



# Desert Channels Queensland

## Position Paper - Vegetation Management

**May 2019**

Desert Channels Queensland Inc (DCQ) is a community-based organisation working with landholders on the sustainable management of their land and water resources. Our goal is to have thriving communities with productive industries supported by a healthy environment.

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# Vegetation Management Policy Position

## The issue

Vegetation Management has been a sensitive policy position for Queensland since major reforms to the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* (VMA) occurred in 2004. Since that reform, regular amendments to the framework occurred causing uncertainty amongst landholders.

Landholders in the DCQ region often feel limited by the framework due to the restrictions in managing woody vegetation. This is in particular for:

1. Pasture improvement;
2. Thickening of vegetation; and
3. Weed Control.

The reason for restricting the ability to clear woody vegetation is to conserve the role that woody vegetation plays in ecosystems, providing habitat for a range of species, but also for providing ecosystem services such as improving water quality, improving air quality and sequestering carbon. Queensland has cleared significant areas of vegetation since European settlement, predominantly for agricultural expansion in the eastern part of the state. Limiting further clearing to property maintenance or conserving ecosystems is the current purpose of the VM framework. Clearing can occur under the framework through development approvals, self-assessable codes, exemptions or area management plans.

## Evidence

### Vegetation Statistics in the region.

The Queensland Herbarium undertakes regular programs to map vegetation across the state. The DCQ region has an area of 51 008 472 ha, and within that, the majority of the area is classified as remnant vegetation (Category B), or previously uncleared. This amounts to over 95% of the region. Only 4% of the area is mapped as Category X or previously cleared, with very small areas of protected areas (Category A) and regulated regrowth (Category C) occurring in the region (0.01% and 0.12% of the region respectively).

Further details of the regulated vegetation layers are shown below in Table 1.

*Table 1: Regulated vegetation layers within DCQ*

Regulated Vegetation Category	Clearing Options	Hectares	Percent of DCQ region
Category X (Previously cleared areas)	Can clear without approval under the VMA	2 147 400	4.2%
Category A (Protected areas)	Unlikely to be able to clear as it is required for offsets or restoration.	8 733	0.01%
Category B (remnant vegetation)	Unless a listed grassland, will need to clear in accordance with exemptions, self-assessable codes or development approval.	48 790 083	95.6%
Category C	Need to clear in accordance with regrowth code	61 546	0.12%

(high value regrowth)			
Other (water)		710	0.001%

Within the Category B category – a large proportion of the area is not regulated by the VMA as they ecosystems are listed as a natural grassland. In addition, some grassland ecosystems are available to have clearing occur as part of an encroachment self-assessable code. Details of these are listed in the Table 2.

Table 2: Areas of grassland within the DCQ region.

Type of Grassland	Area	Regional Ecosystems
Exempt (clearing can occur without approval as ecosystems are not regulated under the VM Framework)	Occur within an area of 11 417 144ha or 22.4% of DCQ region.	1.3.1, 1.9.1, 4.3.14, 4.3.15, 4.3.16, 4.3.17, 4.3.18, 4.3.19, 4.4.1, 4.4.2, 4.9.1, 4.9.2, 4.9.3, 4.9.4, 4.9.5, 4.9.20, 5.9.3, 5.9.4, 10.4.8, 11.3.21, 11.3.24, 11.4.4
Encroachment grasslands (clearing can occur through the self-assessable code).	Occur within an area of 3 522 125ha or 6.9% of DCQ region	4.3.13, 4.3.20, 4.9.7, 4.9.8, 4.9.9, 5.7.9, 5.7.10, 10.3.7, 10.3.8, 11.3.20, 11.3.31, 11.4.11, 11.8.11, 11.9.12

### Historical Clearing Notifications in DCQ region

There is no public information on historical development approvals for the DCQ region. However public information is available on notifications made for self-assessable code clearing and clearing notifications made under Area Management Plans (AMP). Self-assessable codes allow clearing without approval. Landholders have to notify to the government about the proposed clearing that they will undertake. Once notified, landholders have to clear in accordance with the relevant code.

A summary of the codes commonly utilised in DCQ region are listed in table 3 below and the number of notifications placed in the DCQ region is shown in Figure 1. Note that encroachment is the most common clearing notification.

Table 3 – Summary of the clearing under self-assessable codes in the DCQ region.

Type of clearing	Description
Encroachment	Allow clearing of native vegetation to prevent encroachment onto grassland ecosystems.
Thinning	Selective clearing in woody ecosystems to return it to its natural state.
Property Infrastructure	Allow clearing of regulated vegetation for the infrastructure including fences, roads, fire breaks, dams and other built infrastructure.
Weeds	Allows for the clearing of regulated vegetation for the purpose of weed control.
Fodder	Able to clear woody vegetation such as Mulga ( <i>Acacia aneura</i> ) to feed stock.
Native Forest Practice	Clearing is undertaken as part of a commercial forestry activity.
Regrowth	Clearing of native vegetation shown as Category C on the regulated

	vegetation management map.
Necessary environmental clearing	Clearing of native vegetation to prepare for natural disaster and to restore the environmental condition of land.

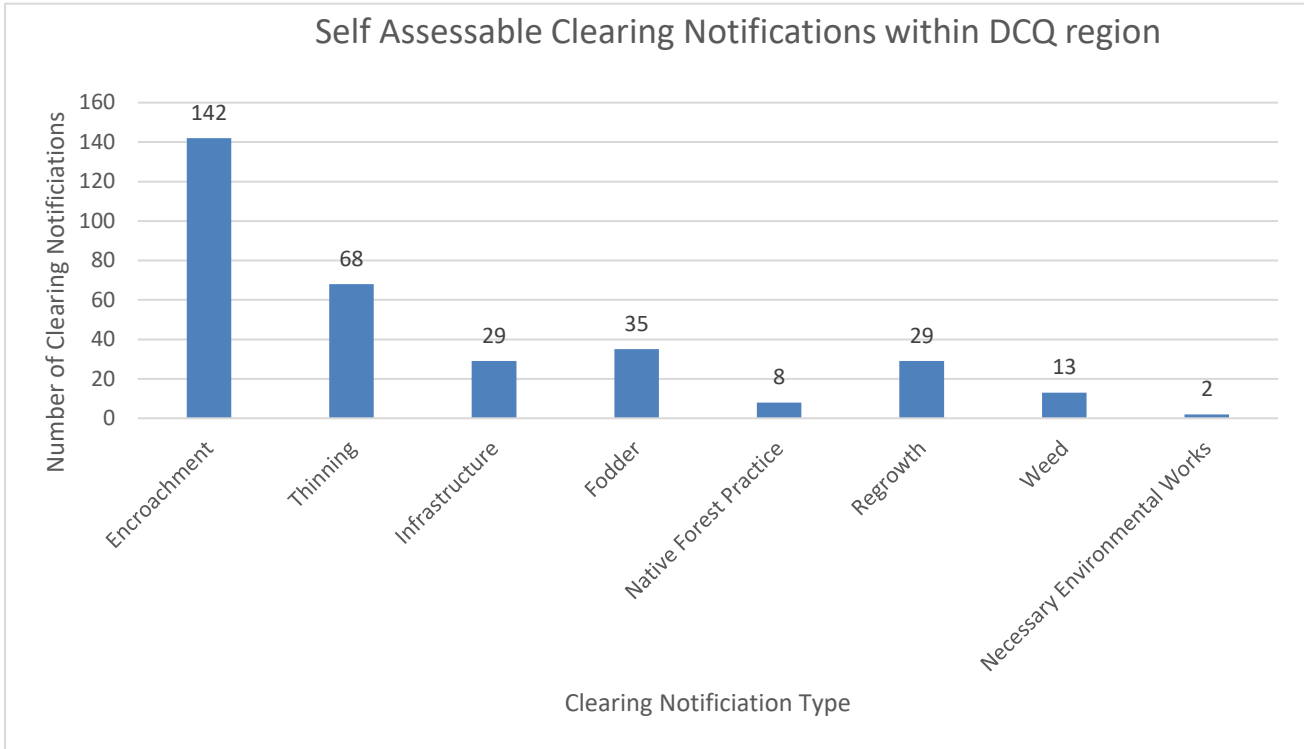
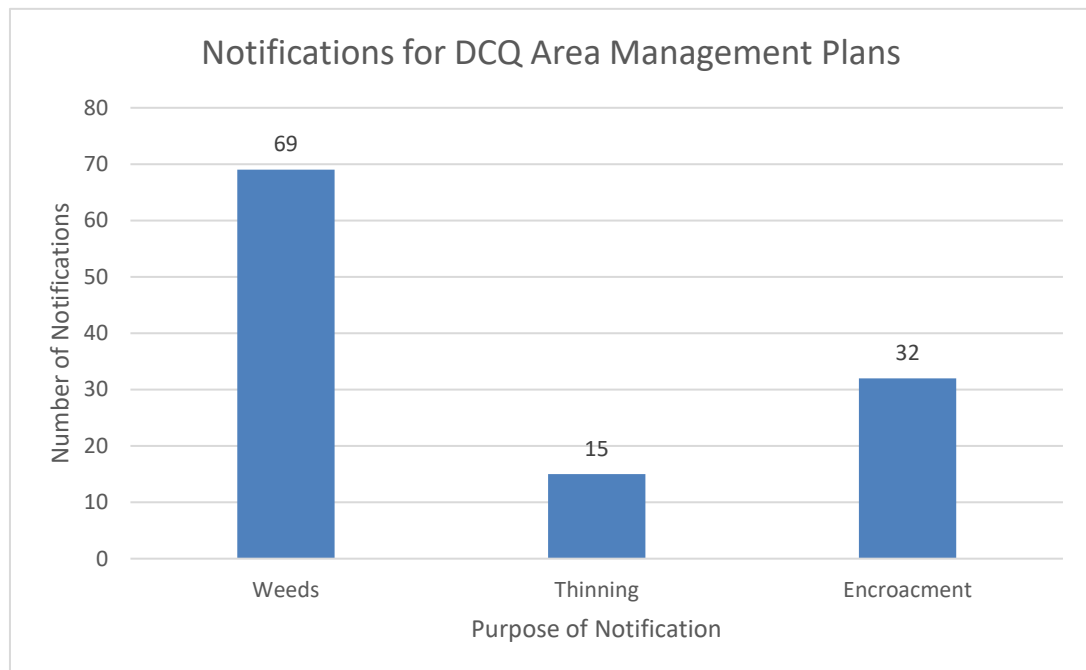


Figure 1: Historical self-assessable code clearing notifications since DCQ in key LGA.

Area Management Plans or AMPs are similar to self-assessable codes but designed for certain locations and contexts. Once an AMP is approved, landholders are required to notify to the department about the clearing activities. DCQ has two AMPs summarised below. The Thinning and Encroachment AMP will expire at 8 March 2020 and will not be eligible for extension due to recent legislative amendments.

Type of Clearing	Purpose	Timeframes associated with the AMP
Thinning and Encroachment AMP	Allow clearing of native vegetation to prevent encroachment onto grassland ecosystems. Also allows thinning of thickened woody ecosystems.	This AMP will expire in 8 March 2020. Due to legislative amendments, this AMP cannot be continued.
Weeds	Allows for the clearing of regulated vegetation for the purpose of weed control.	This AMP is in place until September 2023. Based on current legislation, this AMP will be able to be extended.

The record of notifications for AMPS issued in the DCQ region are shown in figure 2. Weeds and encroachment are the key issue for the region based on landholder notification.



*Figure 2: Number of notifications for DCQ Area Management Plans. Note that the thinning and encroachment has been active since 2012 and the weeds AMP active since 2017.*

Clearing within the region has dropped dramatically since 2000. Peak clearing records occurred with 120 000 ha/year being cleared. Due to the regulations brought in by the VMA, clearing has now dropped to under 20 000 ha/year. See figure 3 for a summary of the clearing trends from 1997 onwards within the DCQ region.

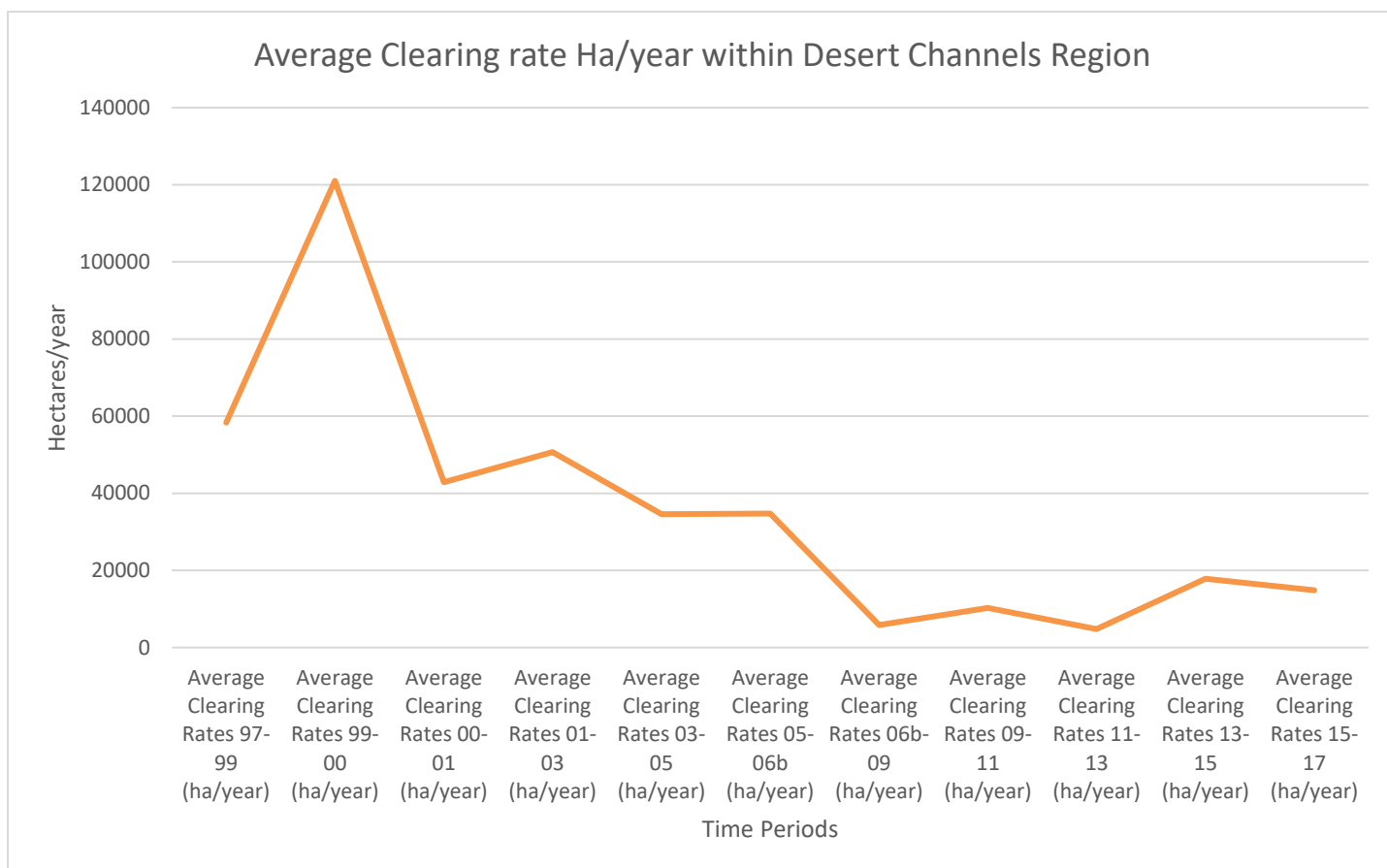


Figure 3 – Historical clearing trends within DCQ region (Accad et al. 2019).

### Landholder views on Vegetation Management.

There are no contemporary studies within the DCQ region that summarise the views of landholders on the vegetation management framework. In the recent NRM plan consultation in 2016, vegetation management was never ranked as a key concern of the community. The only issue that came up was the encroachment of woody vegetation onto grasslands, which is able to be managed through the VM framework.

On a statewide level, Agforce, as a leading advocacy body for grazing landholders finds that the VM framework does not provide certainty to landholders and restricts their ability to manage vegetation (Agforce, 2019). Agforce advocates for greater flexibility to managing vegetation such as being able to clear with less restrictions on ecosystems that have thickened since European settlement. The statements that they make on their website (Agforce, 2019) include:

- Provide investment certainty and clarity about the ultimate treatment of agriculture so that farmers can immediately start preparing their businesses.
- Provide positive financial incentives for adopting greater environmental and biodiversity outcomes and practices. Where possible, this should include a variety of options that allow farmers to choose the appropriate pathway for their enterprise.
- Acknowledge previous good practice.
- Be based on sound science but entail a low administrative burden.
- Support partnerships with other renewable sectors.
- Be governed by a voluntary, partnership approach, not an imposed regime.

## Evidence from Queensland's State of the Environment on Vegetation Management.

Clearing in Queensland is a major factor in biodiversity loss and degradation of waterways. The recent Queensland State of the Environment (DES, 2019) finds that across the state:

- Clearing of native vegetation is the primary issue for the conservation of ecosystems. Although clearing rates have declined, they are still occurring at approximately 0.04% of the state. For example, in 2015–2016, 395,000 hectares per year (ha/year) of woody vegetation was cleared, statewide. This represented a 33% increase from 2014–2015, and was the highest woody vegetation clearing rate since 2003–2004 (490,000ha/year).
- That invasive non-native flora species degrade natural vegetation and impact on biodiversity generally. Similarly invasive non-native fauna species place significant pressure on Queensland's native biodiversity through predation, competition for food and shelter, destruction of habitat, altering ecosystem balance, and poisoning.

## Evidence from Desert Channels

Desert Channels Queensland through its project work has worked predominantly through the vegetation management framework for clearing weeds and clearing of native woody vegetation as part of encroachment activities. It has also utilised and worked with the Biocondition framework to implement monitoring programs.

In the vegetation management requirements for clearing native vegetation to allow for weed control, DCQ has relied predominantly on the Weeds AMP to undertake the majority of the works. This AMP, approved in 2017 has been effective in facilitating clearing as part of weed control activities. It allows for flexibility in treating weeds, which will in turn promote ecosystem health and support DCQ's objectives in improving landscape profitability.

In clearing for encroachment, DCQ has developed a number of lessons in working through the Encroachment self-assessable code or through the Encroachment AMP. Trials have occurred in Mitchell Grass Downs ecosystems in the management of *gidyea* (*Acacia cambegei*) that have encroached onto native grasslands. The lessons DCQ has learnt include:

- Landholders need to apply any clearing of encroachment in strips or patches to allow for rapid pasture recovery following any clearing. Clearing that occurs across large areas, will not allow for rapid pasture regeneration due to the lack of pasture seed or the ability for pasture seed to naturally disperse;
- Too much disturbance of the soil layer can also lead to undesirable recruitment of species such as false sandalwood (*Eremophila mitchellii*); and
- It is difficult to undertake misting to retain the woody retention rates and further code flexibility in this section would be advantageous.

DCQ has also utilised the Queensland Government Biocondition framework to measure the change in condition health for different ecosystems in the region. This system works well for DCQ and provides a repeatable procedure to document change in ecosystem condition. For this system to operate effectively, accessing the relevant biocondition benchmarks is important to allow for comparison to the current state. Currently, not all benchmarks are available and this should be promoted as a tool to assist with measuring ecosystem health throughout the region.

DCQ has not seen any major investment in landholders obtaining additional funding through carbon sequestration, such as the Carbon Farming Initiative. Although the available area for potential carbon sequestration through woody regrowth is small, it is still a potential option for landholders, particularly in the woody ecosystems in the Eastern part of the region. Currently landholders have the ability to participate in the Emissions Reduction Fund, which can provide additional income if

they can meet the regulatory additionality requirement. For vegetation management projects, this requires landholders to allow previously cleared areas that are not currently regulated to regrow and not be re-cleared.

## Position statements

Based on the evidence and the issues, DCQ holds the following positions in relation to vegetation management.

1. Clearing is supported to maintain ecosystem health
  - DCQ supports the ability to undertake clearing activities to maintain ecosystem health throughout the region. Maintaining ecosystem health includes undertaking clearing such as clearing woody encroachment on grasslands, clearing to facilitate weed control and undertaking thinning to restore thickened woody communities.
2. Regulatory tools are promoted and made available in a user-friendly format.
  - DCQ supports landholders accessing a user-friendly framework to allow for clearing authorised under the framework. DCQ supports regular communication and updates on the framework from staff regulating the VM framework. In particular, ensuring that the community is informed about future changes in carbon sequestration activities and that tools such as Biocondition benchmarks are made available.
3. Information should be provided to landholders about woody thickening through remote sensing analysis.
  - DCQ region contains 20% of the area as grasslands. Regular analysis should be conducted to determine woody thickening in these areas and be used to inform landholders about the risk to ecosystem health and the opportunities to clear under the framework.
4. Encroachment Code should have broader guidance on how to undertake clearing to promote grass regeneration and prevent further woody growth.
  - Encourage landholders to undertake small clearing to allow for pasture to recover, minimise soil disturbance that triggers false sandalwood. Allow for slice clearing of misting.

## DCQ recommends

1. Working with State Government to undertake a regular analysis of the region's grasslands and determine the trends in woody thickening. This could occur at a 2-3 year interval. Where thickening is detected, communication could be provided to landholders about the areas detected and the options to clear under the VM framework.
2. Work with State Government to encourage the presence of vegetation management staff in the region to provide for education on the issues within the framework, particularly how to interpret the codes and utilise the exemptions. Also provide information on carbon farming activities and how that can be utilised for additional sources of income in a grazing enterprise.
3. Undertaking an analysis of category X areas that contain woody regrowth and communicates with landholders about the potential of retaining that woody regrowth and participate in the



Commonwealth's Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF). To be eligible for funding under the ERF, proposed projects must use an approved method and is dependent on the tenure of the land. Examples could include:

- Managing regrowth through controlling weeds and feral animals.
  - Avoided clearing – protecting regrowth that would otherwise be cleared
  - Planting forests on areas that contain no forest cover.
4. Promoting the expansion of the regional ecosystem benchmarks to be used for Biocondition scoring. In particular focus on developing benchmarks in the following bioregions:
    - Mitchell Grass Downs Bioregion – there are currently 42 regional ecosystems that contain benchmarks, out of a possible 60.
    - Desert Uplands – there are currently 0 regional ecosystems that contain benchmarks out of a possible 76
  5. Working with landholders who have notified under the DCQ Thinning and Encroachment AMP and indicate that they will not be eligible to clear under that code after March 2020.
  6. Providing comment on the next revision of the self-assessable codes, particularly encroachment to incorporate DCQ knowledge in implementing those clearing practices.
  7. Subject to appropriate funding, provide a workshop on clearing for encroachment which is a large issue in the region given the high proportion of grasslands.

## DCQ will

1. Collaborate with State Government to establish a biennial or triennial analysis of woody thickening and be able to inform landholders about the implications for ecosystem health.
2. Inform landholders about the Thinning and Encroachment AMP expiry in March 2020 to allow for clearing under this tool.
3. Participate in future revision of VM framework codes and incorporate DCQ knowledge, particularly on clearing strategies for encroachment.
4. Write to Department of Environment and Science and encourage the development of the remaining Biocondition benchmarks for the Mitchell Grass Downs and Desert Uplands bioregion.
5. With availability of funding, develop workshops on encroachment and carbon farming to provide education on key issues to landholders in the region. This will be guided by the analyses undertaken by DCQ to inform the opportunities for carbon sequestration, or where encroachment is occurring.

## References

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