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25 February 2026

Committee Secretary
Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

By Email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au
Cc: minister.watt@dcceew.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

RE: SUBMISSION TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICTIONS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION REFORM BILL 2025

AgForce Queensland Farmers Ltd is the peak representative body for Queensland's cane, cattle, grain, and sheep, wool and goat producers. Together, these industries generated approximately $11.2 billion in on-farm value of production in 2022-23. AgForce's purpose is to advance sustainable agribusiness and to support the long-term growth, viability, competitiveness and profitability of Queensland agriculture. More than 6,000 farmers, individuals and agribusinesses support AgForce through membership, collectively owning and managing approximately 55 million hectares—around one-third of Queensland's land area. Queensland producers supply high-quality food and fibre to domestic and international markets, contribute significantly to the social and economic fabric of regional, rural and remote communities, and play a central role in stewardship of the state's natural environment.

INTRODUCTION

This submission addresses recent amendments to section 43B of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), which remove agricultural action exemptions where vegetation has not been cleared for 15 years. The amendment establishes a national ecological maturity threshold of 15 years since the last clearing event and converts what was historically a land-use continuity provision into a uniform ecological trigger applied nationally, irrespective of:

- Bioregion
- Climate
- Vegetation class
- Productivity
- Structural development rates
- Species assemblages

Australia contains highly diverse ecological systems spanning tropical, subtropical, temperate and arid zones. Ecological regrowth trajectories differ markedly across these systems.

The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) has justified the amendment on the basis that "scientific evidence shows many species use regrowth from around 15 years of age."
However, peer-reviewed ecological literature demonstrates that:

- 15 years represents an average minimum age of first use.
- Species' regrowth requirements range widely (3–68 years).
- Habitat quality continues to improve well beyond 30 years.
- Structural maturity (including hollow formation) often requires several decades.
- Regrowth trajectories differ substantially across bioregions, particularly between high-rainfall and semi-arid systems.

A single national threshold does not reflect this variability and is inconsistent with contemporary ecological science.

AgForce acknowledges that DCCEEW have referred to Queensland's 15 year rule[1] in their rationale for the adoption of the same. AgForce has concerns with this rationale as we are aware that this limit was merely adopted and agreed upon arbitrarily as an administrative threshold with no real science behind it.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE ON REGROWTH AGE

Thomas et al. (2025), published in *Biological Conservation*, analysed the habitat value of regrowth forests and woodlands for threatened fauna across Australia. The key findings were:

- The average minimum age at which regrowth became suitable for threatened species was 15 years.
- The range of minimum ages was 3–68 years.
- Regrowth approached 75% of remnant habitat value at approximately 25 years for some species, but considerably later for others.

The study does not identify 15 years as a maturity threshold. Rather, it identifies it as a statistical average of earliest recorded use. Using this value as a national ecological benchmark misinterprets the study's findings and disregards documented variability.

Biodiversity Gains Continue Beyond 30 Years

Brigalow Landscapes (Queensland)

Bowen et al. (2009), in *Biological Conservation*, examined woodland-dependent birds in Brigalow landscapes and found:

- Regrowth age significantly influenced bird assemblages.
- Regrowth older than 30 years supported higher species richness and abundance.
- Extent and maturity both mattered for biodiversity outcomes.

Semi-Arid Acacia Woodlands

Doohan et al. (2019), in *Global Ecology and Conservation*, found:

- Avian species richness increased with regrowth age.
- Functional and phylogenetic diversity were higher in older regrowth.
- Structural complexity developed progressively over time.

These findings demonstrate that biodiversity outcomes continue to improve well beyond 15 years, particularly in woodland systems.

[1] Where Category X vegetation that is not 'locked-in' on a PMAV converts to High Value Regrowth (Cat C).

Structural Complexity

Lindenmayer et al. (2012), in *PLOS ONE*, demonstrate that structural attributes such a large trees, tree hollows, canopy layering and dead wood strongly influenced bird assemblages.

Hollow formation in Australian forests and woodlands often takes several decades and, in some systems, more than 50 years (Lindenmayer et al. 2012; Gibbons & Lindenmayer 2002). Hollow-dependent fauna rely on these features, which are absent in early regrowth.

AgForce again reiterates that a 15 year threshold does not align with structural habitat development timelines in many Australian ecosystems.

Bioregional Variability

Dornelas et al. (2013), in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, show that biodiversity change is dynamic and spatially heterogeneous.

Regrowth trajectories differ by:

- Climate and rainfall regime
- Soil productivity
- Disturbance history
- Landscape connectivity
- Bioregion.

Semi-arid systems typically exhibit slower growth and slower development of structural attributes compared to mesic forests. Applying a uniform national timeline disregards these ecological realities.

BIOREGIONAL VARIATION ACROSS QUEENSLAND AND AUSTRALIA

Queensland contains diverse systems including:

- Brigalow landscapes
- Mulga (Acacia aneura) woodlands
- Southeast Queensland forests
- Tropical savannas

Across Australia more broadly, additional systems include temperate woodlands, Mediterranean shrublands and arid shrublands.

These systems vary substantially in:

- Vegetation growth rates
- Biomass accumulation
- Structural development timelines
- Hollow formation rates
- Faunal assemblages

For example:

- Brigalow woodland birds show strong positive responses to regrowth older than 30 years (Bowen et al. 2009).
- Semi-arid Acacia systems develop structural complexity slowly due to rainfall limitation (Doohan et al. 2019).
- Hollow-dependent fauna may require more than 50 years for suitable habitat (Gibbons & Lindenmayer 2002; Lindenmayer et al. 2012).

A uniform 15-year national threshold:

- Ignores rainfall and productivity gradients.
- Treats tropical and semi-arid systems as ecologically equivalent.
- Fails to distinguish between early and structurally mature regrowth.
- Risks flattening ecological value distinctions across fundamentally different landscapes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

AgForce recommends:

1. Removal of the blanket 15 year threshold in section 43B.
2. Development of a bioregion-specific regulatory framework aligned with recognised bioregional classifications.
3. Incorporation of structural indicators such as canopy complexity, tree diameter, hollow presence and connectivity (such as the 70% height, 50% canopy cover threshold[2] adopted in Queensland for remnant vegetation).
4. Commissioning of an independent scientific review to determine ecologically calibrated, bioregionally appropriate thresholds.

CONCLUSION

A nationally uniform age threshold is inconsistent with Australia's ecological diversity. A differentiated, bioregionally calibrated framework would better align with contemporary science and deliver more effective biodiversity outcomes.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback and look forward to continued engagement.

If you have any questions or require further information please contact Anna Fiskbek, Policy Advisor by email [redacted].

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Niki Ford
Chief Executive Officer

REFERENCES

[2] https://www.qld.gov.au/environment/plants-animals/plants/ecosystems/about#:~:text=vegetation%20management').-,Definitions,mapping%20methods%20of%20remnant%20vegetation.

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