QUEENSLAND FARMERS' FEDERATION

Inquiry into the Impact of the Australian Government's 2025 Environment Protection Reforms on Queensland

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Prepared by
QFF
E: qfarmers@qff.org.au

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This submission is provided to:

Queensland Productivity Commission
PO Box 12078, George Street QLD 4003
Submitted by upload and by email: enquiry@qpc.qld.gov.au

Our members

- Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers
- Cotton Australia
- CANEGROWERS
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- Timber Queensland
- Queensland United Egg Producers
- Turf Queensland
- Pork Queensland
- Australian Chicken Meat Federation
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- Eton Irrigation
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About the Queensland Farmers' Federation

The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland.

Our members are agricultural peak bodies who collectively represent more than 13,000 farmers who produce food, fibre and foliage across the state.

QFF's peak body members come together to develop policy and lead projects on the key issues that are important to their farmer members and the Queensland agriculture sector.

Together, we form a strong, unified voice leveraging our effectiveness by working together to drive policy and initiatives that support a strong future for Queensland agriculture.

Submission

The Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission 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 (Cth)* (EPBC Act) on Queensland.

Queensland agriculture depends on healthy and resilient natural systems. Farmers have a direct interest in protecting biodiversity, maintaining soil and water resources, managing invasive species and ensuring the long-term productivity of the landscapes they manage. QFF supports environmental regulation that is clear, evidence-based and proportionate, while recognising the importance of protecting Matters of National Environmental Significance (MNES).

The key issue for Queensland agriculture is not the objective of the reforms, but whether the regulatory framework enables environmental protection and productive agriculture to coexist. In QFF's view, the current implementation settings do not yet achieve this balance.

The reforms significantly expand landholder obligations to assess, document and manage potential environmental impacts, while many core elements of the framework remain incomplete or continue to evolve. Producers are therefore being asked to make operational and investment decisions under a system where important requirements, definitions and processes remain uncertain.

These challenges are particularly significant in regional Queensland, where access to ecological, heritage and technical advice is limited. Family farming businesses generally do not have dedicated compliance specialists, meaning new obligations fall directly on those managing day-to-day operations. Delays in accessing specialist advice, combined with seasonal decision-making windows, create practical barriers to compliance.

This uncertainty risks increasing costs, delaying investment and discouraging activities that deliver both productivity and environmental benefits, including improved resource efficiency, pest and weed management, fire mitigation and land stewardship.

Queensland farmers are already significant environmental managers, investing in conservation, best management practices and improved production systems. A successful regulatory

framework must recognise this existing stewardship and provide a practical pathway that supports, rather than restricts, continued environmental improvement.

Recommendations

- Make assessment proportionate to actual impact. Create an agriculture-specific pathway for small-scale, well-understood proposals, and add a legislated sustainability principle requiring decision-makers to weigh proven productivity, water-efficiency and stewardship gains against localised environmental impacts.
- Protect routine farming from the intensification and clearing rules. Retain a workable continuing-use exemption for regrowth management, drainage, weed and pest control, fire mitigation and biosecurity (don't narrow it until the Standards are finalised), and give "intensification," "indirect impact," "unacceptable impact" and "seriously impair" explicit, granular definitions that exclude like-for-like efficiency improvements.
- Fix the maps and guidance landholders are told to rely on. Make compliance mapping accurate, with a free and timely correction process; link bioregional plans explicitly to Queensland's own instruments; and pair every plan with plain-English guidance on what nearby landholders need to avoid or minimise.
- End the duplication with a genuine single approval pathway. Pursue an approval bilateral agreement and formal accreditation of Queensland's vegetation management and planning frameworks, rather than running two overlapping approval systems for the same activity.
- Credit the stewardship already being delivered. Give formal compliance weight to accredited BMP and certification programs, credit existing self-funded on-farm conservation before imposing new obligations, and fix offset settings so high-value arable land is protected, restoration charges are costed, and land covenants aren't the default security mechanism.
- Sequence implementation and back it with evidence and support. Commission a full cost-benefit and regulatory impact assessment, with case studies, before further rollout, and fund transitional extension support and a binding advisory service, consistent with the lessons of Queensland's own vegetation management reforms.

Environmental Outcomes

Likely impacts on environmental outcomes, and which elements carry the largest risk

QFF considers the reforms are as likely to worsen environmental outcomes in Queensland as to improve them. Three elements carry the greatest risk:

- Suppression of research-informed practice change. Where an improvement identified by research as the most environmentally sound option (a change in irrigation technology, rotation or nutrient management) may be captured as "intensification", producers are unlikely to proceed with it. Regulatory risk of this kind is generally resolved in favour of inaction, meaning the older, less efficient practice continues.
- Restriction of active land management. Fire mitigation, weed control, pest animal control and biosecurity operations are all land-disturbing activities. Where a producer

cannot be confident that undertaking them is lawful, they will be deferred. In some cases the conflict is direct: complying with Queensland's statutory obligation to manage invasive species may itself risk a federal compliance breach.

- Land becoming uneconomic to manage. As set out under Environmental Offsets below, the cumulative compliance and offset burden risks tipping some land management from marginal to uneconomic.

If the compliance burden makes active management uneconomic, land does not revert to a pristine state. It becomes unmanaged, with predictable consequences:

- Feral pest animal populations build up and spill over onto neighbouring properties and public land.
- Weeds proliferate unchecked, including declared species that landholders are legally obliged to control, degrading both agricultural and conservation values.
- Fuel loads accumulate, increasing bushfire risk to neighbouring properties, infrastructure and towns, and destroying the very habitat the reforms are intended to protect.
- Biosecurity surveillance falls away: producers are Queensland's frontline detection network, and absent landholders are not.
- Food and fibre production is lost, regional economic activity contracts, local employment falls and land values decline, with flow-on consequences for the rate base and service viability of regional communities.
- The cost of managing neglected land transfers to State and local governments and, ultimately, to the community.

Environmental outcomes are unlikely to improve where land can no longer be actively managed. A regulatory design that drives landholders out of active stewardship will produce worse environmental results at greater public cost.

Whether other mechanisms support these outcomes, and whether the reforms complement or work against them

Queensland already has several mechanisms delivering the outcomes the reforms seek, and in their current form the reforms work against most of them:

- Industry best-management-practice (BMP) and certification programs. Queensland's agricultural industries operate mature, audited BMP and certification frameworks covering water use, nutrient and chemical management, soil health and vegetation retention. These have driven measurable practice change across large areas of the State at industry and producer cost and are the most efficient mechanism available for achieving on-farm environmental outcomes because they are voluntary, extension-supported and grounded in production reality. The 2025 reforms give them no formal standing: participation in an accredited BMP program is not recognised as evidence of compliance, so a producer who has invested in certification is in no better regulatory position than one who has not, which is both inefficient and a direct disincentive to further participation.

- Carbon and biodiversity markets. The Nature Repair Market and the ACCU Scheme are intended to attract private investment into on-farm environmental improvement. Their viability depends on landholders being able to make voluntary, additional commitments with confidence about their baseline obligations. Where the regulatory baseline is uncertain and subject to a non-regression ratchet, that confidence does not exist: producers cannot know whether a voluntary activity today will become a compliance obligation tomorrow, in which case the investment is stranded and the additionality is lost. The reforms therefore risk suppressing participation in the very markets the Commonwealth has established to fund environmental repair.
- Reef water quality programs. Queensland's Reef protection regulations, together with substantial industry and government investment in extension, monitoring and practice change, are the primary mechanism for improving water quality in Great Barrier Reef catchments. The removal of clearing exemptions in those catchments is layered over that framework rather than integrated with it and does not recognise the practice change already achieved and verified through it.

Our members are already among the State's largest environmental managers. It is common for working properties in Queensland to retain between 10 and 40 per cent of their area as native vegetation and riparian zones, maintained at the landholder's own cost and without any regulatory credit. Decades of levy-funded research and extension have delivered measurable, verified reductions in water use, chemical use and land area per unit of production. The 2025 reforms give none of this stewardship any weight and may actively discourage the next round of it. A framework that penalises efficiency improvements and provides no credit for conservation already delivered is unlikely to improve environmental outcomes.

Economic and Regulatory Impacts

Impacts on business activity, investment and compliance costs

Queensland agriculture is overwhelmingly a sector of family businesses. The typical enterprise is family-owned and operated, directly employs a handful of people, contributes the great majority of its income to its regional economy, and combines cropping with grazing and other enterprises. These businesses have no in-house environmental, legal or planning teams. When a new obligation is created, it is absorbed by the same person making planting, stocking and irrigation decisions.

Releasing Standards piecemeal, and bringing forward timelines before the core institutions and instruments exist, makes it impossible for industry to assess the true cost of the reforms. The predictable consequence is that investment decisions are deferred: growers who built productive operations under the existing laws advise QFF that they would not proceed with identical capital investments today, because they cannot cost the compliance exposure attached to them. No comprehensive impact assessment has been undertaken to quantify the effect on agriculture, and there is no publicly available cost–benefit analysis of the reforms' implications for jurisdictions or landholders, yet heavy compliance costs are landing on enterprises well before any formal approval is granted.

Of particular concern is the statutory non-regression principle, which locks in today's unfinished settings and creates an asymmetric ratchet. Broadly framed objectives can later be tightened against business but not loosened, so industry is being asked to commit capital against a floor that can only ever move in one direction.

What is driving the increase in compliance costs and uncertainty

The draft MNES Standard expands self-assessment, sets more detailed requirements for each of the nine MNES, requires ecological, heritage, community and First Nations assessments to be undertaken by suitably qualified individuals, and obliges landholders to retain that documentation, together with proof of consultation, even where no referral is ever lodged. No retention period is specified, so given future sale and succession, landholders must assume the obligation is perpetual. The evidentiary burden is placed on individual farmers to disprove environmental impacts, using tools the department concedes are not determinative. Producers are expected to hold the same expertise, time and resources as the Commonwealth, and to independently track every new species and ecological community listing.

This uncertainty is compounded by definitional gaps: "intensification", "indirect impact", "unacceptable impact" and "seriously impair" lack granular, explicit criteria, so producers cannot reliably predict whether a routine efficiency improvement will be captured.

Capacity to comply does not exist in regional Queensland. The reforms assume a supply of suitably qualified ecologists, heritage practitioners, hydrologists, environmental lawyers and planners that is not available outside South East Queensland:

- Members report waiting six to twelve months to secure an ecological consultant, with the queue lengthening as the reforms bite and as the resources, infrastructure and housing sectors compete for the same practitioners.
- Ecological survey is seasonally constrained: a missed survey window is a delay of a year, not weeks, because a species must be surveyed when it is detectable.
- Legal and planning advice on whether an activity is even captured is now a significant cost in itself, and firms are reluctant to give definitive advice while the Standards remain in draft.
- Farm decisions are seasonal and cannot be paused: a decision on regrowth management, drainage maintenance or an irrigation upgrade has a window measured in weeks.

Whether impacts fall disproportionately on smaller or family-owned businesses

Unlike major project proponents, family farming businesses rarely have dedicated environmental, legal or planning specialists, so the compliance burden set out above falls directly on the person running day-to-day farming operations rather than on a specialist team. The same regulatory settings therefore land disproportionately harder on small and family enterprises than on well-resourced corporate or government proponents, and disproportionately harder on regional Queensland than on South East Queensland, where the specialist capacity needed to comply is concentrated.

Land Management

Impacts on routine land management practices

One of the greater risks to Queensland agriculture is not project assessment, it is the uncertainty about whether routine, continuing land management is now captured. Producers make continuous, seasonal decisions, including regrowth management, weed and pest control, grazing rotations, stocking adjustments and drainage maintenance, in areas where habitat values are inferred at a broad scale and cannot support definitive compliance calls. The

framework does not distinguish routine farming from major development, so ordinary operational decisions become significant compliance risks.

Ordinary improvements, such as switching to water-efficient bankless irrigation, installing a fence that subdivides a paddock, complying with Queensland's invasive-native-species rules, rotating crops with different sowing rates, or changing fertiliser type or rate, may be captured as "intensification" that triggers self-assessment. The "unacceptable impacts" test is drafted so broadly that it risks capturing reasonable activity rather than the "very limited circumstances" the Commonwealth says it intends.

The removal of the section 43B clearing exemptions is of particular concern, and both limbs are material for Queensland agriculture. The first captures land that has not been cleared for over 15 years. In practice this will capture routine regrowth management across grazing and mixed-farming country, where the interval between management events is commonly longer than 15 years and where the land has been continuously used for agriculture throughout. Regrowth managed on a long cycle is not new clearing, and treating it as such applies a first-time-clearing assessment burden to country that has been farmed for generations. The second limb captures land within 50 metres of a watercourse, wetland or drainage line in the Great Barrier Reef catchment, and will capture long-standing clearing activities safely and lawfully undertaken for decades.

The practical consequences are immediate: vague drafting restricts fire mitigation, weed control and essential biosecurity operations, and complying with a State-mandated legal obligation to manage invasive weeds can trigger a separate federal compliance exposure.

Interaction with Queensland's land management laws

Queensland producers must navigate two regulatory systems, the EPBC Act and its MNES, and Queensland's vegetation management and planning laws, assessing substantially the same land management activities, with no genuine single approval pathway. Operating faithfully under a State-approved framework can now result in a technical breach of an overlapping federal obligation for the same activity.

Rather than resolving this duplication, the reforms layer new Commonwealth obligations on top of the existing Queensland framework. Expanded audit powers, environment protection orders and stop-work powers are stacked on top of State enforcement regimes rather than replacing them, adding cost and legal risk without improving environmental outcomes, and exposing producers to dual-consent liability. Queensland already operates a comprehensive vegetation management and planning framework, yet there is still no clarity on how the Commonwealth regime will recognise it. The revised bilateral provisions in the 2025 reforms create an opportunity in this regard and QFF considers it should be taken.

Unintended consequences for community safety, infrastructure resilience and operational risk

Where landholders defer fire mitigation, weed control or pest control because they cannot be confident the activity is lawful, fuel loads accumulate and bushfire risk increases for neighbouring properties, infrastructure and towns. Where producers, who are Queensland's frontline biosecurity detection network, pull back from active management, surveillance and early detection of pests and weeds falls away, with consequences that extend well beyond the affected property. These risks are addressed in more detail under Environmental Outcomes above.

First Nations heritage, economic development and knowledge

QFF's membership and expertise centre on non-Indigenous farm-business operations, and this submission does not attempt to answer on behalf of First Nations people or organisations. QFF encourages the Commission to test these questions directly with First Nations landholders and representative bodies. We note only that any new engagement, consultation or documentation requirements attached to these matters should be subject to the same practical tests of capacity, cost and seasonal timeframe raised elsewhere in this submission.

Environmental Offsets

Importance of offsets and weaknesses in current settings

The proposed offset settings are structurally flawed and, as drafted, risk permanently removing highly productive arable land from food and fibre systems. Offsets are intended to be a last resort, used only after avoidance, mitigation and repair, but the repair pathway is drawn so narrowly that offsets become the default rather than the exception.

Experience interstate demonstrates how difficult suitable offsets are to secure, and the broadened "relevant area" and cultural criteria will make this more difficult still. There is no clear methodology and no costing of the restoration contribution charge, so proponents cannot price the obligation. There is a real risk that offsets are secured on arable land via private contract without full disclosure, a pattern already seen in the carbon market, transferring liability onto landholders who were never the proponents.

The settings ignore the conservation value that working properties already provide. Properties commonly maintain up to 40 per cent of their area in native vegetation and riparian zones without receiving any regulatory credit; the framework should recognise and credit this existing, self-funded, on-farm conservation before imposing new obligations. There is also currently no requirement to avoid high-value arable land when selecting offset sites, and QFF considers that there should be.

Additionally, the use of restrictive land covenants as the default security mechanism degrades property values, restricts family succession planning and triggers immediate adverse tax consequences; alternative security mechanisms that do not permanently encumber title should be available.

Whether changes are needed to Queensland's own offset scheme

QFF has not undertaken a technical assessment of whether Queensland's own offset framework will need to change to remain compliant with the Commonwealth's tightened standards and defers to government and technical experts on that specific question. QFF flags it as a live risk area: absent an approval bilateral agreement and formal accreditation of Queensland's frameworks, Queensland risks having to operate a second, parallel offset scheme alongside the federal one, doubling the compliance task for the same land management outcome.

Opportunities to Improve Outcomes

Processes and policies expected to hinder compliance, and implementation risks

The compliance risks set out above (piecemeal and incomplete Standards, an evidentiary burden that assumes Commonwealth-level expertise, undefined terms, and a shortage of qualified practitioners in regional Queensland) are, in QFF's view, the central implementation

risk of the reforms. No expanded obligation should commence until landholders can be advised, reliably and free of charge, whether their activity is captured.

Reducing duplication: bilateral agreements and accreditation

QFF asks the Commission to give particular attention to whether the reforms deliver a genuine single approval pathway, or merely a second and parallel one, and to recommend that Queensland pursue an approval bilateral agreement and accreditation of its existing vegetation management and planning frameworks. Recognised industry best-practice and certification frameworks should also be given formal weight as evidence of compliance, and existing, self-funded on-farm conservation should be credited before new obligations are imposed.

Mapping, bioregional plans and landholder guidance

Farmers need to understand how compatible land uses, including pest management, weed control and other productive activities, can operate consistently with these reforms. In fact, the 2018 review of interactions between the EPBC Act and the agriculture sector identified the same need, and it remains unmet.

The online search tools producers are directed to are non-determinative and frequently misclassify active cultivation and existing infrastructure as protected ecological communities. The Queensland Globe was promptly updated to reflect the Great Barrier Reef catchment attributes captured by the reforms, which QFF welcomes; however, the update has in places incorrectly identified engineered irrigation systems as natural drainage lines. A producer whose farm infrastructure is mapped as a natural watercourse faces a compliance obligation created entirely by a mapping error, with no free, timely or reliable way to correct it.

Queensland's draft bioregional plans, developed on the Australian Government's behalf as pilots to guide the management of cumulative impacts, raise a related problem. Because they are designed for the Commonwealth decision-maker, they consider only MNES; they are information only and not regulatory, and unless there is an overlap with MNES they do not deal with Matters of State or Local Environmental Significance. A landholder reading a bioregional plan therefore cannot rely on it to understand their full obligations. The plans should be explicitly linked to their State-level equivalents, and accompanied by plain-English guidance for landholders in the vicinity of the plan area, including those upslope of a mapped value or within the range of a listed species or ecological community.

A proportionate pathway and a dedicated sustainability principle

QFF recommends a proportionate, agriculture-specific assessment pathway, so that farmers proposing localised, small-scale activities with limited and well-understood impacts are not held to the same evidentiary requirements as major greenfield developments or mining projects. QFF also recommends a dedicated sustainability principle, requiring decision-makers to weigh high-level environmental outcomes against clear social and economic sustainability benchmarks, including proven productivity, water-efficiency and stewardship gains. This would give decision-makers a legislative basis, which they presently lack, to weigh proven productivity, efficiency and stewardship gains against localised environmental impacts, allowing the environment to be protected without rendering regional businesses unviable.

Queensland's existing vegetation management reforms

Queensland has already undertaken a comparable exercise. Successive rounds of vegetation management reform offer directly transferable lessons:

- Adjustment takes years, not months. Landholders, advisers and regulators all faced a long learning curve, and compliance improved only as guidance matured and practical support was made available.
- Uncertainty during implementation was itself the largest cost. Mapping disputes, changing interpretations and evolving guidance imposed an administrative burden that had nothing to do with environmental outcomes and everything to do with implementation design.
- Mapping accuracy and an accessible correction process were decisive. Where landholders could not have errors fixed cheaply and quickly, the framework lost legitimacy and compliance suffered.
- Transitional arrangements and extension support worked. Where the State invested in plain-English guidance and extension officers who could provide reliable answers, landholders complied.

The 2025 reforms are being implemented in the opposite manner: obligations before Standards, Standards before guidance, guidance before maps, and no extension capacity at all. QFF asks the Commission to recommend that implementation be sequenced appropriately, with transitional arrangements and funded practical support, and that a full cost–benefit analysis and regulatory impact assessment of the reforms on Queensland agriculture be undertaken, supported by agricultural case studies documenting their financial and regulatory implications.

Conclusion

Queensland farmers support strong environmental outcomes because productive agriculture depends on healthy and resilient landscapes. The issue is not whether environmental protection should occur, but whether the regulatory framework enables farmers to continue delivering these outcomes while operating viable businesses.

The current reforms create significant uncertainty through incomplete implementation settings, unclear definitions, limited regional capacity and insufficient recognition of existing stewardship. Without practical guidance, proportionate assessment pathways and appropriate sequencing, there is a risk the reforms increase compliance costs while discouraging the land management activities needed to maintain environmental values.

QFF is not seeking exemption from environmental obligations. Farmers are seeking a framework that is clear, evidence-based and achievable, with recognition for the environmental outcomes already being delivered across agricultural landscapes. A dedicated sustainability principle, improved regulatory coordination, recognition of accredited stewardship programs and practical support for landholders would help achieve a more balanced approach. This would allow environmental protection and productive agriculture to coexist, ensuring Queensland's farmers can continue their role as long-term custodians of the State's landscapes.

Kind regards,

Aaron Kiely
President
Queensland Farmers' Federation

This submission is provided by the Queensland Farmers' Federation

PO Box 12009 George Street, Brisbane Qld 4003
Level 8, 183 North Quay, Brisbane Qld 4000
ABN 44 055 764 488

Contact QFF

E: qfarmers@qff.org.au
P: 07 3837 4720
W: www.qff.org.au

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