MORE than 450 ecologists and wildlife scientists will today call on the premiers of Queensland and NSW to protect the 3.2 million hectares of east coast stock routes.

In an open letter to Anna Bligh and Morris Iemma, scientists have written that stock routes provide refuge for endangered species and, in many cases, are the best remaining examples of native vegetation in a highly cleared landscape.

They say stock routes, also known colloquially as the long paddock, might be the saving grace for species under threat from climate change.

As the climate warms, species will need to shift to survive and to do so, many will need corridors of trees, grasses and undergrowth — just the environment provided in the stock routes.

University of Queensland scientist Hugh Possingham and Australian National University Emeritus Professor Henry Nix have told the Queensland and NSW governments no stock routes should be sold or leased because they have become important environmental assets, albeit by accident.

Stock routes also were a carbon bank helping to mitigate climate change and, despite their value, were under threat from governments, they said.

“The historical pattern of intermittent grazing of stock routes has, in general, delivered them to the current generation in a much healthier state than similar environments on adjoining grazing and agricultural lands,” their letter said.

A review of stock routes is under way, prompting fears they will be sold or leased to graziers.

In May conservationists launched a campaign to keep stock routes in public hands, which was supported by AgForce (which represents beef, sheep and wool, and grains producers) so long as there was no move to limit their use by drovers.

Professor Possingham said the stock routes had to be guarded so they remained economically efficient alternatives to road transport upon which stock could be moved.

Natural Resources Minister Craig Wallace has said Queensland will not sell its stock routes but there are fears it may allow some to be turned over to agistment, which would lead to continuous grazing.

Mr Wallace said droving was likely to increase in future and the stock routes’ role in protecting biodiversity was recognised.

Professor Possingham said the network was a historical, grazing, cultural, recreational and tourism asset.

“Research shows the network supports some of the last strongholds of Australia’s most threatened native animals and plants on public land,” he said.

Professor Nix said the network was critical for migrating birds and its value was even more important now that natural systems were adapting to climate change.

Queensland stock routes cover 76,000km, all of which is deemed public roads.

Tracks vary from 60m to 1.6km wide. Whatever its width, it is deemed a public road.

Drovers pay fees to councils to use the stock routes.