



# ***STATE DEVELOPMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE***

## **Members present:**

Mr CG Whiting MP (Chair)  
Mr DJ Batt MP  
Mr JE Madden MP  
Mr BA Mickelberg MP  
Ms JC Pugh MP  
Mr PT Weir MP

## **Members in attendance:**

Mr LL Millar MP  
Mr RI Katter MP

## **Staff present:**

Ms L Manderson (Inquiry Secretary)

## **PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2018**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**THURSDAY, 29 MARCH 2018**

**Longreach**

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**The committee met at 8.05 am.**

**CHAIR:** Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the inquiry into the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to thank the Stockman's Hall of Fame and everyone from the region for being so generous and hosting us. My name is Chris Whiting. I am the member for Bancroft and the chair of the committee. The other committee members here with me are Mr Pat Weir, deputy chair and member for Condamine; Mr David Batt, member for Bundaberg; Mr Jim Madden, member for Ipswich West; Mr Brent Mickelberg, member for Bundaberg; and Ms Jess Pugh, member for Mount Ommaney. I also acknowledge Mr Lachlan Millar, member for Gregory, who is joining us today as a participating member of the committee.

The bill was referred to the committee on 8 March 2018. The committee is required to report to parliament by 23 April 2018. Today's proceedings are similar to the proceedings of a parliament and are subject to the standing rules and orders of the parliament. In this regard I remind members of the public that under standing orders the public may be admitted or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath, but evidence should be given in good faith and intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

Today's proceedings are being recorded by Hansard and a transcript will be published on the committee website unless there is a good reason not to do so. Media may be present so you may also be filmed or photographed. The standard media rules and conditions and terms of the Legislative Assembly also apply to our proceedings today. Before we commence could you please switch off your mobile devices or put them on silent.

**CHANDLER, Mr Rob, Mayor, Barcaldine Regional Council**

**HOCKINGS, Mr Paul, Director of Corporate Services and Deputy CEO, Longreach Regional Council**

**NUNN, Ms Leonie, Deputy Mayor, Longreach Regional Council**

**PRATT, Mr Mike, Deputy Mayor, Barcoo Shire Council**

**SMITH, Mr Trevor, Councillor, Longreach Regional Council**

**CHAIR:** Would anyone like to lead off with a brief opening statement?

**Mr Hockings:** Thank you to the panel for coming out here for this community consultation. Longreach Regional Council is covering an area of 40,000 square kilometres and encompasses the towns of Ilfracombe, Isisford, Yaraka and Longreach. Council is proudly apolitical. We pride ourselves on working constructively with all members of parliament, both state and federal. We have an economic development plan called Outback Prosperity 2021 and we have three pillars of our region: agriculture is our first pillar, tourism and livability.

We feel that this act has the potential to impact all of those pillars of our economy. Our regions have struggled with one of the worst droughts in living memory over the last six years and really these rains are the first wet season rains that I have seen anywhere in the three years that I have been here, which gives you an idea of what this region has been experiencing. We feel that the vegetation changes are perpetuating a cyclic uncertainty, leaving landholders unable to effectively plan for their sustainable future. I will hand over to Councillor Smith to talk about gidgee encroachment.

**Councillor Smith:** Thank you, Paul. I would like to touch on gidgee. I had an ongoing battle with gidgee for 30 years. I am out of the fight now. I got a block of 70,000 acres which had 45,000 acres of gidgee on it. That in its state when I bought it would only run 4,000 sheep. When we went into a pulling program—left 10,000 acres of gidgee untouched, pulled 35,000 acres—taking out the seasonal variations, that property carried 10,000 to 12,000 sheep and 200 to 500 head of cattle. We

educated four children on that. There is no way known that we would have been able to stay on that. It provided a living for us and enabled us to raise our family which was so important. We would not have been able to do that without pulling.

The way things are now that would not be possible to do, the way I did it then. I understand things change. Where it leads to is less people, loss of income for people—you are fighting it all the time—and when you do get seasons you do not have the potential to get the productivity out of the country. I think there needs to be a little bit of common sense here in regard to control because it is not going away.

I know what it does to country. I have had a bit to do with prickly acacia and to me the end result is exactly the same: it is degradation and loss of production. Because it is an introduced species it is the boogiemán and yet a native species that does exactly the same thing to people has all sorts of laws protecting it. I am not saying do away with the laws, but there needs to be a bit of loosening up here because it does not do the country any favours. There is a loss of biodiversity and it puts people under a lot of pressure to try to survive.

**Councillor Nunn:** Mulga is a great fodder source in dry times and, as you know, we have had many of those drought years out here. Pushing off mulga to feed stock is so much part of a management plan and provides economic stability to someone who has a mulga block. We have pushed it and, my goodness, it has come back thicker and faster than ever before. Landholders who have got mulga really need to be able to continue to harvest it in dry times and to be able to control it after dry times when it comes back and it is so thick because it will just keep growing.

**Mayor Chandler:** Thank you for coming out. My angle here is a little different. I sold my property back in 2000 and so I am virtually coming at this from my perspective as the chair of RAPAD. RAPAD is owned by the seven councils of Central West Queensland. Our footprint is about 23 per cent of the state of Queensland. I go back to the days of Anna Bligh and the Bligh government and the wild rivers legislation that was about to be presented to parliament. The RAPAD group, along with the natural resources management group Desert Channels Queensland and environmental groups, we came together and sat down and worked out a sensible plan for the Cooper Creek catchment and the Cooper Creek Basin. That is the way we should be moving forward on this: to sit down and work it out sensibly and in the best interests of all parties concerned.

I think it is very fitting that this hearing is at the Stockman's Hall of Fame. This place was built to honour the pioneers of our country who opened it up. They came out to absolute virgin country. Over the years, since that time, there have been trillions of dollars spent to turn this country into one of the most productive food bowls in the agricultural industry and I am talking sheep, cattle and goats, but predominantly sheep and cattle. The Alpha country, the Jericho country, the Blackall-Barcaldine country was referred to by the open downs country landholders in those days as the dry paddocks. They have been developed to be the best cattle-producing country in the nation. Just to put it into perspective, the vegetation management laws must be fair to the people who have spent a lifetime to develop this country and make it the best it can possibly be.

Let us look at the state stock route network. It has been managed by local government and it has been managed by various governments over 150 years or more. Those stock routes have never had any vegetation management rules attached to them, except for controlling woody weeds or Weeds of National Significance and maybe pests. Fifty years ago—unfortunately, I can remember that very clearly—from Barcaldine to Longreach there was not a tree on the stock route. It was beautiful wide open natural downs country, the best natural grazing country in the world, by far. It is virtually organic right through. Have a look at it. Go for a drive from Barcaldine to Longreach today and you will see the encroachment of that vegetation on the stock route. If it is not managed exactly the same as the rural properties that we have out here today, if it is not managed, you will not have a productive stock route. There will be no natural open downs country.

I have spent a lot of time talking about a tourism industry and talking about how we must try to instil an affinity with the bush in the people from the city. Years ago, everybody in the city had a relationship with somebody who had a dairy farm or had a block just out of the city or they knew one of us or were related to one of us out in the outback. That is being eroded away. This place here was built in true partnership between all levels of government, all states in Australia and all people came together to create what is one of the greatest economic development areas that we have out here at the moment, and that is tourism. That is what I call a true partnership.

I implore the government to come back to the people. Do not make a decision on an election promise that was negotiated to win parliament with a minority group. This is about all Queenslanders, to make sure that we all work together to make sure that these laws are sensible, environmentally friendly and for all Queenslanders.

**Councillor Pratt:** Thanks, Rob. Good morning, lady and gentlemen. Thank you very much for the opportunity to present our case. Barcoo Shire Council is concerned that these proposed changes will unnecessarily impose a detrimental impact on the environmental, cultural, social and economic sustainability of our region and the mental wellbeing of our landholders. Barcoo Shire covers 61,000 square kilometres, located in the heart of the Channel Country, encompassing the towns of Stonehenge, Jundah and Windorah. The property consists of Mitchell grass downs, both gidgee and mulga lands, spinifex and the world-renowned Cooper flood plain.

Our concerns are monoculture. Possibly 30 per cent of the Barcoo Shire land mass is gidgee woodlands, ranging in density from very sparse to mid dense. According to the act, mid dense, that is, more than 1,250 stems per hectare, does not exist within the Mitchell grass downs bioregion. I have photographic proof, which I have put in my submission, from our own property showing gidgee thickened up to 5,000 stems per hectare. A canopy of immature gidgee has formed with the original mature and habitat trees, the majority of which are dead from being choked out, stretching like deer antlers up above the canopy.

This scrub is now a wasteland, totally devoid of ground cover to slow runoff, retain topsoil and offer protection to vulnerable fauna. Small ground-dwelling reptiles, arthropods and other insects, quail and other gidgee-compatible bird life eventually relocate or die out. A monoculture cannot sustain the ecological balance necessary for the wellbeing and survival of localised native wildlife. Inevitably, there will be a break in the food chain, thus triggering a domino effect and, one by one, those species will disappear.

Appropriate thinning and managing grazing pressure will restore the required grass-tree-living organism balance evident prior to thickening. Thickening and encroachment of gidgee along watercourses is also a problem, choking out established coolabah, sandalwood, lignum and native grasses and herbages. This degradation leads to increased erosion, rapid stream flows causing bank destabilisation, increased sediment flow, the deposit of silt along the waterways and diminishing water quality.

Our next concern is that the maximum area to be treated is only 400 hectares per lot. Given the rural lands within the Barcoo Shire have a safe carrying capacity of one dry sheep equivalent to five hectares, a viable livestock business area equates to 50,000 hectares. By limiting thinning to 400 hectares, many landholders would not even get out of the horse paddock. Admittedly, one can apply for a development application to increase this limit. However, this would delay further management of the thickening for up to two years, as past evidence has shown.

The next concern is extension services. Given the complexity of the act, the proposed changes and the issues that are at stake, there needs to be a significant education and extension program implemented. Field days run by department extension officers are essential to demonstrate each step through the assessment and notification process, followed by a practical field demonstration with the thinning bar behind a dozer.

We are very concerned about infringement penalties. Proposed changes include a severe tenfold increase in penalties from 50 to 500 penalty points per infringement. One penalty point is \$126, hence, 500 points is a \$63,000 fine for knocking over or simply sideswiping a nontarget tree. Given the complexity of the thinning code and the almost impossible task of putting it into practice without an infringement, the majority of landholders run the risk of being prosecuted.

To expect a dozer operator thinning with a six-metre bar through scrub of 5,000 eight-foot-high gidgee trees per hectare and avoid by five metres all the mature and habitat trees and the required number of tall immature trees without brushing past one is beyond belief. The common-sense design of the bar concept, which has been used effectively now for many years, was to enable a practical and compliant thinning of thickened immature gidgee trees by swinging around and leaving the mature and habitat trees behind. The fear of being issued with an infringement notice and not having the resources to contest it or not being able to pay the fine places a huge amount of stress on the mental wellbeing of landholders who are simply trying to do the right thing by the environment and the business it supports.

The hypocrisy of government is bewildering given the fact that infringements of the Biosecurity Act by land managers who let declared pest plants and animals take over huge areas mean offenders do not even get a slap on the wrist, yet you breach the regulations of the Vegetation Management Act, another act enforced by this government, and you can face a fine of up to \$1 million, which Eidsvold landholder Mr Baker has recently found out. Where is the equity in that?

In conclusion, Barcoo Shire landholders are prepared to accept the managing encroachment code as a practical and acceptable regulation. However, when considering the thinning and foreign harvesting codes, the department would well be advised to seek professional help from the likes of Longreach

Dr Bill Burrows, retired after 40 years service as senior principal range land scientist with the old DPI, researching the ecology and management of Queensland's grazed woodlands. We all want good biodiversity outcomes and we want a sustainable agricultural system. Unfortunately, the proposed amendments to the act are flawed and cannot possibly achieve this balance. Landholders, industry groups and rural communities alike are aware of this and cannot accept the Vegetation Management Act amendments in their current form.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Hockings, given that there are no changes to clearing out gidgee in this new act and there is a continuation of the ability to clear gidgee under the encroachment code—you can clear now and you can clear into the future under this code and under this act—I am really keen to see if you can work with government and AgForce to ensure that people throughout this area can be fully educated on the Vegetation Management Act now and into the future. Is that something that the council would be interested in being a part of?

**Mr Hockings:** Council has a Rural Lands Advisory Committee. Our deputy chair, David Paterson, is in the room. We are really involved with working with our landholders. Because it a key plank of our economic development strategy, we want to see the most economic value come out of that land.

If I can talk about our Longreach wild dog exclusion fence scheme, council has actually put their money on the line. I know that the state government has put two tranches of \$5 million into exclusion fencing, but our council said we are going to borrow \$18 million and we are going to go out and build 2,500 kilometres of fence, we are going to enclose 900,000 hectares and we are going to put our money behind our local landholders, because we see the sheep industry, particularly, as a source of labour. \$12 of labour from every sheep comes back into our community and \$3 of labour from every beast comes into our community. However, it is not just that. There are nine sheep to a beast, so the numbers are \$108 versus \$3.

We will do anything, as a council, to work closely between state government, local government, with our partners in RAPAD—RAPAD is one of the most active regional groups that I have ever seen in my career in local government—and the local landholders. What I have seen in the three years is that local landholders are really quite smart about picking up on legislation, getting the best out of their property and trying to support the local community. They are not the bad guys in any of this.

I think it is education and picking up on what Deputy Mayor Mike Pratt said about better agricultural extension services. We have seen the state government withdraw out, particularly in the Campbell Newman era, a lot of jobs in Longreach. I think the number is around 70. You think of the multiplier effects of that on our community and it is really something that has gone backwards. Yes, council is keen to work with the community, with government and with landholders, particularly through our Rural Lands Advisory Committee.

**Mr WEIR:** My question is probably to Mike. As we have been travelling around, one of the things that we have heard about is different management techniques in different areas and talk of area-wide management programs for areas such as gidgee. I do not know if I am understanding you exactly, but from what you said I take it that you are concerned that there are areas that might not be covered under your maps where gidgee is thickening and is actually detrimental to the health of the land as it stands; would that be correct?

**Councillor Pratt:** Gidgee is thickening in all of our regional ecosystems that are in the gidgee woodland belt. Our main concern, as I said before, is the actual ability to go in and thin without having infringement. That is not practical. That law is not practical in the bush. I would assume that for anybody who is attempting to thin through really thick gidgee where they cannot actually see where they are going, they are charging through because there is no option, to avoid an infringement is a big concern.

I see that as forcing people to really understand the proposed amendments to the act before they do a thin. It is going to deter a lot of people from doing what they are allowed to do, because they are terrified of making a mistake and being audited and then having to face court. Unfortunately, if only the department would go out and use the extension side to educate people, instead of saying, 'You make one mistake and you'll end up in court'. That is the part that we do not like.

**Mr MADDEN:** I thank all of the witnesses who are going to give evidence today as well as all of the people who have travelled a very long way. We very much appreciate your attendance here. My question relates to one of the recommendations that was made by the Longreach council. I think it is a very important recommendation and I will read it out. Their final recommendation is that '... local government be consulted in the preparation of acceptable development codes.' Development codes are extremely important with the self-assessment system that we have with vegetation management in Queensland, but what mechanism are you proposing for that consultation?

**Mr Smith:** With that recommendation we are basically saying that because the LGAQ is the overarching body for local government, we would work within that framework to drive our case for this individual area. The LGAQ is statewide, and there will be multiple issues across multiple areas. That was the driver for that.

**Mr BATT:** Under the current legislation area management plans have been taken up throughout Queensland. The broad-brush approach of the new bill is that it applies right across Queensland. Area management plans will be removed by March 2020, so we only have two years to go. What are your thoughts on area management plans? Do you have them here? Have you seen how they work? Do you think they should stay in the bill?

**Mr Pratt:** Area management plans have been a magnificent step forward in enabling landholders to practically and appropriately manage the situation. Desert Channels Queensland, with the help of Peter Ruth, our lab consultant here, devised the area management plan for this region which encompasses all the shires from Tambo through to Winton. That, together with self-assessable codes, was an incredibly smart move to take away a lot of the bureaucracy and paperwork and still let people—even though they still have to abide by the act—fast-track the process and get a lot of good stuff happening on the ground. It is absolutely critical that the area management plans remain. That is one of the best features of the whole act.

**Ms PUGH:** One of the things we have been hearing a lot about—especially yesterday in Cloncurry—is the lack of regional staff on the ground. That is something people have really commented on. What changes would you like to see in that space in terms of more departmental staff on the ground to support you in understanding the legislation, whatever that might be?

**Mr Pratt:** I am on the Desert Channels board as well. None of the NRM groups were consulted before all of this was put in place. Surely the NRM groups should have had some input here and they were not consulted. However, that said, I do see a role here for natural resources management groups to perhaps step into that void. They could be the extension arm of the department and maybe subcontracted to that role. There are no departmental people in Longreach and there is one in Emerald to my knowledge, so how the hell can landholders get the advice and help they need before they embark on a management plan.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Councillor Pratt, you spoke about the limited carrying capacity, and I think the example you used was one DSE per five hectares. Noting the limited scope that individuals have to utilise the thinning code as it currently stands, the response you will receive is that you can apply for a DA and go through that process. With your experience in local government in particular and as landholders, do you think that utilising the DA process is workable and feasible for individual landholders who have other competing priorities and experience?

**Mr Pratt:** I would imagine that, had they consulted before they put the 400-hectare limit on it, they would not have put that figure there. Four hundred hectares would be very applicable in more intensive grazing regions in Queensland, but out here 400 hectares is totally impractical. You could not afford to bring a machine in. The freight would kill you and it would not be economical. There are a few changes that really need to be made which are obvious, and that is one of them.

With regard to the 400-hectare minimum allowable, I know we can get a development application, but that would just further drag out the process. That is one thing that we would really like to see changed and the figure increased. It needs to be increased depending on the local region, the carrying capacity and the size of the holding that you require to make a living. If you take a broad-brush approach and make it 1,000 hectares, for example, that is not going to be suitable for other areas of the state. It needs to be in synch with the size of the holding.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Which goes to the last question in relation to area management plans; correct?

**Mr Pratt:** Correct.

**CHAIR:** The time allocated for the session has now expired. Thank you for appearing before the committee today.

**BURDEN, Mr Dominic, Chair, Desert Channels Queensland Board**

**CHAIR:** Mr Burden, would you like to begin by making a brief opening statement.

**Mr Burden:** I have a prepared statement which reflects the views of the board and our management group. Firstly, thank you very much. Desert Channels Queensland is a community based NRM group located here in Longreach. Our not-for-profit organisation's mission is to assist private landholders, local government and government agencies manage the various NRM challenges in the Queensland section of the Lake Eyre Basin.

The LEB—Lake Eyre Basin—covers 510,000 square kilometres of the state. This area hosts communities and businesses based on tourism, sheep and cattle grazing and includes national parks and national reserves. This region is dominated by seven main regional ecosystems, and I only mention this as an example of the complexity of the area which we manage: south brigalow belt; Channel Country; desert uplands; the Mount Isa inlier group; mulga lands; the Simpson-Strzelecki dunefields; and, critically, the Mitchell grass downs. The open Mitchell grass downs, along with the Channel Country, underpin the original development and ongoing sustainability of our region and our communities.

The main thrust of DCQ's recent work has been to actively assist landholders to manage their properties through on-the-ground programs involving our field teams and landholder co-investment. Since 2013, DCQ—Desert Channels Queensland—has been actively pursuing innovative techniques to control weeds, encroachment and thickening in the rangelands and has had high-intensity monitoring in place since 2014. This has culminated in our current work with Biosecurity Queensland, industry and landholders to test innovative control techniques on a larger scale.

We use folio mapping to map weed control and spreading weeds. In particular this has demonstrated the expansion and thickening of not only prickly acacia—a woody weed—but also gidgee onto the Mitchell grass downs and a range of other tree species into the desert uplands. The expansion of trees into otherwise clear country has been a consequence of a major reduction in the prevalence of fire in the landscape and an overall decline in the health of regional ecosystems as trees begin to dominate. Both habitat and production values are very limited under thickened tree cover.

We feel that the current codes are a sensible response to the issue of thickening; however, DCQ believes that geographically based area management plans are a better solution, and two have been developed by our organisation to assist in the restoration of these ecosystems to their original state. The regional AMP for thinning and encroachment predates the current codes. That is the one we talked about earlier which expires in a couple of years time. This allows for the selective clearing of thickened vegetation at a locality with the objective of restoring the regional ecosystem to its original floristic composition and density. It can be used by landholders to guide their application of thinning codes. A second AMP we have developed is used to control weeds of national significance, and that supports our ongoing work assisting landholders to manage prickly acacia and, to a lesser extent, parkinsonia infestations.

The second area management plan—the WONS plan—was amended at DCQ's request to allow DCQ to submit a clearing notification on behalf of landholders. Even though we are killing infestations of prickly acacia in the tens of thousands of hectares, we still have to put in a notification. Instead of a landholder doing that, DCQ does it on their behalf—which we can do under the WONS AMP, but not the thickening AMP. This has resulted in all of the notifications being correctly submitted and the tallies, if you are right, of prickles going down, not being picked up and misunderstood by the SLATS monitoring process. Under the WONS AMP, DCQ manages that notification process and is also involved on the ground assisting landholders to manage conditions under which the work is carried out, specifically around the safe application of herbicides and the prediction of native species.

Our experience suggests that the use of area management plans is a way forward. What we are proposing, for example, would be to modify the current outcomes-focused thinning and encroachment AMP which needs to be renewed within two years, for example, to allow third-party notifications by groups such as DCQ. If that modification was made and in addition its use in the field was facilitated and guided by good quality extension work, the outcomes could be better for all stakeholders—and I mean all stakeholders. For example, the notification of work could be submitted by a third party in compliance with the regulation, which means that there is a third local group helping to manage notifications. Work carried out by landholders could be guided by that local group which the community recognises as a partner, not a regulator. Being an outcomes based mechanism, broader community support for that mechanism could be established.

The intent of the codes and the AMPs is the recovery of regional ecosystems, and this should be the goal of all good vegetation regulation. The current codes are widely supported by the community as is but are a set of rules rather than describing an outcome the whole community seeks. By describing only the rules without identifying the grazing and ecological outcomes sought, it is difficult to achieve broad support from the community.

An outcomes based approach allows for some flexibility in achieving that goal and can produce some innovative methods for managing vegetation that cannot be achieved through prescriptive systems. The codes by themselves will not achieve the best outcomes. We believe that the codes need to be a bedrock of stability to allow industry the confidence to invest in innovation. As such, the codes need minor changes to better support innovation, focus on the sequential control of encroachment and thickening, and incorporate best pasture science which QDAF is willing and able to deliver.

**CHAIR:** Have you put this in as a submission to the committee?

**Mr Burden:** I certainly will make this available.

**CHAIR:** When you have finished, lodge it here and I am sure we will be happy to accept it as a submission.

**Mr Burden:** I will be brief. In summary, we feel a better way forward, other than that proposed by the bill you are considering, is to adopt an area management plan approach supported by extension work undertaken and supported by local NRM groups. NRM groups are well placed to assist landholders to recover these regional ecosystems. However, there needs to be a stable framework and the codes need to encourage innovation and, critically for rangelands, the sequential recovery of areas through the expansion of controlled activities.

The goal of landholders, governments, industry groups and NRM groups are aligned on this issue, particularly if the gains of the last few years can be continued through investment in extension material and on-ground effort and with support for innovative practices that have low establishment costs and performance measures aligned to the recovery of regional ecosystems. Thank you very much for your time.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Burden, for talking a bit about those innovative techniques used to control weeds. It is quite illuminating to hear that your organisation can lodge submissions or do those self-assessable submissions or approvals on behalf of your clients. To clear out gidgee and the prickly acacia from category X land, would your clients use more the encroachment code or the thinning, seeing that encroachment is designed specifically to get rid of those invasive woody weeds?

**Mr Burden:** In category X that is not really an issue. It would be the encroachment code. It depends on the situation and the landform. My point really around allowing a group such as DCQ to manage the notifications is you would not get a gap between the work that is undertaken and the notifications. My understanding is that some of the concern around thinning codes is that not all the notifications go in. If the application of the thinning codes is supported on a local basis you can take a lot of that tension out of the application of thinning codes.

**CHAIR:** There is land of category B and C and category R, riverine. That is obviously people going in there to clear gidgee under the encroachment code. Do people use that code to go into those category lands to do that as well?

**Mr Burden:** There are restrictions in riverine areas, but the applicable code depends on the landscape in which they are operating. There are so many different ones. To restore it to its original state depends on the rating of the area. My point is really around the fact that a code just put out there and not delivered with some assistance, given human nature, especially given the mechanical focus that currently dominates the clearing, because of the costs of mobilising equipment and the economies of scale by clearing on a larger scale, drives the wrong behaviour in a lot of ways. I think what the community as a whole probably needs is more often and smaller-scale work that is done on a sequential basis rather than once-off, every 20 years broadscale work. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that sequential work with a mosaic kind of outcome produces a much better ecological and more productive outcome.

**Mr WEIR:** You were talking about third-party notifications. Do you believe that that is more necessary because of the complexity of getting through the process with the changes in this legislation? In certain circumstances they have to go through a DA process, particularly in the area you are trying to work in, where you are in possibly category R or riverine systems and you are chasing the prickly acacia which you often are. How do you think that process is going to be for the average landowner to go through? Time frames are, of course, always important on these.



**Mr Burden:** I think there are a couple of things there. Given that it is a notification process, if you look at the evidence it suggests that not all the notifications go in as they should so that tells you straight away that we could improve there as a community. I think some assistance in that space would immediately make a difference and again relieve some of the tension about the way that thinning and encroachment is carried out. Let us face the facts, not everybody is equipped to understand in detail the requirements. Where that is facilitated, as it has been in our WoNS AMP, it has worked really well.

**Mr MADDEN:** My question is to do with the monitoring program for vegetation management in Queensland. It has been raised by various witnesses that the monitoring program is not adequate: working with satellites. Do you have any suggestions how that monitoring program, maybe ground-truthing, could be improved?

**Mr Burden:** Monitoring is very difficult to do on a large scale; to do it accurately and do it fairly. I think there are possibilities of monitoring not so much using satellites but using higher resolution aerial platforms. I think this can also deliver other benefits. Other than just monitoring from a regulatory point of view we could be monitoring from a positive point of view. How is the recovery of natives going in areas where prickly acacia has been eradicated? How is the groundcover going in areas that have been selectively thinned? I think having monitoring that is taking a broader approach with the view of supporting outcomes—

**Mr MADDEN:** Positive outcomes.

**Mr Burden:** Yes, positive outcomes rather than a regulatory approach, is the way forward. It establishes facts as well. I think that is really critical in that space.

**Mr BATT:** You mentioned most of the things I was going to bring up—having area management plans and also extension offices with those plans would be a great outcome—and how well your area management plans are going. Can you give any thoughts, even though your area was not consulted, as to why this bill would want to take away area management plans when they are doing such a good job and why they wouldn't be in there in two years time?

**Mr Burden:** I think, as much as all parties can do so, we need to depoliticise this. It is absolutely critical. Like so many ag issues it gets kicked around the field—18 changes to the reg since 1999. Industry groups, local government and industry are calling for innovation. Depoliticising it and setting a stable platform with an outcomes based view is critical. I think regulation is cheap, nasty government, to be honest. We need to work together on a lot of this stuff. I do not think anyone actually wants to achieve our collective outcomes through regulation. It destroys relationships rather than builds them.

I think as a state we all need to believe in agriculture and the value of the bush. I think if we can get better at setting a vision for what we want our patch of the bush to look like in 10 to 20 years for future generations and get a bit of political bravery happening and saying, 'Look, it's okay. We trust these people to get on with it. We have good guidelines in place, we have got excellent monitoring.', that is the space we need to move into, not regulation.

**Ms PUGH:** Thank you for being here today. My question is about offsets. Yesterday in Cloncurry I had a chat with a farmer after the session and he raised with me the idea of offsetting by planting more trees in an area selected by the farmer. I am interested to hear your thoughts about the viability of that as an option.

**Mr Burden:** We do not have a formal view on offsets. It works well in certain landscapes. My point would be it depends on what you are measuring. Is it hectares? If it is carbon, it has got a few knobs on it, in reality. I think it is horses for courses. We cannot treat Queensland as one big homogeneous land. They can work really well. The mining industry uses offsets well. They have high impact activities in a relatively small area; it is critical. For what is really low impact work out here I think it is different. They have their place but I would be cautious about endorsing them to be used in a blanket way.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** My question is in relation to the codes. Are you aware that the codes which have been cited as evidence as to freedoms which landholders will be able to operate within will be reviewed in the near future and do you have confidence that the review of such codes will be undertaken with the input of stakeholders on the ground who are managing gidgee, for example, and other woody weeds at this point in time?

**Mr Burden:** Because of the combativeness around this issue I do not think that the consultation that could have happened has happened. I would hope that through this committee process one of the things we are recognising is that that needs to go out the window straight away. As Councillor Pratt mentioned, local NRM groups have not really been consulted on this. It is important that is done

on a NRM group level. I would expect that as this debate matures and hopefully becomes more outcomes focused, that correct consultation can occur. Groups such as ours, such as Desert Channels, is ready and willing and located in the communities ready to be part of that consultation process.

**CHAIR:** The time for questions has expired. Thank you, Mr Burden.

**McCLYMONT, Mr Malcolm, Private capacity**

**McCLYMONT, Mr Paul, Private capacity**

**MORTON, Mr David, Private capacity**

**SIMMONS, Ms Robyn, Private capacity**

**CHAIR:** I welcome our next group of witnesses. Would you like to make a brief opening statement?

**Ms Simmons:** Good morning, Mr Chairman and members of the committee. I live on a cattle property called Avon Downs which is 150 kilometres north of Clermont. As the first landholder witness, I would like to thank you all for coming to Longreach and meeting with us. I am going to start by reading something I have prepared.

I stand here before you today as a landholder, a beef producer, an environmentalist, a businesswoman and a mother. I have no short-term political agenda. I have a generational agenda—one generation to the next. I have four children all born and bred on the land. I am very proud that my 23-year-old son and my 19-year-old son have made the decision to make their long-term futures on the land managing two of our cattle properties. I am here today to make sure they have a future on the land. I recently heard a saying, 'If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.' Today I am here to protect our rights as farmers, my family's future, the nation's ability to produce food and to protect the environment.

With an aggregation of over 200,000 hectares stretching from Emerald in the Central Highlands to Mount Coolon in the north, I feel I need to have a voice here today. As I pointed out in my submission dated 13 March, as custodians of our land we view our relationship with our properties as a perpetual association. The high cost of land has meant that individuals are rarely capable of purchasing a viable living area in one generation. Landownership passes from one generation to the next. Whilst politicians come and go from power, our association with the land continues for many generations.

For this reason, landholders are very aware of the need to have the correct balance between conservation and agricultural development. This fact is continuously overlooked by legislators who fail to understand that Australian farmers are conservationists not the environmental vandals we are so falsely accused of being.

Following on from this point, I imagine everyone here today is aware the Labor government recently launched an antibullying campaign. We pay our rates, we pay very high land rent and we abide by existing legislation. We bought our land in good faith and now we are going to be punished again. Not only do we have to bear the economic cost of proposed legislative changes, what about the emotional price farmers will have to pay? Why do you think the rate of rural suicide in 2016 was 50 per cent higher in regional areas than it was in the cities? Enough is enough. We are sick of being treated with contempt, stop the unfair laws, stop setting out to destroy us and stop bullying farmers—it is as simple as that.

**CHAIR:** Can I get you to focus on the vegetation management bill?

**Ms Simmons:** I believe these are broad issues. There are specifics that we have all heard here this morning, but this is broad reaching and these are the effects.

**CHAIR:** I understand that, but we are here to hear specific submissions on the vegetation management bill.

**Ms Simmons:** I would like to continue. I have driven 10 hours to say what I have to say.

**CHAIR:** I appreciate that.

**Ms Simmons:** Our property Avon Downs is approximately 90,000 hectares. Avon Downs is like a sump where water from a large catchment area drains onto our property. I like to use the analogy of a bath tub—fill it with water and take out the plug. Avon is where the water goes down the drain hole. We can live with this and we have learnt to manage the situation, but a large part of this management is vegetation control and achieving the correct balance between agricultural production and sustainability.

I am not going to bring up all the points in my submission, but with regard to category R regrowth I would like to make the following point. Our personal experience highlights that the introduction of this legislation has had a detrimental effect on erosion. By leaving a buffer zone along Longreach

watercourses there was increased shade, increased shade attracted animals to the area and this increased the impact of erosion because cattle and native animals camped under the trees on the gullies.

Retaining timber in other less fragile areas of the paddock is more environmentally friendly than having a high concentration of animals along the edge of watercourses. We chose to leave areas of shade in category X where it could have been cleared in order to reduce the impact of erosion. This has proven to be a more sustainable management practice than leaving timber along gullies. As landholders we want to sustain an environmentally rich, diverse ecosystem that supports cattle and native wildlife. Agricultural production and the environment can coexist. They are not diametrically opposed. In our opinion, it is all about achieving the correct balance.

As I just pointed out, I will have travelled over 10 hours to attend this meeting. In the media we are constantly hearing politicians talk about job creation. Today I am directly representing the 21 people currently living on our properties. We provide an income for these people. The proposed changes to the legislation are in direct conflict with the Queensland government's push for job creation—unfair laws, loss of production, loss of jobs. There is no science needed to work that out.

On the subject of science, as producers we are constantly being told that it has been scientifically proven that we are destroying the environment by clearing vegetation. We always hear about the thousands of football fields we clear every year, but do we ever hear about the number of trees that grow back every year? The simple answer is no because the government chooses to blatantly ignore the facts.

The Statewide Landcover and Tree Study report 2012 to 2014 showed that even with an increase in annual clearing rates there were 437 hectares more trees. The report states that 296,000 hectares were cleared but tree coverage increased almost twice the size of the ACT in three years. In the 2015-16 SLATS report, only 0.23 per cent of Queensland was cleared. That is less than a quarter of one per cent. Not only is this figure low, but it does not factor in how much vegetation grew during the same period. How can this be called science when all the data is not considered.

The government has chosen to blatantly ignore vegetation regrowth data from their own reports in order to fulfil their own political agenda. How can they value the losses without valuing the gains? As I previously stated, it is all about balance. Sadly, when the present government deals with landholders there is rarely any balance. Stop the lies and start looking at the facts.

As a landholder I feel that we are continuously defending our existence. We are constantly being judged by people who sit in front of computer screens and think they know what is best for our country and the land we live on, love and manage on a daily basis. I would like to make an analogy. How many people today have sat in front of a computer screen to buy something online, whether it be an item of clothing or even a house? I have no doubt that when you received the item or went to inspect the house the reality was very different to the image on your computer screen.

The point I am trying to make is that if you think we are environmental vandals clearing hundreds of thousands of hectares each year I would like to invite you to come and have a look at our land and our neighbour's land. There are more trees today than there were in previous years. They just keep growing. Every time we have visitors from urban areas their reaction is always the same. They are shocked that there are so many trees because of what they have heard in the press.

If the proposed legislation is introduced the rights of landholders to achieve long-term agricultural sustainability will be eroded. For Australia to successfully contribute to the increased global demand for food there needs to be less focus on short-term political agendas and more focus on the long-term viability of our nation.

In conclusion, I am simply wanting to say that we are not asking for favours, we are not asking for handouts, we are simply asking for the respect and understanding we deserve. As custodians of our land we are passionate about continuing to produce beef and conserve our environment for many generations to come. So stop the unfair laws and let us do what we do best.

**Mr M McClymont:** My property is Dalkeith west of Longreach. We have a family partnership. We have been operating as a family business for 98 years and we hope to continue. I am fortunate in that I am one of the few people in our area who has my son coming home to the farm with another generation. It is a fairly rare event now. We need to maintain our efficiency and productivity and to do that we need to keep vegetation, amongst other things, under control.

Grassland is natural. It appears to a large extent that grassland is being sacrificed to the Holy Grail of trees. We are not on catchments that flow towards the Great Barrier Reef and we have no koalas. Our major problem is gidgee trees. Gidgee trees have taken over a lot of our useful country and our efforts in tree clearing are mainly to maintain the productivity that we currently have.

We do have a PMAV over areas that were economical to clear back in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We will maintain productivity because of that process. We have thickening and encroachment in other areas. We have grave concerns about the restrictions imposed by the thickening regulations now. A major concern is with the gidgee infestation along creeks and waterways. They are producing a choking effect. They are speeding up the water flows and they are causing massive amounts of erosion. They are taking away from what was a natural mixture of grassland and coolibah trees.

We need to have continuity in the legislation. We cannot keep putting up with changes every few years. I think the loss of area management plans and high-value agriculture are all backwards steps in this proposal.

**Mr P McClymont:** When we came onto this land we removed one of the environmental factors on the land which is bushfires. We have added water. This 70,000 acres did not have a drop of permanent water on it 200 years ago. The number of native animals has vastly increased. We have also brought on sheep and cattle. That has changed things, there is no denying that. That just means that we have to manage those changes and we have to be allowed to manage those changes. Not all of them have been for the good, but we can manage them.

I am talking here specifically about our circumstances. We are not trying to change the land. We are not trying to turn it into urban developments or cotton fields. We are not treating it like a coalmine. We are trying to maintain the land as it was a generation ago, 100 years ago and 200 years ago. We are not changing anything. We are trying to maintain it as it was and as it always has been. We have brought stock on and we have changed the cycles of the land, but locking the trees up is not going to maintain pre-European cycles on that land. It has to be managed. It is a fragile ecosystem. It has to be managed very carefully. It has to be run very conservatively.

I do not believe we can manage the laws the way they are now. We have had DNR representatives at home to show them the changes that are happening, particularly in the most fragile ecosystems—our flood plains, our waterways, our encroachment country. So far it has been for nothing. We really feel that without the ability to make our own judgements year by year on how to best care for our land, we are getting into a situation where some of these processes and some of these systems are going to be changed irreversibly.

It is a low-production landscape. We do not push it hard. We look after it, but it is also a low-return landscape. We are fairly limited in how much money we can throw at looking after this country. It is getting to a point now where, if we are restricted in what we can do and what we have to do for much longer, we are going to get to a point where we cannot afford to go back and fix them later on. This is not something that we can try out now and if it is not working 30 years down the track we can come back to it. We are going to be in big trouble by then. We are not knocking down trees for a quick dollar. We are doing it when needed in response to the visible effects within the ecosystem and with a view to a multigenerational plan. We are looking 50 years, 100 years down the track. That is pretty much it.

I will go back to a point that Jess raised earlier regarding carbon offsets. What is getting lost quite a lot in this debate is that we are talking about encroachment of gidgee and thickening gidgee on grasslands. The second greatest carbon sinks on the planet are the grasslands and we are simply trying to maintain that. We could look at carbon offsets. They are not viable in our country at the moment the way the carbon market is. We could look at that and we could sequester the carbon in trees for 50 or 60 years until they are mature and that rate of sequestration slows down. We are really more interested in maintaining those grasslands, which are the greatest sinks available to us. Thank you.

**Mr Morton:** Good morning. I am a producer from the Isisford region. Thank you for letting me have a say this morning. I would like to speak specifically more on the management of thickened immature gidgee. When I first wrote my submission, I was working under a code on the management of thickening. I did my submission on that and then on the weekend I found out that that code had changed, which changed my submission a bit.

I will continue to the extent that I believe that it is of utmost importance that we be able to continue to manage the thickening of gidgee problem. Thickening gidgee woodland ecosystems in some areas of the Mitchell Grass Downs is a serious problem as it has become so thick that it is now a monoculture of immature gidgee, seriously threatening the biodiversity of vegetation and animal life. The land is becoming degraded in these ecosystems.

Immature gidgee thickening and encroachment in 4.3.20 and 4.3.8 ecosystems along watercourses is causing problems, as thickening of immature gidgee along creeks is killing coolibah, dogwood, bluebush, lignum and sandalwood and therefore, once again, upsetting the balance of the

ecosystem. Because no grasses or herbage grow where immature gidgee is thick, the soil is left bare so erosion and silting becomes a serious problem. Thirty-five years ago the watercourses here were reasonably open, with coolibah and dogwood and the odd mature gidgee scattered along the banks with the bluebush and lignum grasses growing along the channels. Now, in places immature gidgee is taking over and choking out the other species. There are photos of those watercourses that show that.

On page 9 of the *Accepted development vegetation clearing code—managing thickened vegetation* under clause 1.3, 'Objective', the first four dot points state—

- restoration of regional ecosystems to their typical floristic composition and range of densities
- prevention of land degradation
- restoration and maintenance of ecological processes and biodiversity
- maintenance of bank stability, water quality and habitat of wetland, watercourse and drainage features

With counts of immature trees in the ecosystem on this property as high as 6,250 and with a count of mature trees, which are now all dead, of 300 per hectare, if we are not able to manage this problem all 4.9.11 and 4.9.16 areas will become a worthless monoculture of immature gidgee as mature gidgee, sandalwood, false sandalwood and boonoroo dies and ground bushes, herbage and grasses no longer exist, which is contrary to the objective. It is paramount that a balance be struck to maintain a healthy biodiversity in this bioregion. It is of the utmost importance that ongoing management be allowed to continue to maintain a healthy and biodiverse ecosystem.

With the density of the immature trees in 4.9.11 and 4.9.16 and not being able to manage the problem, it affects the productivity of the property as stock cannot use this area. Therefore, it decreases the carrying capacity and valuation of the property. On my own property, I believe that the loss of production due to the reduction of its carrying capacity is in the vicinity of \$40,000 per year.

I have measured and marked the GPS at five different sites around the property where immature thickening is becoming a problem. The average count of the immature gidgee from these sites is 4,540 per hectare. On the first page of the photos, you will have a photo where there is no thickening and I think that we had a density of 160 mature trees and that bottom photo, working on the number of dead trees, it used to be a similar density of mature trees. There are 5,000 immature trees there.

The last point is about the guidelines for thinning. It is important that, instead of having set numbers of trees that we have to weed per hectare of immature stuff, I think that we should be able to take it back to what that country was originally for the biodiversity of the country. With the guidelines for thinning, I believe that the gidgee woodlands and the Mitchell Grass Downs should have different guidelines for the management of it, because of the invasive nature of this plant and how it is seriously damaging the biodiversity of the ecosystems.

A specific point here is that, in this low rainfall area, the criteria that an immature tree must be two metres in height before it can be counted is too high. Where these seedlings are very thick, it can take up to 40 or 50 years for them to reach that height. When I first went to the property 37 years ago, they were probably about two feet high then. That is a long time for that country to be in that state.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Morton. We are about to run out of time.

**Mr Morton:** Can I say about three more words?

**CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr Morton:** On the retention of category X, going back to remnant after 15 years is the same deal in this low rainfall. I believe that, in 15 years, with some of that country that was pulled, it is not viable to pull it within that 15-year period because it is still too small to get a successful treatment of it. Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Simmons we have talked a bit about codes today. We have heard a bit about how codes will continue. Obviously, there will be a review of the codes as part of this process. Of the 11 codes available, what do you use when you want to do work in your category R land?

**Ms Simmons:** On our category R land, we do not use any codes. We just do what we are told. We leave a buffer of 50 metres because we have to.

**CHAIR:** You have a continuous ribbon of vegetation of 50 metres, or does your workable land go down closer than 50 metres to banks?

**Ms Simmons:** At this stage, we just clear it according to our PMAV. Yes, we have buffer zones on any land that we have cleared recently. The problem with that is, while that is not so bad along major watercourses, where you also have gullies, that is where it becomes a huge problem—where you have a lot of gullies. You can economically fence off major watercourses but when there are lots of minor gullies, that is when it is a problem, because trees are left there and it is a more fragile environment. You do not want animals camping there causing erosion.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much.

**Mr MILLAR:** I would like to thank everybody for coming along. Your passion is fantastic, because that is what it is about. Area management plans are proposed to expire in 2020. Could you say that you are frustrated, angry and concerned that that is happening when a community based management approach has clearly been working for so long?

**Ms Simmons:** I am assuming—

**Mr MILLAR:** Anybody can answer that question.

**Mr M McClymont:** I could not really say firsthand. We do not have an area management plan in our area.

**Mr Morton:** The area that I did under encroachment of thickening under the area management plan I found that fairly reasonable and we can live with that. I believe that, for the control of this thickening, especially of the gidgee, it is of the utmost importance that we have a workable plan that makes it easy for people to understand. The way it has been explained to me now, there are some problems because, if you go into doing encroachment in an area where it is a mixed area of 4.9.7 and 4.9.16, that 4.9.16 area cannot be treated as an encroachment; it can be only treated as thinning. Because it is a mixed area, you have to be very careful that you do not block over a 4.9.16. It makes it difficult to be able to do it from on the land. This is probably where the argument for more extension officers comes in, too.

**Mr MADDEN:** I would like to thank the witnesses for coming in, particularly the ones who have travelled a long distance. The question that I would like to ask is really an open question for all of you. Mr McClymont and Ms Simmons have raised the issue of the importance of the self-assessment codes. I would like to know how the self-assessment codes and the PMAVs have changed how you manage your properties. Could you mention that?

**Ms Simmons:** PMAVs have been a really great tool for us to be able to manage our properties. When you look at land to purchase or you have to approach the bank, the PMAV is an integral tool, because you can forward plan. If you do not have it, you have no economic security. It is vital, otherwise you just do not know where you stand.

**Mr MADDEN:** And the codes?

**Ms Simmons:** On the codes, I am probably better to hand over to someone else, so I will do that.

**Mr M McClymont:** With the codes, the infrastructure code is very useful, because there is certain essential maintenance work that you have to do—clearing fence lines, firebreaks, what have you—and you can just go ahead and do it. You read the code, this is what you can do, go ahead and do it.

Avoiding unnecessary paperwork is very important. Not only does it save us a lot of time, but also it saves the department a heap of time. One of the big problems before the codes came in was that every little action took a mountain of paperwork from us and a mountain of paperwork from the DNR. They could not cope, so it took us ages to get a response back. When you wanted to do something, it did not mean to say that it was going to happen then; it could have been months later. The codes have been a very big step forward and they should be retained.

Going back to Lachlan's question on the area management, while we do not actually have an area management plan in our particular area, it is not to say that they are not a worthwhile way of, again, avoiding that implication and avoiding a whole heap of excess paperwork, because the plan has been done and everybody knows where they stand. They definitely need to be kept in the new legislation.

**Mr KATTER:** The question I have is on the area management plans. They seem to be talked about a lot and they seem like a good way forward. I do not know who is the most appropriate to answer this question. Is there a requirement for that to be enshrined in legislation or just incorporated as best practice? Certainly it seems like a way forward. My view is that the existing laws are doing a Longreach

very good job of restricting development everywhere at the moment, so we want a practical way forward to allow us to do the job properly. Is there a requirement for the area management plan to be enshrined in legislation or are they just a best practice?

**Mr Morton:** I think it is best practice. I am not sure on that, Rob. If I was working under the Desert Channels one, that is where it was and we were able to do it. With the change to self-assessable, that did free it up a lot, to be able to achieve what we had to. However, with that area management plan that came in, it still allowed us to do what we needed to do.

**CHAIR:** Did you want to comment on that, Mr McClymont?

**Mr M McClymont:** I do have a short comment on the clearing restrictions in creek lines. I have some photos here. Unfortunately, I did not duplicate them, but I can hand you this copy to pass along. I have numbered the photos so that you can see the effects.

**CHAIR:** Do you want to lodge that with the committee as supporting documentation? Do you want to leave that with us?

**Mr M McClymont:** Yes, that can stay. That is a copy of the submission that you already have.

**CHAIR:** Okay.

**Mr M McClymont:** You can see the photos first-hand. Photo No. 1 is a photo of a creek where we have not actually cleared gidgee. You can see where it has narrowed the water flows down into sharp-edged channels and it is causing erosion.

No. 2 photo is a bit further downstream where we have cleared and you can see the grass is taking over, it is spreading the water out, slowing it down and creating less erosion.

No. 3 photo on the list shows, once the grass is fully established, the water flow is almost totally restricted and the erosion has been reduced to virtually nothing. We would prefer it to be Mitchell grass than buffel grass, but buffel grass we could get in there quickly to get it going and certainly it has done the job.

No. 6 photo on the list—the last one—shows the creek lines as they ought to be with coolabah trees and grass down the embankments. This is a major creek. The preceding two photos show where gidgee is infesting on the outside of that creek and causing additional channels, to the extent that, with one of them, it is actually eroding around the roots of the gidgee trees themselves.

Therefore, the restrictions on clearing in riparian areas and creek lines really need to be adjusted so that we can maintain creeks as in that last photo. You cannot have a blanket brake on clearing within the creek lines. They need to be managed just as much as any of the other country needs to be managed.

**Ms PUGH:** My question is to Mr Morton. Can you outline for me how the new legislation will affect you being able to clear gidgee? We had a good look at it yesterday at Cloncurry. Thank you for the photos, which are very helpful, and it is good that we have seen it on the ground as well, literally. Can you outline that for me?

**Mr Morton:** Probably the biggest thing is that, when you were treating thickened gidgee, and I was speaking mainly on the thickening code, before when you went through you had to leave—I forget exactly—five or seven immature trees for each mature tree, and the same for mature dead trees. Now, if you go through and clear, it depends on the group—and I forget the specific word. It is either very sparse, sparse or mid dense. That determines how many immature trees you have to leave. In the sparse, which a lot of the gidgee country is, you have to leave 300 immature. In those photos, you will see there is an area there with only 165 mature trees, but after you finish you have to leave 300. I find a problem with that.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** My question is to Ms Simmons. In your submission, you talk about the fact that currently you have about 5,000 acres of forage sorghum in each year and you use that as a means to bridge the protein gap. You talked about the fact that that results in better animal welfare outcomes and also better business viability. With the removal of those high-value agriculture and irrigated high-value agriculture provisions in this legislation, if you could do what you do now—and I guess my question is for those who do not already have an area of cultivation where they could do what you are doing—what would that mean for your business? What would it mean if you did not have that forage sorghum as it sits right now?

**Ms Simmons:** It means instead of being able to drought proof our property, we would be looking for government handouts in a drought, which is exactly what we are trying not to do. By doing that, we can grow forage sorghum, we can cut it as hay, we can put it in the shed and save it for a later date. As all farmers know, no matter how well you plan and you manage your property, the one



thing you can guarantee is a drought. If we can continue to develop high-value agriculture, not only will it help the bottom line of the Queensland government with us calling for help; it helps us, it helps the economy and it stops starving cattle dying. There is nothing worse than going out and shooting dying cows. It is vital. There are limited resources and there is a small percentage of agricultural areas that have suitable terrain and soil. We need to be able to develop those if we can.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I have a very quick follow-up question: does the forage sorghum and the ability that you talk about to drought proof your property reduce the pressure, from an ecological perspective, on the rest of your block, because you have that capacity?

**Ms Simmons:** It certainly does, to a very large extent.

**CHAIR:** The time for questions has expired. Thank you to the panel.

**CHANDLER, Mr John, private capacity**

**CURRIE, Mr Bruce, private capacity**

**PARKER, Ms Elisha, private capacity**

**WHIP, Mr Peter, private capacity**

**CHAIR:** We have 20 minutes, so we will have brief statements for 10 minutes and then 10 minutes of questions.

**Mr Chandler:** Thank you for coming to Longreach. It is all too short. The number of people in the room today is an indication of the feeling, the anger, the frustration and the fear around this vegetation management issue. My name is John Chandler. I represent a family from south of Barcaldine. We own and manage 40,000-odd hectares on three properties. I have two married sons in the business. They have seven children between them. Those grandchildren of mine are sixth generation out here. Two of my grandfathers were out here in the 1890s. I know you said before you did not want any emotional talk and to stick to the codes—

**CHAIR:** Emotion is fine.

**Mr Chandler:** I have come with no submission. I have just put my name down, because I want to tell you what the people behind me are feeling. We have a PMAV. That has been a blessing. It has given us security and peace of mind. It is an important part of our ownership. Although you took away our freehold privileges—not you, but the previous government did that when they introduced the vegetation management restrictions on remnant timber—we have a fair area of remnant timber left that is now thickening like you would not believe. I have 1950 aerial photos that show how open the country was. Previous speakers like Mike Pratt talked about the dead trees through the environment: dead blackwood, dead gidgee, dead ghost gums. You only have to go down the Blackall-Barcaldine stock route and look at how thick that is and how many dead trees there are.

I want to talk about what clearing has done for us. It took the property we bought originally from running 3,000 sheep in the 1960s and a herd of 30 milking cows to running 3,000 cattle in this recent drought—six years we have had. That is all because of improving it, growing buffel grass and running polythene around the country.

My sons are well educated, they are articulate, they cannot be here today, but they believe in the future of the bush and they believe in the future of agriculture. However, we are being hampered so much by regulation, red tape and trying to follow the changes in these rules that involve people sitting in our office, studying them. If it was not for people like Peter Whip who help us interpret it. We have an area management plan in place. I still do not understand what you are going to do to that.

Our biggest concern is thickening and encroachment on our downs country. It has gone from being beautiful open Mitchell grass, Flinders bluegrass country, with a lot of herbage, to absolutely growing no grass under boree and gidgee thickening like you would not believe. Not only that, we have built 70 kilometres of fence around this at great expense. We spent \$800,000 in the past two years, trying to manage this resource that we own and we are trying to hang on to, battling weeds like you would not believe that have come into the country in recent times.

Something that has not been discussed here today and is very seldom spoken about is the increased temperature and carbon dioxide that leads to this carbon fertilisation that I have witnessed in my life. It has created the environment for the thickening and the increase in weeds that we have never seen or heard of on our country, like florestina and even parkinsonia and mimosa. The country is being degraded and we need to be able to keep it open. We need to be able to thin it. We need to be able to control the encroachment.

That was a very passionate speech from Ms Simmons. She was fantastic. She is a great example of what we should be listening to. Peter will be able to embellish what I talk about in relation to the aerial management plan. Thank God he has turned up because I don't know much about that, but can I hand it to Peter?

**CHAIR:** We might go to Mr Currie first and then we will go to Mr Whip.

**Mr Chandler:** In summary, thank you for coming to Longreach. Please do not just vote on party lines on this. If you have got any courage, cross the floor because it means so much to the bush, you wouldn't believe it.

**CHAIR:** I appreciate that, thank you.

**Mr Currie:** Thank you, Mr Chairman, and committee. I am from a different bioregion to most of your speakers today. I have a brief statement. I am from the Desert Uplands Bioregion. Biodiversity is extremely important for the production of our extensive beef cattle operations. Trees are an important part of that biodiversity and they are an integral part of our mineral cycle. In the right balance in our bioregion they maximise ground cover. Once the trees exceed that balance their canopy prevents daylight reaching the ground cover plants thus stopping photosynthesis causing the ground cover to die out. The increased density of the trees is such that it also stunts their own growth thus creating a monoculture of woody weeds.

The loss of ground cover creates erosion and destroys the effective mineral cycle. Our concern is that because we are in a very low production area we need to have legislation that is outcomes based. We need more economical methods to retain our biodiversity and reduce the woody weeds. I am situated on top of the Great Dividing Range and our water runs not only to the reef but also to Lake Eyre and erosion is a big concern for us. We need some way of economically retaining our ground cover. Thank you.

**Mr Whip:** I would like to say thank you for coming out so that we can have a chance to have some input. A couple of things if I can, probably some big picture stuff and some smaller detailed type stuff. The big issue I suppose with the codes is that when we try to apply a rule for the whole of the state I think that is when we really get into trouble because our state is so diverse, our ecosystems are so different. There are a couple of things in the code that I can see that illustrate that.

One is the five-metre rule for thinning. That might be really applicable, say, in the Central Highlands or in the rainforest or something like that, but with gidgee, and we have heard it talked about, that 4.3.8 gidgee on alluvial plains, basically, if you leave a five-metre buffer around a mature gidgee tree, from the photos you have seen how thick it gets, you are guaranteeing that you will kill that tree in about 10 years. That mature tree will be killed by that encroaching gidgee. To leave that five-metre buffer is actually completely counterintuitive to what you are trying to achieve in this sort of ecosystem. I am not saying that is across the board, but for gidgee in alluvials definitely that is a serious issue; that five-metre rule will actually be completely counterintuitive to what we all want to achieve there.

The other issue I suppose is in terms of area management plans. I helped DCQ put the aerial management plan together and it was a totally community based development process. We involved the department, we had the natural resource management groups, we had landholders on the ground, and we looked at actually what is going on and can we tailor that plan to actually really nail the issues. Rather than have the big blanket sort of approach for the whole state, our area management plan is designed for the Mitchell Grass Bioregion and it is designed to deal with the issues that we see.

For example, there is a code there, 4.3.23. I think Mike might have mentioned it. It is not in any of the codes anywhere, in thinning or encroachment, and yet it is one of the major regional ecosystems that experiences thinning/encroachment. It is alluvial boree on alluvial plains, and nearly everywhere you go it will be completely choked up and yet it is not in any of the codes this time. It is a real gap, those sorts of things. It is really important, the aerial management plan.

The other issue with having thinning in the development application process is that my understanding is for a development application normally you are building something, you are constructing something, you are changing something, but for thinning and encroachment you are actually just maintaining what was there. I think that is it totally inappropriate to have that in a development application process because it is actually a maintenance job that you are doing, it is not a new development process. It is not like broadscale clearing or something like that. I think it is completely inappropriate to have it in that development application process.

**Ms Parker:** I will not go over what I have already presented to you before, but thank you for the opportunity to speak again today. I thought I would briefly cover off on a couple of summarising points. I think overall this legislation, as I mentioned the other day, is not going to achieve its intended purposes. The introduction of the high-value agriculture and the irrigated high-value agriculture provisions which deletes those as a relevant purpose under a development application is going to bring an end to expansion of the horticulture industry which is astounding for Queensland.

I think the introduction of the extra catchments to be affected with the 50-metre regrowth control along watercourses is not only going to not achieve its purposes, it is going to increase erosion. There are changes to the codes. The fodder code has been abolished; there is an interim code in place. The new code is apparently going to be done in consultation with stakeholders, which I would probably suggest is going to be the CSIRO and the Queensland Herbarium not us sitting here today so we cannot comment on that anyway.

The removal of the thinning code, whilst it is going to be introduced with some new restrictions which are definitely not good, it is simply really making that process a harder administrative process and we have to apply for a development application rather than doing it under the self-assessable code.

The essential habitat map, there is probably a lot of people sitting in this room today with a PMAV thinking that they are probably not too badly affected by some of these changes. I would like to encourage everybody to have a look at Queensland Globe tonight and realise that the essential habitat layer does actually affect your PMAV. Anybody in the public with anecdotal or no evidence or suspected evidence can nominate a new threatened or a threatened species sighting and that is applied to your PMAV. I would also like to mention that the increase in penalties in the act really paints a picture that we are doing the wrong thing out here and we are not. It is just unfair the way that that is being done.

Lastly, I would like to make a point that this legislation has been desktop based. The CSIRO and the Queensland Herbarium have been consulted but largely this is based on desktop data, scientific data, satellite imagery which has been proven to be wrong time and time again on all of our properties. We are here today to tell you what is happening on the ground, what we see, what we know and what is actually happening. I really hope that you have listened to us today and that when you consider these provisions and report back on 23 April that you consider what we are telling you is actually the case. Thank you.

**Mr MADDEN:** This is a question that I put to the Longreach council. It is what you just spoke about, Ms Parker: the issue of the base data that we are using. You spoke about the deficiencies in it. What I would like to talk about and get input from all of the panel on is how that could be improved. One of the suggestions from Desert Channels was we rely on satellite data and we should be using aerial data because it is more accurate. I would like you all to comment on that, just to guide the committee.

**CHAIR:** Two people.

**Mr MADDEN:** Maybe Ms Parker can have another crack and, Mr Whip, you spoke very well about that.

**Mr Whip:** SLATS does the job of monitoring, but I think there is a big gap between that and how that then is applied. I have had people ring and say they have rung up and picked up that they have pulled 11 hectares and yet they have been to places where there are thousands of acres that have been pulled, it shows up on the SLATS data but it has never been raised as an issue. I do not think the monitoring is so much the problem, it is something that is happening between the monitoring and how that is applied and I think it is to do with the computer analysis of that data that comes in.

**Ms Parker:** I have two brief points on that. I think, yes, what we have talked about time and time again is that the satellite imagery can be wrong. It has been wrong on our property. We have had parkinsonia, which is a Weed of National Significance, being incorrectly mapped and at the end of the day the cost of ground-truthing this and fixing the mapping comes at the cost of the landholder. We cannot recoup this. As I mentioned to you in Rockhampton, I had friends there that day in the room who spent \$130,000 having their PMAVs ground-truthed. It has taken two and a half years. They are still not approved. They still cannot clear regrowth that was incorrectly mapped and they cannot recoup that cost and that falls on us. There needs to be some improvement in the mapping. When I was on Queensland Globe a couple of nights ago our property was missing a shed that has been there for some time. It is so out of date. It needs fixing.

**Mr WEIR:** That was the point I was going to. It has been some time since PMAVs have been done. Do you think there should be a review of those PMAVs? Maybe that could be area to area because we are hearing stories about the thickening particularly in some of those areas of category R and problems that are evolving there. How do you overcome that problem? Is it through mapping?

**Mr Currie:** Thank you for the question. In our situation it has to be outcomes based because we are being accused of causing run-off to the reef but unless we can reinstate our ground cover actually you are causing the problem because you cannot give me an economical way. We are in a low production area in the Desert Uplands so we need to have a very efficient way of reinstating our ground cover to stop that erosion, as you have heard today from a number of speakers. That is our situation. You have to be outcomes based in our case.

**Mr Chandler:** Bear a thought for the contractors in this debate who have spent so much on outlaying capital to build thinning bars and move families to towns where there is work. It costs so much to move their tractors around and the work is becoming smaller and smaller jobs as people are scared of doing what they thought they were going to do. These people are just as important in these communities as the owners of the land. They are represented here today but not able to speak.

**Mr Whip:** We all acknowledge the mapping is atrocious and it is probably not going to change, I don't think. The previous self-assessable codes allowed an individual landowner to say this is obviously mapped incorrectly, there are boree trees here and it is mapped as an area that doesn't have boree trees. That code allowed you to treat that as it was rather than as it was mapped provided you kept evidence: photos and GPS points. To me that is a sensible approach, if we can actually say it is wrong and it is clearly wrong. That fits for our region out here. That is not going to fit on the highlands. It needs to be designed more specifically for different regions. I think that is a good way of dealing with it.

**Mr BATT:** We have heard how well AMPs are working and that we do need to work on a regional basis rather than on a statewide basis. What are your thoughts on getting regional staff out here again and how important that is to you—extension officers and education officers for each of the regions in Queensland.

**Mr Whip:** I think it is really critical. It definitely makes a difference. What Desert Channels did with their area management plan was a series of field day workshops. They had departmental staff, they had NRM people there, they actually had contractors there with dozers doing it on the day and that was a huge tool to really educate people to say well that is what you can do, that is what you cannot do, and we had departmental staff there to say well look that is why that is important, that is a habitat tree, that is why we want to keep them. To me, that collaborative approach works really well. That was when we weren't fearing the penalty breathing down our neck. To me we really have to get back to where we actually do that practical hands-on, this is what you can do, this is what you cannot do. People went away from those workshops and field days and knew exactly what they could or could not do.

**Ms Parker:** What we need to do is ground-truth the whole of Queensland but the size of that project is astronomical. On that note, having more extension staff I think, to give an indication. I have friends who have blade ploughed land that has been now marked category R, whether we have misunderstood the legislation or whether that is a mapping error needs to be proven. That is going to be at a cost to them. The essential habitat map has gone from 2.7 million hectares to 4.8 million hectares since the introduction of this bill. If we were to all ground-truth that you can imagine the cost. I think if we could introduce more extension officers and staff we could do that process and help alleviate the cost to landowners.

**CHAIR:** Mr Chandler, what you said about certainty is very important to ensure the long-term sustainability of economies and communities here. Long-term confidence that things will not change will be very important; have I got that right? That is one of the things that I want to take back to the minister.

**Mr Chandler:** Yes. Thank you.

**Mr MILLAR:** I want to go to the question of trusting the science. Looking at woody vegetation clearing, the SLATS report suggests there was just under 400,000 hectares of vegetation cleared. Out of that just over 100,000 of remnant vegetation was cleared, which represents 0.23 per cent of vegetation in Queensland. Do you think that we should be saying to the people who are making these laws down south, 'Allow us to continue with our code assessable requirements and our area mapping and trust the science'?

**Mr Whip:** One of the big issues I have is that the SLATS data is also picking up encroachment and thinning. When you pull up the SLATS data it is pulling up encroachment and thinning as remnant clearing. That is completely wrong. It is about maintaining the ecosystem. Even environmentalists who understand western ecosystems will acknowledge that we probably do need to thin those ecosystems to maintain habitat trees to maintain mature trees, otherwise we will lose them. When we look at the science I think that really has to be pulled out, because I am 100 per cent sure that that data is not accurate in terms of the total picture. If we take out thinning and encroachment, that should not be included in the clearing of remnant vegetation. That is just a maintenance process.

**Mr KATTER:** Just to give the committee a bit of an idea of the historical context around this whole issue of vegetation management, I am sure that 30 or 40 years ago there were a large number of contractors and the landscape looked a lot different. Now you are talking about spending \$120,000 to lock PMAVs in and all of these costs. To the layperson it looks like it is already so onerous and the landscape has changed dramatically. You are very restricted with what you can do now and very limited. Can you give us an idea of what it was like 20 or 30 years ago compared to what you are dealing with now? It seems to me that there are already very onerous laws there to restrict what you are doing.

**Mr Currie:** Our situation is that we have not been on this place that long, so that is why I think you have to revert to an outcomes based situation. If you are getting run-off to the reef and you are blaming the landowners and we are not allowed to re-establish our ground cover because of the woody weed thickening, we have been restricted by legislation from achieving what we want to achieve. In our case it has to be an outcomes based situation because we do not have the historical data. You could look back in time and say there were only so many trees because fire has been taken out of the equation. I think somebody already highlighted the way we manage our country.

What does the committee want the whole thing to look like at the end of the day? If we cannot agree on that, then that has to be dealt with. When we know what you want the landscape to look like, you have to let us achieve it in the way that is most economical and effective. Pulling a six-metre bar behind my dozer is not economical in my country: I need two dozers and a chain. That is the only way I can economically do it. If you do not let me, do not blame me for run-off to the reef or Lake Eyre. You did it; you are stopping me. I need to reinstate my biodiversity, and that will increase my production. Trees are very important in my landscape. They are a big part of my minerals cycle, but if I cannot maintain it then I am just creating a monoculture. I need to have that flexibility. Give me an outcome and we can talk about how we can get there.

**Mr Chandler:** You are right, Robbie. The changing landscape meant that when we cleared it originally for \$20 an acre you got a long period without regrowth, high productivity, vigour in the soil and buffel grass jumped out of the ground; pulled it again for \$10 an acre; pulled it again for \$10 an acre. In a much shorter time the regrowth has been coming back much more quickly. We raked it to clean it up and finally we have ploughed it and spent another \$65 an acre on this country. Looking through into the country that is not on the PMAV that has not been pulled, it is just getting thicker and thicker. On the open downs country, the natural country, it is being encroached by the weeds I was talking about. It is a changing landscape that is taking more than just a bit of management.

**Mr Whip:** I suppose, Robbie, the landscape is always changing. We have the Isisford-Arrilalah Road, which used to be the old Cobb & Co coach road through there, and it looks like those photos that were put up there. You can still find where it went, but you cannot ride a four-wheeler through it let alone a stagecoach. In terms of that, it is changed. Most people tell me that the thickening really started to be noticeable from the 1950s onwards, and then in the 1970s and the 1990s with every really big sustained wet event that is where we get that thickening. I think it has changed dramatically probably from the 1950s to now.

**CHAIR:** The time allocated for this session has now expired. I have been asked to remind all visitors to the Stockman's Hall of Fame to please sign the register of attendance before you leave. I have also been asked to advise you that there will be smoko outside as well when we are finished, so I think we are all looking forward to that. We will be around to have a chat to you. Thank you to all of our witnesses for their appearance at today's hearing on the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018. Thank you to our secretariat and thank you very much to Hansard. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's website in due course. I declare the hearing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 10.07 am.**