

## Tree clearing: Indigenous leader Noel Pearson hits out at changes to Queensland's Native Vegetation Act

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*The Government is expected to reveal its changes to the Vegetation Management Act next week, but has been criticised for taking more than a year to follow through on the policy. (ABC News)*

**Prominent Cape York Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson has hit out against the tightening of Queensland's tree clearing laws, arguing the changes could hurt Indigenous people trying to break out of poverty.**

The Palaszczuk Government wants to make it harder for landholders, such as farmers, to clear native vegetation to make way for new agriculture projects.

Mr Pearson said landholders, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, were better placed than politicians in Brisbane to say what was best for their land.

He urged crossbenchers to reject any State Government moves to tighten clearing laws.

"My prejudice is on the side of landowners," Mr Pearson told the ABC.

"I believe that too many decisions are arbitrarily taken in south-east Queensland for considerations other than proper environmental stewardship.

"I'm hugely sympathetic to the position being taken by [farm lobby group] AgForce and other stakeholders here in north Queensland."

The Government is expected to reveal its changes to the Vegetation Management Act next week, but has been criticised for taking more than a year to follow through on the policy, which it announced during the 2015 state election.

However, Mr Pearson challenged the move, arguing it would hold back Indigenous people who want to develop agriculture businesses.

"We're not going to lift ourselves out of the poverty and misery we live in unless we have balanced development" Noel Pearson

"We have a right to development, and in particular the Indigenous right to development isn't one that has ever been recognised," Mr Pearson said.

"We didn't have a chance in the old days to develop our land, we weren't part of the economy, we were marginalised and excluded.

"And now that we have our land back, what are you saying to us? That we don't have a right to development?"

"We're not going to lift ourselves out of the poverty and misery we live in unless we have balanced development."

## 'This isn't about farmers versus conservation'

In a statement, Queensland's Environment Minister Stephen Miles said the proposed changes to Queensland's vegetation laws were based on science.

"The Palaszczuk Government accepts the science that proves that unsustainable rates of tree clearing are damaging Queensland's environment and our climate," the statement said.

"This isn't about farmers versus conservation."

Tree clearing has been a contentious issue in Queensland for more than a decade, following strict clearing laws implemented under former Labor premier Peter Beattie that ended decades of broad-scale clearing.



*Noel Pearson says the land clearing laws are Brisbane-centric. (ABC News)*

The Liberal-National Party under Campbell Newman amended that law to enable farmers to clear native vegetation for the purpose of high value agriculture, such as new cane and cropping ventures.

Mr Miles said the former Newman government had an irresponsible approach to climate change and land clearing.

"Land-clearing rates doubled in Queensland in the first two years of the LNP government," he said.

"Queensland is now responsible for 90 per cent of Australia's emissions from land use.

"Some 36 million tonnes of emissions every year is generated in Queensland alone by land clearing."

## **Pearson urges crossbenchers to reject reforms**

Mr Pearson urged the four north Queensland crossbenchers, who hold the balance of power along with a Sunshine Coast MP, to reject Labor's reforms.

Two MPs from Katter's Australian Party have come out against the reform, and Mr Pearson said the independent member for Cairns, Billy Gordon, should do the same.

"We would be urging him to support the objection to this potential move by the State Government," Mr Pearson said.

"It's death by a thousand cuts, the ability for the people of the Cape - including Indigenous people who now have vast areas of land back on our title - to do anything on that land is severely restricted.

"Our opportunities for our future generations to develop have been cut off at the past, so I just think this is an unfortunate agenda the State Government is pursuing here."

However, Mr Pearson concedes clearing can have a negative impact on the land if not done correctly.

"There has got to be proper processes and assessments and clearances in place," he said.