Saving Habitat, Protecting Wildlife and Restoring Land: Ending broadscale tree clearing in Queensland (again)
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Message from the Premier

Queensland Labor has a long history of balancing environmental protection with growing our agriculture sector.

It was Labor that drove land clearing down from rates on par with the clearing of the Amazon Basin, to an all-time low in 2009.

It was due to Labor reforms that Australia was able to meet its Kyoto targets for reducing carbon pollution. While these laws were in place, the agriculture sector grew by almost $2 billion.

We recognised in the past that tree clearing rates in Queensland were unacceptable. We took action and we got results. After three short years of LNP government, tree clearing rates have again reached unsustainable levels. It’s damaging our wildlife, our reef and our climate.

My government made a concerted effort to arrest unsustainable clearing rates by introducing strong, sensible laws to the Parliament in 2016. These laws were blocked by an alliance of the LNP and crossbenchers. This was my government’s only legislative defeat and is evidence of our determination to drive down clearing rates.

A re-elected Palaszczuk Government will once again drive down tree clearing rates by legislating to end broadscale clearing of remnant vegetation.

We will also provide economic and employment opportunities for farmers and regional communities by investing in land and vegetation management projects. We will build a new industry which promises to contribute as much as $8 billion annually to the Queensland economy by 2030.
Tree clearing rates in Queensland have reached unsustainable levels, putting at risk our iconic native wildlife, climate and the Great Barrier Reef.

A re-elected Palaszczuk Government will drive down excessive clearing rates. We will support a sustainable and prosperous agricultural sector and spearhead the development of new economic and environmental opportunities through supporting projects that sequester carbon, restore valuable habitat, repair riparian vegetation and improve water quality.

We will:

- Establish a flagship $500 million Land Restoration Fund to directly support Queensland based land sector carbon projects and create new jobs and opportunities in this growing industry
- Introduce legislation to protect remnant and high conservation value regrowth vegetation
- Continue to provide flexibility to landholders through self-assessable codes as long as they are providing appropriate protections based on advice from the Queensland Herbarium
- Continue to update and improve the mapping of protected vegetation
- Release the Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) on an annual basis within one month of receiving it from the Queensland Herbarium
- Advocate for the adoption of a national vegetation mapping system, modelled on SLATS.
The Newman-Nicholls Legacy

The Newman-Nicholls Government has the worst environmental record of any modern Australian government. In three short years, they stripped away protections and laid waste to environmental achievements which had taken a generation to secure. Nowhere was their disregard for our natural environment more evident than in their regressive tree clearing laws.

In 2012, Campbell Newman promised that “the LNP will retain the current level of statutory vegetation protection.” Just weeks after being elected, Campbell Newman, Tim Nicholls and the LNP broke that promise. They announced that existing laws would not be enforced and existing investigations into illegal clearing would be discontinued. They gave the green light to broadscale clearing and environmental vandalism.

The Newman-Nicholls Government went on to gut the legislative protections for native vegetation. As a result, clearing rates doubled in Queensland in the first two years of the LNP government - up to nearly 300,000 hectares of trees per year. That rate continued to climb, reaching nearly 400,000 hectares in 2015-16.

The LNP’s irresponsible and reckless tree clearing policies have left a destructive legacy for Queensland.

CURRENT STATE OF CLEARING IN QUEENSLAND

The annual Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) uses satellite imagery to monitor woody vegetation clearing in Queensland’s native vegetation in support of the Vegetation Management Act 1999.

The study produces spatial data to inform a range of other land management policies and reporting initiatives in Queensland including protection and management of the Great Barrier Reef, State of Environment reporting and biodiversity conservation and planning.

Each year this report has shown the alarming annual rate of clearing that has occurred since the former LNP government stripped away vital vegetation protection measures.

The 2012-2014 SLATS report showed that the annual rate of clearing increased from 91,700 hectares, to almost 300,000 hectares.

This particular report covered two years as the LNP refused to release the damning data in 2012-13.

The 2015-16 SLATS report shows that tree clearing has again increased, to four times the rate it was prior to the LNP coming into power, at nearly 400,000 hectares per year.

That’s over 1,000 football fields of land being cleared each day.

Alarmingly, the 2015-16 SLATS report also showed that 40 per cent of all clearing state-wide is occurring in Great Barrier Reef catchments, putting at risk our beloved Great Barrier Reef and the livelihoods of so many Queenslanders who depend on it. It is riparian vegetation that holds riverbanks together and keeps sediment on land and out of the reef.
Annual woody vegetation clearing rate in Queensland (1988–2016)

Impacts of excessive tree clearing

WILDLIFE
- According to the Scientific review of impacts of land clearing on threatened species in Queensland, land clearing has been directly responsible for two plant species becoming extinct in the wild. Land clearing has also been identified as a threatening process for many of the 739 threatened flora species and 210 threatened fauna species in Queensland.
- In 2015-16, 35% of clearing was of remnant vegetation – that’s pristine vegetation that has never been cleared before and is vital habitat for native wildlife.
- Clearing at these rates leaves animals with nowhere to live and nowhere to go.

GREAT BARRIER REEF
- Land clearing contributes to climate change which, in turn, is causing the coral bleaching threatening the reef.
- It also contributes to sediment pollution by removing the vegetation that holds the soil together.
- A key commitment of the Reef 2050 Plan is to reduce land clearing. Both the State and Federal Governments committed to this plan and it’s what has stopped UNESCO putting the reef on the ‘in danger’ list. The Reef’s World Heritage Status is vital for the industries that rely on it and at least 60,000 associated jobs. In this year’s report, the World Heritage Centre singled out the lack of progress on delivering important laws to reduce clearing and called for greater effort to implement this commitment.
- Tim Nicholls and the LNP are standing in the way of Queensland and Australia delivering on its plan for protecting the Great Barrier Reef.

CLIMATE
- Some 45 million tonnes of CO2 emissions were generated in 2015-16 in Queensland through land clearing alone. That more than wipes out the abatement purchased through Federal Government’s $1.5 billion Emissions Reduction Fund.
- Queensland’s emissions from land use and tree clearing are now more than four times larger than Australia’s total emissions from land use because NSW, VIC, TAS and WA actually capture more emissions in their land sector than they emit, acting as overall carbon sinks.
- Emissions from Queensland’s land sector are putting at risk Australia’s ability to meet its emissions reduction targets under the Paris Agreement.
The Palaszczuk Government’s Record

The Palaszczuk Government made a promise to Queenslanders at the last election that we would reinstate Labor’s nation-leading vegetation management and protection laws. However, our amendments to the Vegetation Management Act 1999 were blocked in the Parliament by the LNP.

Despite this setback, we have made concerted efforts to address unsustainable tree clearing levels. The government undertook a review of one of the largest high-value agriculture (HVA) clearing applications approved by the Newman-Nicholls Government which led to a tightening of the application and approvals process for HVA applications, as well as the clearing being referred to the Commonwealth under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999.

The government also committed $7.8 million over four years in the 2016-17 budget to buy high-resolution satellite imagery covering the entire state every year, instead of every three years. Timely high-quality digital satellite imagery is critical for vegetation management monitoring and the early detection of land cover change, particularly in vulnerable Great Barrier Reef catchments.

This high-resolution imagery assists with improving the accuracy of vegetation mapping and detecting clearing events more quickly, particularly smaller areas of clearing. For landholders, the advancement in technology means compliance matters are kept at the lower end of the scale and the contentious ‘reverse onus of proof’ provisions are not required in future laws. For the environment, it means intervention can be taken to stop destructive clearing before the damage is done.
Our Plans: Putting Queenslanders First

Seizing New Opportunities

A re-elected Palaszczuk Government will turbo-charge the creation of new jobs and opportunities in land management by establishing a flagship $500 million Land Restoration Fund that will directly support Queensland based land sector carbon reduction projects.

We will support land and vegetation management activities that avoid carbon emissions being released into the atmosphere or store carbon dioxide in the landscape.

These projects will not only achieve emissions reductions, they will also deliver numerous co-benefits for Queensland communities. These co-benefits include creating additional revenue streams for farmers, landholders and indigenous communities. There will also be regional employment opportunities. We will protect Queensland’s biodiversity, prevent soil erosion and run-off, enhance water quality and help protect the Great Barrier Reef.

Since 2012, around 4.96 million tonnes of carbon emissions have been stored or avoided in the land sector through the Commonwealth Government’s Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF), generating an estimated $58.7 million in revenue for Queensland. Recent analysis by Energetics indicates that with the right policy settings, this industry in Queensland could grow to around $8 billion by 2030.

This is an exciting opportunity for landholders, particularly farmers and Traditional Owners, to earn additional income through caring for their land. Under the ERF, only the carbon abatement delivered by projects is valued and financially rewarded. Under the Land Restoration Fund the environmental, economic and social co-benefits of land carbon projects will also be valued.

$8 billion
INDUSTRY IN 2030
The Land Restoration Fund will support projects such as:

- Revegetating state-owned land to create new koala habitat
- Protecting native forests on land earmarked for clearing
- Restoring and revegetating degraded grazing land to provide income diversification for farmer and other landholders by creating carbon credits, while reducing sediment pollution and improving water quality in the Great Barrier Reef
- Rehabilitating and revegetating private land by removing pest and weed species and replacing them with native trees
- Improving the condition of wetlands in Great Barrier Reef catchments, helping reduce nitrogen pollution.

The Land Restoration Fund will be established through an initial $30 million contribution from government, with capital of $500 million to be raised through the issuance of a State Government Green Bond. The capital raised will offset debt and interest impacts on the State Budget.

The government will investigate options for the fund to operate independently to deliver returns as the world moves towards the Paris Agreement target.

To ensure the environmental benefits of projects are fully-realised, projects involving longer-term commitments by landholders will be highly valued under the fund, as will projects that protect unregulated vegetation.

We are committed to working with stakeholders in the design, development and implementation of the Fund. We will also be working with interested parties in setting the co-benefit priorities for the Fund.

Queensland’s land mass and natural assets make our state a potential leader in the domestic and international carbon markets. We want Queenslanders to reap the benefits of this growing industry.

How will the Land Restoration Fund work?

The Fund will support land carbon projects that will not only deliver emissions reduction, but deliver environmental and economic co-benefits. There is an emerging market for the carbon credits these projects produce that will provide the potential for these co-benefits to be delivered at a much lower cost.

The Land Restoration Fund will:

- Facilitate a pipeline of qualifying Queensland-based carbon offset projects
- Pursue environmental and economic co-benefits as defined by the government
- Support research and development into emerging areas where Queensland has a comparative advantage for the purpose of establishing eligibility as Australian Carbon Credit Units.

The Fund will enable the sale of the carbon credits produced and private sector participation. Demand for Queensland-sourced carbon credits could come from a variety of sources including banks and airlines. For example Qantas currently purchases carbon credits from a fund established in the Northern Territory.
**Benefits delivered by the Land Restoration Fund**

- Sequester carbon in land and soil and reduce Queensland’s carbon emissions
- Boost revenue sources for farmers and other landholders, such as income opportunities for farmers to grow trees while repairing degraded soil and water quality
- Create regional jobs, plus social and community benefits, especially for Traditional Owners
- Improve Reef water quality
- Enhance wetlands for fisheries and hatcheries improving commercial fishing opportunities
- Strengthen critical habitat protection
- Restore ecosystems and degraded land.

**New laws to protect our wildlife, climate and reef**

A re-elected Palaszczuk Government will introduce legislation to protect remnant and high conservation value non-remnant vegetation.

“High conservation value” will be defined consistently with the international definition advocated by the High Conservation Resource Network, including (but not limited to) endangered vegetation species and communities, vegetation in reef catchments, riparian areas, threatened species habitat and areas where landscape integrity is at risk.

We will ensure strong monitoring and resourcing for the enforcement of land clearing laws, drawing on the $7.8 million investment made in high-resolution satellite imagery in our first term.

**Carbon Plus Fund**

The Land Restoration Fund will build on the Queensland Government’s current Carbon Plus Fund, which is providing funding to the Aboriginal Carbon Fund to support and grow Indigenous community participation in carbon markets.

The Carbon Plus Fund will see delivery of a method for valuing the social co-benefits or ‘core benefits’ associated with Indigenous economic development that results from undertaking a carbon sequestration project.

Further, up to $5 million will be used to purchase high quality carbon credits to offset the emissions of Queensland Government vehicles in 2018-19 and 2019-20.
Supporting sustainable agriculture

Taking action on excessive tree clearing doesn’t create competing interests between agriculture and conservation. It’s about sound environmental protection in the interests of all Queenslanders, based on scientific facts.

The science proves that the current rate of tree clearing in Queensland is damaging our land, our environment and our climate. In fact, farmers will be hit hardest by the effects of climate change. They are the first to feel the impacts of more droughts and heat waves. They have to live with the difficulty in supplying water to their crops and livestock because of decreasing rainfall and runoff with increasing temperatures and evaporation.

Labor’s vegetation management laws will continue to provide flexibility to landholders in drought by recognising fodder harvesting as a key drought saving measure.

A re-elected Palaszczuk Government will maintain self-assessable codes (SACs), including for fodder harvesting, where they are providing appropriate protections. Where necessary, SACs will be amended in line with relevant scientific literature and advice from the Queensland Herbarium. This will ensure that the codes are only being applied to clearing that presents a low ecological risk.

Agriculture thrived during the decade that Labor’s tree clearing laws were enforced. The agriculture sector grew by almost $2 billion during that period, proving we can get the balance right between growing a thriving agricultural sector and protecting our environment.

Under Labor’s laws, clearing for agricultural expansion and development will still be able to be undertaken through a range of mechanisms, including:

- SACs, under which smaller parcels of land can be cleared for numerous agricultural purposes
- State Development and Public Works Organisation Act 1971, under which large agriculture projects can be assessed and approved

Putting scientists in charge

Labor’s vegetation management laws have always had a solid foundation in science. The rest of Australia is envious of the mapping and science that underpins these best-practice laws.

The Queensland Herbarium developed the “regional ecosystem” framework to ensure vegetation management policy is based on real-time and accurate ecological mapping and data.

A re-elected Palaszczuk Government will continue to update and improve the mapping of protected vegetation and ensure that mapping for the purposes of vegetation management is based on the regional ecosystem mapping managed by the Queensland Herbarium.

The annual Statewide Landcover and Trees Study (SLATS) is widely recognised as a leading scientific work. Labor will ensure the SLATS report is released on an annual basis within one month of receiving it from the Queensland Herbarium.

A Labor government will advocate for the adoption of a national system modelled on SLATS.