
Tree-clearing laws unfair for Aborigines, says land council

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One of Queensland's most powerful indigenous groups, the Noel Pearson-aligned Cape York Land Council, has warned that Labor's "flawed" proposed tree-clearing laws will hold back Aboriginal economic development.

The council's submission to the parliamentary committee -investigating the Palaszczuk -government's planned tightening of the state's vegetation management regime says the bill ignores mining, fails to accommodate the special circumstances of native title holders, and proposes unnecessary regulation.

The government is trying to woo former Labor crossbench MP Billy Gordon - an Aboriginal first-term politician whose seat takes in Cape York - to help pass the bill through the state's hung parliament. Mr Gordon -remains undecided.

The council argues the bill proposes "unfair and unreasonable constraints on development that will perpetuate Aboriginal social and economic disadvantage across Cape York".

The bill once again bans broad scale clearing, which was allowed under the Newman government's 2013 introduction of High Value Agriculture permits.

The council suggests these permits should continue to exist for Cape York. It also proposes the introduction of a 10 per cent quota for clearing of Aboriginal freehold on the peninsula, similar to "total allowable catch" quotas in fisheries. It suggests there should then be compensation for the loss of clearing rights on the remaining 90 per cent of the land, with the money to be used for "Aboriginal economic empowerment and development".

The council prepared the submission in consultation with Balkanu and Cape York Partnership.

The government insists changes will not stop Aboriginal people from clearing for agriculture on Cape York, an action that is permitted under the Cape York Peninsula Act 2007.

The Wilderness Society Queensland campaigns manager Tim Seelig said ABS data showed there was no evidence land-clearing legislation had reduced the state's overall agricultural output.

"We're using official ABS data, in real dollar terms, across crops and livestock," Dr Seelig said. "It's a good bullshit detector on claims we're going to starve, and farmers are not going to be able to produce as much.

"We believe Queensland has a significant land clearing problem again - 300,000ha of land cleared in one year is 35.8 million tonnes of carbon released in

one year. It's about the loss of carbon sequestration. Once you've chopped a tree down, it's no longer a carbon sink." The NSW government has introduced new laws aimed at making it easier for farmers to clear their land but the state's Deputy Premier, Tony Grant, promised it would not result in Queensland-style widespread loss of native vegetation.

The Baird government laws sweep aside regulations introduced by Bob Carr's Labor government that required farmers to maintain or improve environmental outcomes when clearing land. Routine farm work, such as clearing along fence lines and around sheds, will be exempt.

Farmers will be able to self-assess whether they need to seek permission for land-clearing and whether they need to set aside land or contribute to a fund to -offset more significant development.

Mr Grant said farmers were the best conservationists but some had broken the law."In our package, there is still no place for them," he said. "If they want to be a cowboy, they can move to Queensland."