

## **Submission: Local Land Services Act – review of native vegetation clearing laws**

- Globally, NSW is considered a ‘hot spot’ for biodiversity/habitat loss and excessive land clearing. It is obvious that these two phenomena are linked. The exponential increase in land clearing since 2016 has gone hand-in-glove with the decline of thorough environmental assessment.
- The NSW native vegetation clearing laws are at odds with NSW’s own Natural Resources Commission, the NSW Upper House enquiry into the fate of the iconic Koala, the NSW Koala Strategy, and the NSW Auditor General’s report, which variously question the integrity of the regulatory system (including compliance and enforcement), the biodiversity offset scheme, and the effectiveness of habitat protection. The 2021 NSW State of the Environment report states that the number of species at risk of extinction continues to rise and clearing of native vegetation has increased 13-fold since 2016. This trajectory is totally unacceptable.
- The native vegetation clearing laws must be reviewed in the light of the extreme weather events of the last few years, namely severe droughts, catastrophic wildfires and record-breaking floods. Scientists warn that this is the ‘new normal’, so business-as-usual is an outdated response.
- There is ample circumstantial evidence that the land clearing code has exacerbated habitat destruction. Travelling through NSW over a number of years, we are witnessing a marked increase in clear-felled paddocks where native vegetation has been flattened, piled up and burned. On our country road, we are seeing a huge increase in log trucks that service ‘private native forestry’. Roadside verges, known corridors for biodiversity, have been dramatically halved as landholders completely clear their side of the fence back to 25 metres, including felling mature native trees, some with hollows.
- It begs belief that the Native Vegetation Regulatory Map has not been finalised in the 5-plus years since the laws were changed. Surely this fact alone undermines the integrity of the scheme, and leaves it open to abuse. Indeed, 75% of the clearing since 2016 has been categorised as ‘unexplained’. Landholders will ignorantly clear threatened ecological communities if adequate mapping is unavailable and genuine protections are not enforced.
- The alarming onset of climate change necessitates the conservation of as much native vegetation as possible. The current clearing laws are plainly causing an escalation of vegetation loss – exactly the opposite of the necessary response. Vegetation clearing negatively impacts flora and fauna, water catchments, soil health (including loss of soil carbon), and whole ecosystems, and the health of all these components has to be of primary concern for the people of NSW. The crafting of these laws should be beyond short-term political gain.

It’s devastating to see the stark decline in native vegetation following the 2016 changes in the clearing laws. At a time when we have access to the latest science, and are so aware of what we need to do to mitigate climate change and halt species extinction, these laws are accelerating the very opposite. They need to be radically changed in the light of the rapidly deteriorating state of remaining native vegetation and dependent species.

Thank you

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