 'harvested', you really have to define that very, very carefully.

CHAIR: I think the example, Margaret, was mulga country out in the south-west.

Ms Moorhouse: Yes, so whether it is harvesting or clearing is a bit of a moot point. When is it regrown and when is regrowth? This starts to get into a bit of a complicated matter of defining it and how it is going to be protected or not protected if it is allowed to regrow. I do not support this

idea and our group does not support the idea of either clearing more land because the property has become unviable or of this so-called harvesting.

CHAIR: Does anyone else have any comments?

Mr Yorkston: I would make one comment there. In developing and talking about this whole issue of best practices for and reducing the impacts on water quality from agricultural uses, the grazing industry obviously makes up a significant part of the GBR catchment. About 80 per cent of GBR catchment is grazed. There has been some great work that has been done which looked at this whole issue during the periods of really dry weather through the mid-2000s which looked at the economics of keeping stock on the paddock for longer periods, trying to supplementary feed and other things. The economics of it generally showed that it was a much smarter process to look at those weather patterns and trends early and move cattle on and put your money into safer ventures. It is a part of the good management of the land that what we saw in the early 2000s were quite distinct differences between good management practices and poor management practices in these dry country areas during dry conditions. So it really is about the management, and bad management leads to further degradation of the system rather than good economic outcomes.

Ms McGuire: Landholders, the agricultural sector, industry or whomever it is you are talking about will always push for less regulation. They will always push for shorter time frames on approvals being issued. But often those processes exist for a reason and we need to take a bigger picture approach to it, look at the bigger perspective and think about why those approval processes are there and in the long run what are the outcomes that we want to see and what is best for the community as a whole?

Mr YOUNG: I have done mulga and I also own a rainforest property. One of the things that you need to be mindful of is that in the case of property owners—and this is for Margaret and her colleagues—the people are on the land generally because they care about not only their livestock but also the welfare of the property. One of things that does happen is you can get caught in a drought. It does not matter where you are. It does not matter whether it is the Wet Tropics. As I said, I own a rainforest property and people can get caught out. You want to keep your livestock alive so you will use whatever means you can.

Mr HART: I just want to expand on the question asked by the member for South Brisbane about self-assessable codes. We have heard from many of the farmers who have given evidence that the 2009 Vegetation Management Act, for want of a better word, tied their hands behind their backs. They are telling us they were very limited in the amount of clearing they could do for things like clearing their fence lines—and we have already discussed fodder harvesting—or, say, clearing a bit of land to dig a trench to put in an irrigation pipe to improve their land. You seem to be opposed completely to self-assessable codes, if I read you right. Is there anything that would be acceptable to you as far as self-assessable codes and farmers making their own decisions about what they could, can and cannot do with their own land? They tell us that they love their land and they want to nurture it and grow it. Is there anything that they could do as self-assessable from your point of view?

Ms Moorhouse: I think the problem with the whole code thing is that there is no detail. Codes like that have to be very carefully spelt out in great detail so everybody is very clear about where the limits to the self-assessment are.

CHAIR: Hugh or Anna, would you care to make comment?

Mr Yorkston: We are definitely not against self-assessable codes where the limits of those can be easily prescribed.

Ms McGuire: I agree with Margaret's comments.

CHAIR: Hugh, if I could pick up on that, in the earlier session we put forward a statement and asked for people's views on it. In light of what has occurred to date with the Vegetation Management Act and the way in which that has educated and brought about changes with people's land use, do you feel that a self-assessment code now is achievable because people are better educated and would be able to act more appropriately?

Mr Yorkston: Again, it depends on the nature of the activity. When I said there are a number of activities which are easily definable as self-assessable, one of those is clearly fence lines and firebreaks and the size that they can be. Those sorts of things are fairly easily described. I think one of the challenges comes into context when you start thinking about broadscale clearing, and I would not call those broadscale clearing activities; I would call them operational, farm based activities. It is

the broadscale activities that have the potential to have significant environmental impacts because of the nature of the vegetation that you might be clearing. I will give you an example of that. I was involved with some of the vegetation planning in the Einasleigh Uplands and some of the clearing, in particular country like Blackwood country, which sits on particular soils which can be very erodible. Clearing in that country can lead to very significant erosion and gulying problems. The research over the last five to 10 years has shown that significant sources of sediment flowing into our river systems are disrupting the biological and ecological processes and ending up causing problems downstream and into the Great Barrier Reef.

There are a range of actions that can be easily self-assessable. It is when you get into the broader scale clearing activities where the farmer is very unlikely to have access to a range of the information that decisions need to be made on whether it is a sensible thing economically and environmentally for him to do.

Ms Moorhouse: Of course, it is not that this clearing for fence lines and so-called minor things is illegal; it is the need to get a permit, and there is nothing wrong with that fundamentally. It might be a nuisance. It is a nuisance when we have to go and get a driving licence, but we have to do it and there is a good reason for it. Even that so-called minor clearing along fence lines and so on—I was on very steep country. A bit of carelessness could result in a landslip, erosion and so on. Sometimes you go up and down the slopes; you are not just on the flat. So the simple view of a fence line being cleared for convenience or for fire protection is not the whole story. Fence lines can be very complicated and they run over the landscape. That is why we have such reservations about self-assessment codes. If they cannot be simply understood then that part of it has to be by permit.

Ms TRAD: Anna, you said that this bill represented the most significant wind back in environmental law in Queensland's history. Have I captured that correctly?

Ms McGuire: Yes.

CHAIR: Didn't she put it in writing?

Ms TRAD: The chair said that you put it in writing. Margaret, do you agree with that assessment?

Ms Moorhouse: Could you say that again? I am sorry, I missed the beginning of it.

Ms TRAD: I think Anna said at the beginning that this bill represented the most significant wind back in environmental law in Queensland's history. Is that a statement that you would agree with?

Ms Moorhouse: Absolutely, yes. Before the Vegetation Management Act came in, the clearing that was going on up here in the north and the far north was horrendous. The way that the habitat for creatures, which are values of the Wet Tropical World Heritage area and which impacted on the water quality on the Great Barrier Reef, which is affecting the seagrass which is the basis of the health of dugongs, turtles and everything else in the Great Barrier Reef—that was just going ahead by leaps and bounds. Bringing in that Vegetation Management Act caused a really big halt to that indiscriminate sort of clearing. What we see is that bringing in this bill takes us back literally to that time. There might still be an act and the purpose of the act is set out clearly, but the provisions that they wanted to come in under this bill actually contradict the purposes of this act and take us back to the pre-act time.

Mr HOLSWICH: I have a question for Margaret. You mentioned right upfront that essentially your position on this is that you reject the whole package. In your reading of this bill is there any way that you can see that this legislation could provide for both increased opportunities for landholders whilst still maintaining environmental preservation? Is it possible that the two can co-exist through this legislation?

Ms Moorhouse: Not through this bill, but through this legislation undoubtedly. But that needs to have proper investigation, proper evidence and a period of time for all the stakeholders, not just the landholders who said they want it, but all the other stakeholders including those groups who stand for the public interest. That is the problem with this bill: it has not been presented with that sort of evidence. I have actually read all the submissions and I have to say I was surprised that some of those landholder submissions that came in on those pro forma statements represented some pretty archaic ideas about the natural environment. I guess this is a matter of education of the Queensland population as a whole. Something is missing here about the case of the natural

environment and what they now call ecosystem services, the loss of tree cover throughout Australia, which is about 90 per cent—

CHAIR: Margaret, I might just pull you up there because we are running short on time. Thank you for that. I thank everybody for their involvement in the hearing today. As always, this committee benefits from engaging and listening to the public and we thank you for your involvement. The time allocated for this session has now expired and I thank everyone for their involvement. Unless there are compelling reasons not to, I move—

That pursuant to section 50(2) (a) of the Parliament of Queensland Act 2001, the committee authorises the publication of the evidence given here before it this day.

All in favour? Carried. I now declare this hearing closed. I thank you all for your involvement. Hugh, Anna and Margaret, again, I appreciate that you could have been doing other things today. The fact that you gave up your time for our committee's hearing is genuinely appreciated.

Committee adjourned at 2.59 pm