

SUBMISSION TO:

Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018

SUBMISSION COVER SHEET

The closing date for written submissions is 12:00pm, Thursday 22 March 2018.

Please complete and submit this form with your submission to:

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Committee Secretary

State Development, Natural Resources
and Agricultural Industry Development
Committee

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SUBMISSION

Cotton Australia provides this submission on rejection of the changes proposed in the Vegetation Management (Reinstatement) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 (“the Bill”).

This constant change in legislation severely impacts on the ability of farm managers to plan and implement effective long-term property and business management decisions. Ecological processes work in much longer timeframes and can be severely compromised when mismatching regulations are enforced. Farmers have long called for certainty with the vegetation management regulatory framework. Cotton Australia is totally opposed to continued uncertainty and attacks on the viability of farming and the long-term sustainability of the cotton industry and the wider farming sector in Queensland.

The impacts of the proposed changes to the Vegetation Management Act include;

-) The purpose for High Value Agriculture and Irrigated High Value Agriculture will be removed.
-) Extends Category B areas (remnant vegetation) and Category C (regrowth vegetation) to freehold land, and indigenous freehold land. Additional 862 000ha High Value Regrowth and water course buffers to all reef catchment, Burnett Mary, Fitzroy, Eastern Cape York.
-) Thinning will require Development Application to be lodged for approval.
-) The purpose for High Value Agriculture and Irrigated High Value Agriculture will be removed.

Describe the impacts the changes will make to stall agriculture, discourage investment, and increase costs and time to manage vegetation.

Cotton Australia is the key representative body for Australia’s cotton growing industry, supporting about 1,200 cotton farming families in NSW, Queensland and now into Victoria. These 152 Australian regional communities produce around 3.8 million bales from across the 473,000 hectares of growing area. In 2016/17 the Australian cotton crop was worth \$2.3 billion to the Australian economy. Approximately one third of the crop is grown in Queensland, primarily in Central Queensland, Burnett, Darling Downs, Balonne and Border Rivers. However, there is room for significant expansion particularly in Central and Northern Queensland.

Cotton Australia endorses the separate submission being provided by the Queensland Farmers Federation (QFF). As the cotton industry’s peak body and a QFF member we would also like to take this opportunity to provide a few additional comments.

Cotton Australia opposes the Bill simply because it will limit the expansion of economically significant agricultural land in Queensland.

The proposed changes come at a time when global demand for our great food and fibre has never been higher (ABARES 2016 statistics found in 2015–16 the gross value of Australian agriculture to be \$58.1 billion).

If introduced, these laws will significantly limit opportunities for new agricultural development in Queensland where regional communities are in desperate need of investment to ensure their future viability.

When the equivalent of this Bill was introduced in 2016 Cotton Australia opposed it, but made it clear that it believed there was room for a sensible and rational renegotiation of Queensland's Native Vegetation laws. It was, and remains Cotton Australia's view that there is a sensible middle ground, that would protect Queensland's environmental values, while allowing for sensible development where there was a compelling social and economic case.

Such an outcome had the potential to stop the long running game of "legislative football", where native vegetation laws bounce from the left to the right and back again with every change of government.

Unfortunately, the political climate of the time did not allow for such a renegotiation, and we are left again with legislation which may suit a particular ideological view, but will not serve Queensland well in the long-term.

Cotton Australia is not seeking wholesale change to this legislation, but strongly believes that there must be some avenue to allow for the further development of agriculture (at a scale less than a State Significant Project) where there is a compelling social and economic case, and the environmental impacts are managed.

In the past this was achieved through the High Value Agricultural Land and the High Value Irrigated Agricultural Land provisions.

Cotton Australia calls on the government to include an avenue that would allow approval of applications where there is a significant benefit to a community, a region or the State as a whole.

This could range from clearing less than 5 hectares for a high value horticultural development, to significantly greater areas for a broadacre irrigation development that may be associated with projects such as releasing additional water in catchments such as the Flinders and the Gilbert.

A balanced approvals process can be regulated and should be stringent, and set a test for social and economic benefits, as well as any environmental impacts.

It is disappointing that in drafting this Bill the Government appears to have given little or no consideration to the wider social and economic implications. There are many communities in Queensland that will be negatively impacted by these changes and they have a right to be told what cost this legislation will have on them.

Cotton Australia fully support the Qld Governments efforts to release additional water in catchments like the Flinders and Gilbert, and it would be timely for this committee to take evidence from these communities as to the impact this legislation will have on proposed development.

Cotton Australia acknowledges that in many cases this water may be utilised on land already cleared, or still permitted for clearing, but the State would be short sighted not to maintain an option that would allow high returning development on land that would otherwise not be allowed to be cleared, if that high level of return in proportion to environmental loss can be demonstrated.

Cotton Australia would like to point out that in the time period from 2013 – 2018 only 5,500ha was

developed under the IHVAL purpose.

Cotton Australia would also like to call on the Queensland Government to greatly improve the level of information and statistics around land clearing, regrowth, and change in land use away from agriculture into uses such as resource extraction, solar farms, urban development etc.

In addition, the statistic should clearly demonstrate the amount of native vegetation clearing that is undertaken for reasons other than agriculture.

We are concerned that the focus has always been on vegetation clearing rates, and has not acknowledged the real net change of native vegetation in Queensland, with significant areas of regrowth countering areas cleared.

We also must point out, that unless some clearing is allowed, Queensland cannot maintain its agricultural production capacity, as there is a steady loss of agricultural land to other uses.

Cotton Australia would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee.

In summary Cotton Australia recommends:

-) The Committee recommends that the Bill be rejected, and a process is developed, including extensive community and industry , to prepare a long-term native vegetation policy that will best serve the interests of Qld.
-) If the above recommendation is not supported, the Bill is amended to allow the continuation of the HVIAL and/or the HVAL purpose, or a similar mechanism which would permit an application process to consider clearing proposals where there is an overwhelming social and economic benefit.
-) Processes and Funding are put in place to ensure the accurate reporting of net Native Vegetation areas, the purpose of any clearing, and the changes in land use, both to and from agriculture.

Signed:	 Michael Murray – General Manager
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