

# Land clearing in Queensland: **THE FACTS**

## Queensland has seen a rapid rise in clearing rates in the last few years

Current clearing rates are the highest rate they have been for many years. Official figures indicate that land clearing rates in Queensland have risen from a low point of 78,000 ha in 2009/10 to 296,000 in 2013/14. After a period of decline, this rapid rise in clearing in the last few years can be attributed to changes to laws and regulations by the LNP.

## Clearing is bad for the Great Barrier Reef

Many of the factors discussed above — large scale clearing, erosion and run-off, climate change — combine to add to the pressures the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) is already under. The Queensland Auditor-General has already pointed to clearing as a key threat to the GBR, and the Reef 2050 Plan which seeks to lay out a pathway to protect the GBR assumes land clearing law reform will take place in Queensland.

## Clearing is bad for the climate and for drought

As well as destroying nearly 300,000 hectares of woodlands in one year (think 300,000 pitches at Lang Park), this also released 35.8 million tonnes of greenhouse gases, stored in the trees that were knocked down. At a more local level, scientific research indicates the removal of woodlands can reduce local rainfall and add to drought. At a time when we should be using trees as a carbon sink, mass clearing is adding to the problem of climate change, and potentially making droughts worse.



## The LNP changes to clearing laws allowed for a lot more clearing

When the Newman government ‘took the axe to Queensland’s tree clearing laws’ (their own words), they allowed clearing previously prohibited. They reversed the ban on broadscale clearing, they removed protections on ecologically important regrowing woodlands, and reduced regulation, monitoring and enforcement of clearing. A return of the bulldozers and chains, and rapid rise in clearing rates, were the inevitable results.

## Clearing is bad for wildlife and habitats

Millions of native animals which depend on woodlands for their habitats have been killed over the years from land clearing. A number of threatened species, including the iconic koala and some of our rarest birds, are directly impacted by the loss of trees and woodlands. If we want to protect our special, unique biodiversity — one of the stated purposes of the *Vegetation Management Act* — we need to dramatically reduce land clearing rates.

## Clearing is bad for erosion

Trees help keep landscapes intact and healthy. Clearing trees can lead to degraded land, erosion and run off especially along river banks. There are many instances now of massive eroded gullies on the east coast of Queensland being created or made worse by tree clearing.

**The Bill before Parliament essentially seeks to restore land clearing laws to their pre-2012 state.**

# Land clearing in Queensland: **THE MYTHS**

## **“There has been no consultation on the land clearing reform Bill”**

Labor’s position on reforms to the *Vegetation Management Act* has been clear for several years, and was a feature of the 2015 Queensland election. This contrasts with the Newman LNP, which promised in 2012 NOT to change land clearing laws, and then did just that. A meeting in July 2015 involving all key stakeholders and government agencies discussed land clearing law reform. AgForce was shown the draft Bill prior to its introduction, as were some conservation groups.

## **“There has been an increase in woodlands and trees in Queensland recently”**

As the government’s SLATS report makes very clear, you can’t compare variations in leaf coverage detected by satellite with the verified clearing of woodlands. If we properly protected higher conservation value regrowth, and found ways of keeping other trees as carbon stores, we might one day see more trees!

## **“News land clearing laws will reduce farm productivity”**

There are annual variations in farm productivity, but these are due to a range of weather and international trade factors. There is no correlation between land clearing controls and the value of crop and livestock output in Queensland.



IMAGE: Tree clearing on Olivevale Station by Kerry Trapnell

## **“Land clearing laws have reduced opportunities for Indigenous prosperity”**

There is no evidence of this, and in fact official figures show that despite opportunities to seek approvals to clear under two separate pieces of legislation, none have even been applied for.

## **“High Value Agriculture clearing is about specialised high price cropping”**

While ‘high value agriculture’ sounds like growing special and valuable crops, it was effectively undefined under the LNP and was really a backdoor means of clearing for grazing and cattle fodder. On Cape York, clearing of native woodlands home to threatened species, in an area of documented World Heritage value, and in catchment areas of rivers that flow through world renowned wetlands into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon, has been done to produce nothing more than stock feed.

## **“Thinning and fodder harvesting are necessary and environmentally benign”**

An independent review of the Self Assessable Clearing Codes for thinning and fodder harvesting identified some real problems. They are not part of the current land clearing reform Bill, which leaves self-assessable codes untouched but will be considered through separate regulatory processes.

## **“Farmers will be treated as guilty until proven innocent”**

The Bill restores an initial, perfectly reasonable presumption that the owner or leaseholder of land is responsible for what happens on their land, unless they can show it was someone else who did the clearing. The government still has to prove that an offence has actually been committed.

## **“No environmental harm has resulted from the LNP’s changes”**

Land clearing kills native animals, including threatened species; destroys habitats and biodiversity; degrades landscapes and increases risk of erosion and run-off in waterways, wetlands and marine environments; reduces local rainfall and cloud cover; releases carbon and contributes to global warming and shifting weather patterns including extended droughts.