



Full Day Hansard Transcript (Legislative Council, 29 May 2014, Proof) Proof

Extract from NSW Legislative Council Hansard and Papers Thursday, 29 May 2014 (Proof).

NATIVE VEGETATION AMENDMENT BILL 2014

Bill introduced, and read a first time and ordered to be printed on motion by the Hon. Robert Brown.

Second Reading

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN [9.54 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I am pleased to introduce the Native Vegetation Amendment Bill 2014. I thank the NSW Farmers Association for providing the narrative that enabled the Parliamentary Counsel to draw up this bill. Farmers in New South Wales have had nothing more than calls for reviews, reviews and more reviews in relation to the Native Vegetation Act. After all these reviews, nothing substantial in the form of legislative change has occurred, and the people on the farm and in the bush are ready for legislation that will give them some relief from an onerous Native Vegetation Act. I trust that my colleagues in The Nationals, as an influential partner in the Coalition, will find a way to ensure that this important piece of legislation is brought into law as soon as possible.

It is clear that farmers who own and work their land in a sustainable manner for future generations are being robbed—and that is not too strong a word—by restrictive and ridiculous native vegetation laws, all because of some green ideology that says farmers do not know what is best for their land. That is a load of heifers' dust, to be polite. What is worse is that the current laws are leading to perverse environmental outcomes as well. The concept that farmers are environmental vandals is beyond insulting—they are not. Farmers are, in fact, the greatest and most dedicated environmental custodians we have. Their ability to farm their land sustainably and profitably is on display every single day. Farmers have been pushing for changes to the native vegetation laws in this State for decades. The latest version of the laws that they ended up with back in 2003, the same one we have today, is nothing but shambolic, in the view of farmers.

It must be noted that I am not pushing for broadscale destruction of the landscape, and this bill does not go anywhere near that. Farmers highly value biodiversity on their farms. The benefits from economic incentives to maintain environmental integrity are vast. However, there are significant and unmistakable flaws in current native vegetation laws in New South Wales that are costing farmers, rural communities, and the health and viability of the farming sector every day that the system remains unchanged—hence this bill.

Last June, the New South Wales Deputy Premier and The Nationals Party Leader, Andrew Stoner, acknowledged the issue and announced at the National Party conference that there would be:

A comprehensive overhaul of the Native Vegetation Act, the Threatened Species Conservation Act and related biodiversity legislation.

That announcement was close to a year ago and none of this has been delivered. In fact, the real legislative process has not even started. No matter, the Shooters and Fishers Party is happy to step in and get the ball rolling and help in any way.

The Government has proceeded with changes to the regulations, before the reform of the Act. There has been a good start, but it has been somewhat underwhelming. In fact, the self-assessable codes have been described by NSW Farmers and others as unworkable, impractical and difficult to interpret. I know that the Government has also been approached and asked to consider targeted amendments to the Native Vegetation Act whilst this lengthy review, which has not even started, is undertaken.

This bill is being introduced to try to give the farmers of our State some room to move when it comes to native vegetation laws, and I hope Government will support us in this endeavour. We consider that the current Native Vegetation Act was flawed from its inception and is in urgent need of a complete overhaul. In the meantime, the changes being proposed in this bill are sensible in nature and will go some way to addressing the multitude of problems with the current Act.

These changes will: change the objects of the Act in order that assessments can be made on a triple bottom line

basis, taking into account social, economic and environmental issues; remove all references to groundcover within the Act; change the meaning of "broadscale" as it relates to clearing so that it genuinely means broadscale and not just the removal of a single tree; allow landholders to undertake clearing if there are work health and safety risks associated with the vegetation—and bushfire is a perfect example of this; allow landholders to undertake clearing if it is a drought preparation necessity; harmonise the dates of regrowth between different areas of the State; and reduce the penalties in line with the gravity of the offence.

<4>

Farmers and people in the bush deserve to have politicians deliver what they promise. The time for empty words and rhetoric has passed. If those on the Government benches are genuine in what they have said in recent years, and I believe they are—I have every faith in The Nationals to prosecute these changes—

The Hon. Dr Peter Phelps: Along with the Liberal Party.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: And the Liberal Party, yes. If they are genuine about wanting to help farmers and people affected by native vegetation laws in this State they will support this bill. I commend the bill to the House.