

# PRODUCTION V CONSERVATION: A POLICY DILEMMA IN THE TREE CLEARING DEBATE IN QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

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## ABSTRACT

A process for developing policy for tree clearing that meets the competing goals of conservation and production has been followed. There were two levels at which policy was developed. An overall Statewide policy outlined general targets to meet commitments of the Queensland Government. Local guidelines were developed by a large number of groups containing representatives of government and interested conservation movement and industry representatives. The policy and the local guidelines are an important part of the process used to assess applications for permits to clear woody vegetation.

## KEYWORDS

Local guidelines, biodiversity, sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

Tree clearing is undertaken throughout the world to enable agricultural pursuits to be undertaken. This provides a dilemma for policy makers as that clearing also threatens biodiversity and contributes greenhouse gasses to the atmosphere. In Australia, about half of the intensive land use zone has been cleared or thinned, representing about 20% of the whole continent (Graetz et al., 1995). Within Queensland, one estimate is that disturbance to the tree layer has occurred within about 30% of the State's area of 173 million hectares (Graetz et al., 1995). Another study suggests that about 76 million hectares supports high levels of tree cover (Danaher et al., 1992). Of the remaining area, 40 million hectares is grassland.

The rate of tree clearing within Australia is estimated to have been 500,000 ha/year for 1983-1993, of which 60% occurred in Queensland (NGGI 1994, DEST 1995). However the figure in Queensland includes area of woody regrowth that are retreated, and this may represent about 65% of all clearing. This clearing is undertaken to increase cattle production by increasing the sustainable stocking rate (Burrows, 1990).

A recent study of greenhouse gas emissions suggested that 24.4% of all emissions were due to land use change and forestry (NGGI, 1994). The density and biomass of uncleared woodlands was not taken into account and the area of clearing that was regrowth clearing was also ignored. Also, more accurate estimates of the rate of clearing and the rate of soil carbon changes are needed before the emissions attributable to clearing for agriculture can be accurately assessed.

Given the importance of tree clearing from both a production and a conservation perspective, sound policy for tree clearing is needed.

## LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

Clearing of trees on most leasehold land in Queensland has been controlled through provisions of various Land Acts for over 100 years. Other legislation is also relevant, particularly where forestry and mining are undertaken. No general provisions controlling clearing on freehold tenures (about 20% of the State) exist.

The Queensland Land Act 1994 controls the management of trees on lands on which the State owns the trees - about 74% of the State. The principles of that management are to maintain productivity; allow development; prevent degradation; maintain biodiversity; maintain

environmental and amenity values; maintain scientific, recreation and tourism values; and ensure public safety. A balance is sought between environmental objectives in vegetation conservation (arising in part from national and international obligations) with the need to enhance land productivity. To this end, the assessment of applications for tree clearing permits has to be consistent with the Broadscale Tree Clearing Policy, Local Guidelines and specific matters specified in the legislation.

**Broadscale Tree Clearing Policy.** The Policy recognizes that to meet the State's economic development policy objective the clearing of trees is often required. If tree clearing is intended, it must be demonstrated that this will not unreasonably threaten biodiversity or ecological processes and systems, that it enhances long-term productivity, and that the clearing is economically sustainable.

The broadscale tree clearing policy document includes general information on zones for tree clearing guidelines and native vegetation communities as well as targets for maximum slope limitations; watercourse buffers; configuration of retained vegetation; and the proportion of vegetation type that should be kept.

**Local guidelines.** Local guidelines contain much greater detail than in the Broadscale Tree Clearing Policy and are used as the primary document to assess applications for permits.

There were 5 steps involved in the finalization of local guidelines:

- 38 local guideline working groups (based on biogeographic and social groupings) were established throughout the State. These groups contained representatives from rural industry groups, non-government conservation groups and government technical officers.
- draft local guidelines were developed by each local group using a preliminary draft of the Broadscale Tree Clearing Policy;
- the draft local guidelines were advertised in the local press and sent to interested parties seeking comment;
- the local guidelines were modified as appropriate in response to the public comment received;
- the local guidelines were examined by the chief executives of affected State government departments before being approved as departmental policy.

This process was overseen by an advisory group consisting of senior representatives of grazier organizations, Queensland Conservation Council and relevant State government agencies.

Evaluating applications. In deciding whether to issue a tree clearing permit, and in deciding on any conditions to be imposed, the following issues must be considered in addition to any local guidelines:

- heritage and cultural values;
- the maintenance of multiple use values;
- the economic and social benefits;
- the existence and extent of environmentally sensitive areas; and
- the extent of previous clearing and the likely impact of clearing and subsequent land use.

## **DISCUSSION**

Divergent views were held by interested and affected parties in the tree clearing debate. This was combined with complex landscapes which had different potentials for development through tree clearing and different conservation values. Through a combination of setting a broad policy framework and then developing local guidelines within that framework, the interests and expectations of all parties were considered.

The above policy and associated processes aim to meet the need for planning certainty - both for landholder as they develop lands for agricultural production and for government in their environmental protection responsibilities.

Although there is legislation supporting all of the above, it is recognized that the most desirable outcomes will be achieved where there is involvement of all affected parties. Through that involvement comes a greater level of acceptance and ownership of the resultant guidelines. However, experience in other States of Australia emphasizes the need for a legislative framework (rather than a purely voluntary approach) to ensure that clearing is not excessive.

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