PROUDLY GROWING VALUE FROM AUSTRALASIAN KNOW-HOW, SUNLIGHT, SOIL AND WATER

Monday, 13 July 2026

The Commissioners
Queensland Productivity Commission

Via email: enquiry@qpc.qld.gov.au

Dear Queensland Productivity Commission

RE: Submission to the Queensland Productivity Commission Inquiry into the Impact of the Australian Government's Environment Protection Reforms

Consolidated Pastoral Company (CPC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Queensland Productivity Commission's inquiry into the impact of the Australian Government's 2025 reforms to the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* on Queensland.

CPC is one of Australia's largest grass-fed beef producers, managing approximately 6.3 million hectares across Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and Queensland, including ~850,000 hectares of significant pastoral and breeding properties in Central and Northern Queensland.. Our operations span broad-scale cropping, and cattle, sheep and goat production systems, alongside a growing investment in carbon and nature projects.

CPC's interest in this inquiry is practical and direct. Large-scale pastoral production depends on long-term certainty to invest in our operations. The way the reformed EPBC framework is interpreted and administered will materially influence future investment decisions and viability of extensive agricultural enterprises in Queensland.

Support for the AgForce Queensland submission

CPC strongly supports the submission made by AgForce Queensland and endorses its analysis of the practical implications of the reforms for agricultural landholders. CPC does not seek to duplicate the detailed industry evidence provided by AgForce. Rather, this submission should be read as reinforcing that evidence from the perspective of a large pastoral enterprise managing extensive landscapes and continuous agricultural production systems.

AgForce identifies issues of direct relevance to CPC, including the absence of comprehensive productivity and whole-of-economy analysis before implementation, uncertainty arising from incomplete guidance and standards, duplication between Commonwealth and Queensland regulatory systems, and the legal uncertainty associated with self-assessment for routine agricultural activities. AgForce also highlights the potential for the reforms to affect investment confidence, land values, productivity, environmental stewardship and regional economies.

CPC supports AgForce's central proposition that environmental protection and agricultural productivity should not be treated as competing objectives. Well-designed regulation should support both. Poorly designed or uncertain regulation risks reducing the capacity of landholders to actively manage landscapes and deliver practical environmental outcomes.

CPC's operating context

Pastoral enterprises are continuous land management systems. They are not analogous to discrete development projects with a defined beginning and end. Removal of regenerated vegetation is not permanent and requires continuous upkeep on 5 to 40 years cycles, depending on growth rates (soil, rainfall and species). Activities such as grazing management, water development, fencing, pasture improvement, weed and pest control, erosion remediation, fire management, fodder management and animal welfare responses occur repeatedly over time and are adjusted to seasonal conditions.

This distinction is important because the EPBC framework continues to rely heavily on a project-based “significant impact” model. Where that model is applied to continuous agricultural production, routine management decisions can become legally uncertain, particularly where concepts such as “continuing use”, “intensification”, “expansion” and “land use change” are not settled with sufficient clarity.

CPC recognises the importance of protecting matters of national environmental significance. However, regulation should be designed so that landholders can understand their obligations, make timely decisions and act in good faith with confidence that routine and responsible land management will not later be re-characterised as non-compliance.

Regulatory burden and compliance impacts

For CPC, the most significant compliance impact is not simply the cost of a single approval or referral. It is the cumulative effect of uncertainty across a large operating platform. A large pastoral enterprise is continually making decisions that temporarily remove regrowth to facilitate improved pastures, manage fires (firebreaks), subdivide paddocks (fencing to rest a paddock), and development of water infrastructure. The people who live and work on a specific property know the land and the species that are present. However, Commonwealth self-assessments requiring a formal evidence pack in support of each decision, accompanied with external ecological advice and legal advice, is a substantial cumulative burden for activities that are essentially routine and low risk.

Formal EPBC referrals can involve significant cost and delay. This is a significant issue for pastoral businesses. A framework that encourages self-assessment but does not provide a practical safe harbour for reasonable, good-faith reliance on government guidance does not deliver true certainty. It shifts risk to the landholder while leaving the final interpretation open to later regulatory reassessment.

Duplication between Commonwealth and Queensland systems

Queensland landholders already operate under extensive State regulatory frameworks covering vegetation management, planning, water, biosecurity, environmental protection and animal welfare. CPC is concerned that the reformed Commonwealth framework may duplicate some part of existing Queensland processes without materially improving environmental outcomes. Where Queensland law already regulates an activity, such as “Category X” land consisting of non-remnant vegetation, landholders should be protected and not be required to undertake a parallel Commonwealth self-assessment.

Duplication increases cost, extends timeframes and reduces confidence. It also diverts management attention and capital away from practical on-ground activities such as erosion control, water infrastructure, fencing, pasture resilience, fire preparedness and biodiversity management.

CPC considers that improved bilateral and accreditation arrangements should be a central focus of the Commission’s recommendations.

Economic and productivity impacts

For CPC, the economic effects of regulatory uncertainty are likely to be felt through investment decisions. Pastoral enterprises invest over long horizons. Decisions about watering points, fencing, road access, pasture development, genetics, herd structure, backgrounding capacity and environmental restoration are made with a view to long-term productivity and resilience.

Where regulatory interpretation is uncertain, businesses become more conservative. Projects may be delayed, redesigned or abandoned. Capital that would otherwise be directed to productive or environmental improvements may instead be reserved for compliance advice, documentation and contingency risk. This affects not only CPC but also contractors, suppliers, transport operators, local communities and regional employment.

The impacts of the reforms extend beyond direct compliance costs. Delays to routine agricultural activities can reduce carrying capacity, defer infrastructure investment, constrain sustainable intensification and reduce long-term productive capacity. It also identifies potential impacts on farm income, asset values, borrowing capacity, carbon and natural capital projects, and regional supply chains. CPC supports the Commission giving substantial weight to these broader productivity effects.

Land management, stewardship and operational risk

Active land management is essential to production and environmental condition. Regrowth clearing is completed in an ongoing manner for the purpose of weed and pest control, erosion repair, fire management, water infrastructure maintenance, fencing and encroachment control. They are also practical stewardship activities that support landscape condition, livestock welfare, biodiversity outcomes and regional resilience.

Case Study – Bridled Nail-tail Wallaby

A project to construct approximately 30km of new fence to improve grazing management has been delayed by three to four months, incurring over $30,000 in self-assessment costs, with no corresponding environmental benefit.

A nearby mine lowered groundwater levels, causing one of the property's two creeks to dry up. As a result, cattle now spend more time around the remaining tributary, increasing grazing pressure and reducing ground cover in that area.

The proposed fence would require clearing a narrow strip of trees totalling less than 40 hectares. Once completed, the fence would redistribute grazing pressure away from the remaining watercourse while also providing an effective firebreak.

Prior to the recent changes to the EPBC Act, this type of activity would generally not have required specialist ecological assessment. Under the current arrangements, however, an ecological consultant would need to be engaged to undertake a desktop assessment at a cost of approximately $15,000.

The self-assessment identifies an overlap between the project and the Protected Matter, Bridled Nail-tail Wallaby (*Onychogalea fraenata*), an EPBC-listed endangered species.

Although station staff have never observed the species on the property, a field survey would be required to demonstrate its absence. This survey would cost a further approximately $15,000 and confirm that Bridled Nail-tail Wallabies were not present.

While these assessments were being completed, the fencing project remains on hold, cattle continue to concentrate around the remaining water source, increasing grazing pressure and causing further loss of ground cover and biodiversity along the tributary.

This outcome would occur despite the proposed fencing delivering an overall environmental benefit.

CPC is concerned that regulatory uncertainty may discourage timely land management. In Northern Queensland, the window for management is short with the wet season cutting all access. If landholders are uncertain whether a routine activity may trigger Commonwealth assessment, the rational response may be delay. While potentially a small three to four month delay, it could result in missing a seasonal window with the landholder then having to reassess and act on a larger area the following year. In extensive landscapes, these delay will have adverse consequences and increase project costs. Weeds spread, erosion worsens, fire risk increases, infrastructure deteriorates and livestock welfare risks can escalate during drought or flood conditions.

Regulation should recognise and facilitate active stewardship rather than creating incentives for inaction.

Land clearing exemptions and continuous agricultural use

The removal of land-clearing exemptions for land that has not been cleared for at least 15 years raises major concerns about how these changes may apply to continuous agricultural enterprises. The question is not only whether a particular activity is ultimately approved. The immediate commercial issue is whether landholders can confidently understand when routine land management remains part of an existing lawful agricultural use and when it may be treated as a new action requiring Commonwealth consideration.

The framework should provide clear, practical guidance that can be applied by landholders and advisers in real operating conditions.

Environmental offsets and environmental markets

CPC supports the principle that environmental offsets should be used carefully and only where appropriate and notes that the 2025 reforms introduced changes to offsets, including new options involving market mechanisms and restoration contribution payments.

For pastoral landholders, offsets and environmental markets may create opportunities for conservation, biodiversity restoration and natural capital investment. However, these opportunities depend on regulatory clarity. If landholders are uncertain whether future land management, carbon, biodiversity or restoration activities may create additional compliance exposure, investment in these markets may be discouraged.

CPC encourages the Commission to consider how environmental markets can be designed so that landholders are rewarded for genuine stewardship without creating additional uncertainty over future productive use, routine management or compliance obligations.

Implementation risks

A major risk for Queensland landholders is that key aspects of the reforms are being implemented progressively while central elements remain under development, creating additional practical risk. Landholders are being required to make operational and investment decisions while guidance and regulatory interpretation continue to evolve. This is particularly challenging for businesses that manage large areas and activities that must respond quickly to seasonal conditions.

The Commission should recommend that implementation be accompanied by clear transitional arrangements, practical guidance and administrative safe harbour for landholders acting reasonably and in good faith.

Recommendations

CPC supports the recommendations made by AgForce Queensland and asks the Commission to give them substantial weight in preparing its Interim and Final Reports. CPC further recommends that the Commission advise the Queensland Government to pursue the following outcomes in its engagement with the Australian Government:

1. Clear statutory or regulatory recognition that continuous agricultural production systems are different from discrete development projects.

2. Practical safe-harbour protections for landholders who act reasonably and in good faith in accordance with published government guidance, mapping and expert advice.
3. Improved bilateral and accreditation arrangements so that Queensland approvals and regulatory processes are recognised wherever they achieve equivalent environmental outcomes.
4. Clear definitions and practical guidance on continuing use, intensification, expansion, land use change and routine land management.
5. Decision-support tools and standards that are accurate, accessible, validated and usable by landholders before compliance expectations are enforced.
6. Proportionate compliance settings that focus regulatory effort on activities with genuine risk to matters of national environmental significance rather than routine low-risk agricultural management.
7. Recognition of environmental stewardship already delivered by landholders, including through sustainable grazing systems, erosion control, weed and pest management, fire management, biodiversity protection and investment in land condition.

Conclusion

CPC supports strong environmental protection and recognises the importance of safeguarding matters of national environmental significance. CPC also submits that durable environmental outcomes depend on practical, active and well-informed land management by those responsible for managing Queensland's productive landscapes.

The 2025 EPBC reforms increase regulatory burden, compliance costs, uncertainty and duplication for Queensland landholders. These impacts are not limited to approval costs. They extend to investment confidence, productivity, regional economic activity, stewardship incentives and the capacity of landholders to respond to seasonal, biosecurity, fire, flood and animal welfare risks.

The same or better environmental outcomes can be achieved with greater certainty, proportionality and regulatory efficiency. CPC supports AgForce's submission and encourages the Commission to recommend reforms that reduce duplication, recognise existing stewardship, support long-term investment and ensure that environmental regulation assists rather than impedes responsible land management in Queensland.

Yours sincerely

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Troy Setter
Chief Executive Officer