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MEDIA RELEASE

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Tree-clearing laws needed to protect the Reef

North Queensland Conservation Council agrees with the Townsville Bulletin (editorial, 19/4): it *is* vital for farmers to protect their precious soil. However, unrestricted land-clearing is the wrong way to go about ensuring the productivity of farmers' lands, according to Gail Hamilton, President of North Queensland Conservation Council (NQCC).

'Prior to the changes introduced by the Newman government, about 62,000 hectares were cleared every year, but high-value environmental assets such as remnant forest and some ecological communities were off limits' said Ms Hamilton.

'In the first year following the changes, 230,000 hectares were cleared. That is half a million football fields a year or 1386 football fields a day. In 2015, 280,000 hectares were cleared. One third of land clearing has occurred in the Great Barrier Reef catchment

The Newman government's laws also allowed the clearing of remnant and old regrowth as well as clearing to creek and riverbanks, and allowed landholders to assess what could and could not be cleared.

'Land clearing worsens soil erosion, increases salinity, worsens the effects of drought, and decreases biodiversity – all factors crucial to the success of farming', she said 'and loss of vegetation is a major contributor to climate change, because trees retain carbon in their living tissue .

With the devastating news this week that only 7% of the Reef remains unaffected by coral bleaching, tree-clearing needs to be constrained.

'With the health of the reef being so dire as a result of climate change induced sea temperature warming, and land-clearing as the key driver of both climate change and nutrient-rich sedimentation of the lagoon, the proposed changes by the current Queensland government are a responsible approach to the issue of tree-clearing in the State', Ms Hamilton said.

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