



# ***PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE***

## **Members present:**

Mr SA Bennett MP—Chair  
Mr NJ Dalton MP  
Mr RI Katter MP  
Mr GR Kelly MP  
Mr JR Martin MP  
Mr TJ Smith MP

## **Staff present:**

Dr A Ward—Committee Secretary  
Dr K Kowol—Assistant Committee Secretary

## **PUBLIC BRIEFING—BRIEFING OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY INDUSTRIES**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Wednesday, 19 February 2025**

**Brisbane**

## WEDNESDAY, 19 FEBRUARY 2025

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**The committee met at 10.17 am.**

**CHAIR:** Good morning. I declare open this public briefing. My name is Stephen Bennett. I am the member for Burnett and chair of the committee. With me here today are: James Martin, member for Stretton and deputy chair; Nigel Dalton, member for Mackay; Robbie Katter, member for Traeger; Glen Kelly, member for Mirani; and Tom Smith, member for Bundaberg, who will join us shortly.

Today we will be receiving briefings from departmental officers on the portfolio areas falling within the committee's area of responsibility. The purpose of these briefings is to assist the committee with furthering its understanding of the respective portfolio areas and key initiatives going on in these areas. At the outset I want to thank the directors-general for making themselves available and their leadership teams for being here today. Today we will receive briefings from the Department of Primary Industries and the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development.

This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the briefing at the discretion of the committee. I remind committee members that officers are here to provide factual and technical information. Any questions seeking an opinion about policy should be directed to the minister or left to debate on the floor of the House.

These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I remind those in attendance to please turn their mobiles phones off or to silent mode.

**BACON, Mr Ashley, Acting Deputy Director-General, Agriculture, Department of Primary Industries**

**BOLTON, Mr Graeme, Director-General, Department of Primary Industries**

**CHAY, Dr Rachel, Deputy Director-General, Biosecurity Queensland and Chief Biosecurity Officer, Department of Primary Industries**

**CLARK, Ms Justine, Deputy Director-General, Corporate, Department of Primary Industries**

**JACOB, Ms Pauline, Deputy Director-General, Fisheries and Forestry, Department of Primary Industries**

**CHAIR:** I invite you to make some opening remarks.

**Mr Bolton:** Good morning. I would like to start by acknowledging the Primary Industries and Resources Committee and its members. I thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we gather today, the Turrbal and Yagara people, and pay my respects to elders past and present. I extend my respects to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who join us today.

Queensland is a powerhouse of food and fibre production. We cover more than 1.73 million square kilometres across three very diverse climatic regions. We contribute more than 25 per cent of Australia's primary produce, with our agriculture, fisheries and forestry sector generating \$22.66 billion in 2023-24. Significantly, nearly 60 per cent of this output is exported to over 130 markets worldwide. Our agricultural exports were valued at \$13.35 billion in 2023-24. Our top major

trading partners are China, at \$2.48 billion; the United States, at \$2.15 billion; Japan, at \$1.68 billion; and South Korea, at \$1.67 billion. The major contributor to our export value was beef, which was valued at \$6.73 billion.

The Department of Primary Industries is dedicated to growing thriving regional communities through the sustainable growth of our primary producers. The department has nearly 2,400 employees across our regions, across nearly 250 sites around the state. We work with producers and agribusinesses along the supply chain to support regional investment opportunities and undertake research, development and extension to improve productivity and increase resilience.

We manage the sustainability of our fisheries resources to maximise recreational fishing experiences; drive the economic growth of commercial fishing and aquaculture; and ensure we have fresh local seafood for our consumers. We also manage the commercial sale of state owned native forest and quarry materials and administer the HQPlantations licence. We minimise the impact of biosecurity threats to the economy through biosecurity prevention, preparedness and incident response. We also manage pest and disease management, animal welfare and management, and the eradication of major pests such as the National Fire Ant Eradication Program. The department administers five statutory authorities including Safe Food Qld, the Darling Downs Moreton Rabbit Board, the Veterinary Surgeons Board of Queensland, the Queensland Racing Integrity Commission and the Queensland Racing Appeals Panel.

The committee requested an update with regard to the status of the Auditor-General's recommendations within report 1 of 2024-25. I am pleased to advise that, out of the 11 recommendations made by the Auditor-General, the department has fully implemented 10 recommendations and partially implemented the remaining one recommendation. With respect to the partially implemented recommendation, the department is continuing to work with RSPCA Queensland to develop codes of practice related to minimum standards for the welfare of animals including the dog and breeder code. We are expecting this work to be completed by the end of this calendar year, subject to consultation with industry and community.

The committee also requested advice on machinery-of-government changes that may have affected this particular portfolio. I can advise that the Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority, QRIDA, was transferred to the portfolio responsibility of the Minister for Natural Resources and Mines, Minister for Manufacturing, and Minister for Regional and Rural Development. QRIDA is now subsequently administered through the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing, and Regional and Rural Development. Notwithstanding this machinery-of-government change, the Department of Primary Industries continues to work very closely with both QRIDA and the administering department to ensure our rural and regional communities and primary producers are supported during their time of need. I particularly note the significant flood events that are happening in North Queensland in Ingham.

The committee requested an update with regard to key deliverables. I can advise that Minister Perrett has 15 key portfolio deliverables outlined in his charter letter. You can find a copy of the ministerial charter letter on the cabinet's website at [cabinet.qld.gov.au](http://cabinet.qld.gov.au). The department has commenced implementation on each of these portfolio deliverables, and I am pleased to give you an update on some of those key deliverables.

We are working with the Mossman community, canegrowers and the Mulgrave Sugar Mill to support the harvest and crushing of next year's sugarcane crop while working with local growers to explore options for future seasons. We have commenced a review of the closure of the Cape York biosecurity facility at Coen and are developing options to enhance our northern biosecurity capabilities. We have commenced recruitment for 100 additional frontline biosecurity officers. That commenced prior to Christmas. We will be working with councils and local communities across Queensland to identify the regional biosecurity priorities relevant to their region and then looking at how we then structure our response, including the remaining FTEs, to address those priorities. We have also commenced work to deliver a landmark timber action plan which will underpin Queensland's timber industry and the goal to build one million homes by 2044.

Last but not least, we have commenced work on growing Queensland's primary production to \$30 billion by 2030. I am pleased to advise that next Wednesday, 26 February, the department will be hosting a whole-of-portfolio, whole-of-ecosystem forum to co-design a 25-year blueprint to build a better future for our primary producers and regional communities. We are bringing together representatives from across the agriculture, fishery and forestry industries; our various research partners, including universities and research development corporations; financial investment institutions; multiple levels of government; our supply chain; and innovators to help co-design that 25-

year blueprint. Together we will explore the key factors that will influence our primary producers moving forward such as shifts in globalisation. We are seeing significant trends playing out across the globe at the moment including potential new trade tariffs. We are seeing changes in ESG—environmental social and governance—and that is affecting some of our suppliers and the markets we are supplying into. We are making sure we are getting in front of that.

We are very much in a changing climate. We have seen significant floods happening in North Queensland. Part of the 25-year vision is to start to look forward to say, 'What does that look like for our primary producers in 25 years? What do we need to do now to be ready for that future?' We will also be looking at other opportunities such as digital and technology. The advent of AI will produce significant opportunities for our primary producers. There is also automation and ag technology. I note that the department and Queensland are this week hosting evokeAG, a national conference that showcases ag tech or ag innovation. Finally, there is advanced manufacturing and international megatrends.

There is significant opportunity to look at how we value-add to our primary produce and ensure we are creating jobs and manufacturing opportunities in the regions but, more importantly, adding value to our produce. Success will hinge on a collective effort to create a shared vision, agreed priorities and a strong public-private partnership to deliver real outcomes. There will be opportunities to be involved in the blueprint over the coming months. A broad consultation program has already commenced with primary producers and peak groups. We will be rolling out further consultation over the coming months. The blueprint and subsequent action plans will pave the way for Queensland primary producers and the goal to grow primary production to \$30 billion by 2030. I thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before you, and I would welcome any questions the committee may have.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Director-General.

**Mr MARTIN:** My question is in relation to the 25-year blueprint, which I think has the goal of increasing farm gate output by \$30 billion. You mentioned that the minister has asked you to look at global megatrends, advances in technology and advanced manufacturing. Could you expand on what you mean by 'global megatrends'? Could you provide some examples of what people are doing overseas that we could do here to make things better? Also, does that 25-year blueprint look at employment in the sector?

**Mr Bolton:** Absolutely. I did not cover all of the key issues we are facing, but skills is certainly one of those issues. As anyone who has been paying attention over the last three or four years would know, we have a structural employment issue whereby we do not have enough skilled people for all of our industries—primary production, mines, retail or hospitality. One of the key things for us is to look at the shortfalls and how we work with other parts of government, such as TAFE and Education, to look at the skills that will be required in the future. The future of agriculture is changing. It is no longer pure agronomics—going out and working the land; it is very much about information technology. It is about the skills of the future—how we offset the need and the high cost of skills through better automation and artificial intelligence.

Some of the other megatrends and opportunities through the supply chain are very much around sustainable aviation fuels, as an example, where we can look at those opportunities not just through the lens of a portfolio—say grains or sugarcane—but start to look at that as a regional ecosystem. A particular portfolio or commodity in one region may not have sufficient volume to support that type of opportunity, but, when we start to look at a region, what are the opportunities to aggregate that food source or feed source to then potentially support and grow future industries such as sustainable aviation fuels or biofuels?

**Mr MARTIN:** I will follow on from that in relation to workforce. Many sectors are facing a shortage of workers. Will the blueprint look at potentially increasing the migrant workforce?

**Mr Bolton:** Issues with regard to migration are very much Commonwealth issues and would be best addressed through them. The blueprint will be very much looking at the need for skilled labour and how we work that, noting that a lot of that responsibility sits within other ministerial portfolios. I am working very closely with my fellow colleagues across the other departments to see what we need from them to help support us in achieving that goal of \$30 billion. That includes the skills trades training and, really importantly, pathways from high school, agricultural studies into TAFE and/or higher education and even into our own research organisations like Agri-Science Queensland for applied research over time.

**Mr DALTON:** In relation to the 25-year blueprint for agriculture, you say that you are consulting with First Nations people. I wondered who they are and how they fit in to the blueprint.

**Mr Bolton:** I will correct that, because I do not know that I actually mentioned First Nations people as part of who we are engaging with immediately. Certainly, we are immediately engaging with industry—the peak bodies and representatives of industry. They will be at the table to help co-design that blueprint. There will then be broader consultation across whole of sector and whole of community, which will include First Nations communities, looking at opportunities that they may participate in within this, because it is about what we do around not just our peri-urban areas but also the environmental sector. This is not about growth at the cost of all; it is very much about ensuring that we are embracing ESG—environmental, social and governance—to make sure that we are addressing our social licence and that we continue to meet the expectations of our community and consumers.

**Mr SMITH:** Thank you so much for being here, and that goes for everyone. Yesterday in the House during a ministerial statement the minister mentioned that disaster assistance loans of up to \$250,000 are available with federal and state assistance. Are those disaster assistance loans coming through the department or QRIDA?

**Mr Bolton:** Shortly I will hand across to Ash Bacon, who is my Acting Deputy Director-General for Agriculture, to give you some more detail on that. At a high level, we are working very closely with QRIDA and also the Queensland Reconstruction Authority around how these various grants and assistance packages might be structured. In particular, I was in Cardwell and the Burdekin 2½ weeks ago meeting with primary producers and affected community members to get a really good understanding about what is happening on the ground to help better inform some of the discussions and negotiations that we are having. I will hand to Ash to give you a bit more detail about the packages.

**Mr Bacon:** Those loans are administered through QRIDA.

**Mr SMITH:** Are the disaster assistance grants of up to \$25,000 for the hire or purchase of equipment and materials to clean up and move debris also through QRIDA?

**Mr Bacon:** The package is delivered through DPI. We work very closely with the LDMGs and the local councils but, again, they are administered through QRIDA.

**Mr SMITH:** The minister also announced that, for the first time, Queensland farmers will be able to use disaster funding to replant destroyed crops. He then said—

My department will now begin co-designing, with industry guidelines governing how replanting and reseeding can be carried out using this disaster assistance. I encourage growers to have their say...

Am I right that with this co-designing of industry guidelines there will not be funding available for replanting and reseeding for those who have just gone through the recent Townsville floods?

**Mr Bolton:** Through his statement yesterday, the minister submitted that we are looking to change the guidelines to include replanting. It will be applicable to this particular event and future events moving forward. The reason we are co-designing with industry about what that looks and feels like is that we can make some decisions in isolation sitting down here in Brisbane or in our regional offices, but we may end up creating unintended consequences for our producers. The key thing for me is that we are working closely with industry in defining or shaping that change to the guideline so that we are ensuring those people who need the money to recover are getting that appropriate support.

**Mr SMITH:** Is there a rough timeframe, considering the urgency of those who have just gone through that event, for that co-design to be finalised?

**Mr Bolton:** Absolutely. We will need to look at a cabinet process for that. I cannot talk about the cabinet's timetable or consideration, but we would be looking to try to get this done within the next four to six weeks, if not earlier. Certainly, it is a major priority. We will work with QRIDA around those individuals and companies that might be making applications in the meantime, and QRIDA will be managing those applications such that they are not disadvantaged.

**Mr G KELLY:** It is great to have you here. It is a privilege to see everybody else who is joining today. The one question I have is about jobs. I have others as well. In terms of the 100 additional new jobs with Biosecurity, how are we going there? Have those positions been filled? Are we getting people jumping up and down saying, 'I want that job'? Where are they going to be positioned and what will they have to look for? We are huge on the issue of foot-and-mouth disease never coming to this country. This is such an important issue to the beef industry or to any industry that carries a hoof. Where are we going with that?

**Mr Bolton:** I will give a bit of a prelude and I will hand to my colleague Dr Rachel Chay. This is a very big priority for us. We have commenced recruitment, and it is going to be very much a phased recruitment. We have already recruited—prior to Christmas—three senior leadership roles which will

be located at various locations across the state. The aim is that we get the best people in those roles. It does not matter where they are located; it could be Roma, Charleville, Mount Isa, Emerald, Townsville, Cairns or wherever. Those three leaders will then work with the various councils to identify what are the regional priorities for biosecurity there and that will help shape that further. I will hand across to Dr Chay, who will give you a little bit more information about how popular this particular recruitment has been.

**Dr Chay:** We have closed the recruitment rounds for three Regional Biosecurity leads. The strategy for the recruitment of these 100 biosecurity officers, which we are excited about, as is regional Queensland, is to start with a director level position whose first task is to go and start talking in a regional hub set-up to producers and local government, particularly in the invasive space, and start developing the context under which they will be operating. The joy of Queensland, as the members are all aware, is that the biosecurity situations across the state are very place and context based. That is why we are hammering around three regional hubs.

Those recruitment rounds were really well subscribed, and that speaks to, as the director-general mentioned, our not being incredibly specific about where you are within a region. These people must be regionally based or prepared to be regionally based, but we are not suggesting within a regional hub that they must be at X, Y and Z. The department's vision for these people is that they are out and about: they are on the road and they are working with the communities they serve to provide that biosecurity leadership that we need at a regional level. We are really excited to get these biosecurity leads on the ground.

The subsequent recruitment will be based on—what I need is really good people. We are not looking for necessarily very strict technical requirements or higher education skills; we are looking for good people. I can teach them how to be good regulators and I can teach them how to work with community. I just need them to be willing to do so. We are hoping that this will be a really attractive package to our colleagues in the regions. We are well oversubscribed, so we are getting really good people in there.

**Mr G KELLY:** That is good. Common sense is the one you want.

**Dr Chay:** That is the one.

**Mr KATTER:** Obviously, with Cloncurry in my electorate, it has been very frustrating for me for years to hear that we have all these numbers, but it is always questionable as to whether there is someone on the ground or someone in that office. I get that it is hard. For us who are competing for resources down here, it does not help when we keep hearing the message, 'It's all there. It's all okay,' because it should be about whether or not biosecurity is being achieved—and I think we can all agree it is highly compromised everywhere through weeds growing and pests. That is unquestionable. Bellyache bush, prickly acacia and rubber vine are all out of control in my electorate. If you talk to the NRM groups they say, 'Pick your weed.' It is more of a federal funding issue when we have an attack of it, but they are all growing and the ability to respond to these things—and that is just touching on the weeds. It is not even taking into account the number of pigs, which is exploding out there as well. I will zero down to one thing.

I presented to the minister of the previous government on biosecurity—because you are talking about technology and things, so this was a good little road test. I brought a vet, Campbell Costello, to the minister to talk about an innovative way to look at biosecurity and bring down costs using these PCR testing boxes. Laypeople could just place them and you would not need vets or biosecurity officers; you could have council place them all through the cape and have a quick response by a vet, so effectively it could be a biosecurity shield. Has any work been done in that space? I would have thought that would be in at least the top three when talking about these things. Can you comment on that?

**Mr Bolton:** Absolutely. I might hand across to my colleagues, both Ashley and Rachel, for comment on this. Using technology is a key component of our movement forward in terms of stock management, if I am going to use livestock as an example, but also biosecurity. We have a number of trials underway where we are looking at using remote sensing technology, using technologies such as Starlink, to have cameras at key points for stock where they come to water or lick posts—those sorts of things. Not only can we monitor the health of these stock but we can actually use AI to start to identify potential risks around biosecurity. It could be pests, diseases—those sorts of things. I am not familiar with the PCR testing example that you spoke about, but research and development around that sort of technology is a very key component of where we are heading. Do my colleagues have anything to add in that area?

**Mr Bacon:** I was out at the Ecosciences Precinct just last week and I saw prototypes of those PCR tests that you are referring to. The team are working through that. They were looking in that EAD space and how they can get tools that are small, light and reliable so they could be distributed throughout regions. They have gone through a first phase of prototyping, and I saw those prototypes out at the ESP—Ecosciences Precinct—just last week. As Graeme mentioned, I was also at Toowoomba, at Tor Street, looking at digital technology on the feedlots and the like and using AI technology to identify change in symptoms, say in cattle, to be able to send out those signals around potential EADs or other diseases in cattle, for example. In summary, yes, there is work being undertaken and I have seen firsthand two of those first-phase projects that have been completed in recent times that are being prototyped at the moment.

**Mr KATTER:** There may be a lot that I do not know there. I know the main driver for that has been lost to South Africa, where they are pretty welcoming in saying, 'Yeah, bring it in.' However, there might be others in the field, too, who I do not know about. We could burn up a lot of our time on that. It is concerning to me—I reiterate it may be a federal funding shortfall—to see the weeds when I am driving through the cape, the gulf or anywhere. It is hard to pick the winner now in terms of which is the worst. We are not getting anywhere with prickly acacia. The bellyache bush has gotten worse around the goldfields/basalt area. The caltrop is probably not as bad. Where do we go from here? There is no talk about it; it is hard to get political push. You guys have to be a part of the front line.

**Mr Bolton:** There are a couple of parts to my response to that question. Under the Biosecurity Act, every single landholder has a general biosecurity obligation. Unfortunately, not all landowners take that obligation seriously and respond and manage the land appropriately. A key focus of the 100 additional frontline biosecurity officers is how we work with local communities—the local producers, other local large landholders, the councils, state and federal governments with their own large tracts of land—and how we better coordinate and manage some of those responses. As you mentioned, it can vary depending on where you are in the state. I know that in the north-west it is very much around prickly acacia; in the south-west it is primarily around some of the cactus species; on the east coast feral pigs are a major issue and concern. It is identifying what are the priorities for that particular region and how we use the staff that will augment the 46-odd biosecurity officers across the state to better target and focus that and really make sure that everyone within large communities plays their role as well.

**Mr KATTER:** One last comment, Chair, if you would indulge me.

**CHAIR:** All right.

**Mr KATTER:** I think we just have to be careful in that space. That comment around prickly acacia is really important, because there was a DPI who was promoting that prickly acacia be planted. Going back to the people and saying they have a bigger role to play in arresting the growth of a weed that they propagated and advised people to plant—as you can see—is politically problematic and maybe legally problematic. I do in part agree with you on that, but I think it is not a black-and-white thing.

**CHAIR:** Returning to the targeted \$30 billion increase by 2030, can you advise the committee what programs and innovation we are hoping to achieve to get to that \$30 billion, please?

**Mr Bolton:** The first step is the whole-of-portfolio blueprint forum we are holding next Wednesday. It is really getting the key players in the room. It is all the industry peaks. It is the key industry leaders who are already out there doing great innovation. It is the research partners such as universities, the various RDCs, the other not-for-profits, our own agri-science research areas. It is also looking at what role government has to play in the supply chain and identifying opportunities to advance that.

You may be aware that the government announced a \$30 million sowing the seeds fund. That funding will be directed at priority objectives that fall out of the blueprint and subsequent action plans. The intent is that we will work with industry to prioritise what are the opportunities and how we will turn the dial on achieving that \$30 billion. It is co-design, co-investment and co-delivering, so working with industry around co-investment in those opportunities, working with the Commonwealth around opportunities for them to come to the table, and then having very clear targets.

In terms of the types of activities, we will be looking at on-farm production. That is a key component. We do not have more agricultural land coming onboard. It is really about ensuring we are getting the best out of the land that we have, the really big opportunities around advanced manufacturing or post farm gate, value-adding to the products that we produce, and in particular looking at other opportunities such as reducing waste. At the moment there is quite a bit of food produced that does not initially go to market because of blemishes and other imperfections, yet the

nutritional quality of that food is incredibly high. How do we do more with that so we are not wasting that great produce, we are getting the best value out of that, and producers are similarly being remunerated for the work they are putting in to grow that?

**CHAIR:** Wednesday, 26 February will be the largest consultation that has happened in a long time. How can people who are not going to be at that forum have input into the blueprint? There may be people who are watching this hearing.

**Mr Bolton:** That is a really good question. Next Wednesday is the first step. Coming out of that, we are looking to develop a draft blueprint. We will then take that back out to the participants on the day to say, 'This is what we've heard you say and this is where we're looking to go.' From there we will obviously brief government on where we are heading. Then there will be broader consultation across the whole community, including other parts of the sector such as environmental, First Nations and other parts of the community, for a minimum of four weeks. We are anticipating four to six weeks where they will have an opportunity to comment, inform and help shape what that final blueprint will look like. The intent is that we will have that blueprint ready for consideration by midyear, and then we will start to work on the action plans.

**Mr MARTIN:** Going back to something you mentioned in your initial opening statement, has the department taken any steps to prepare or assist industry if the USA does introduce tariffs in primary industries and what that could do to, for example, our beef sector?

**Mr Bolton:** The USA is our second largest trading partner, as I mentioned before, and beef is obviously one of our largest exports to the USA. It is valued at \$1.57 billion. We are very acutely aware of some of those issues. It accounts for about 73 per cent of our primary industry exports to the USA, so beef is a big area that we are very closely watching. We are very much aware that the USA has introduced a range of tariff measures on a broad range of goods, including a 10 per cent tariff on Chinese imports and 25 per cent on all steel aluminium imports, including those from Australia. To date there have been no agricultural products subject to new tariffs, but we are watching that closely. We are working very closely with our Commonwealth counterparts to help inform any conversations and negotiations they have.

We note that tariffs on steel and aluminium are likely to have an impact on our primary producers because that is the key input to things like machinery and other farm equipment we import from the United States. Having said all of that, Queensland primary producers might also benefit from agricultural production and trade disruptions. There might be new opportunities opening up across other parts that are subject to trade tariffs. We are working very closely with our colleagues in Trade and Investment Queensland on identifying where those potential opportunities might be and looking to work with TIQ and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade around opening up negotiations to take advantage of those opportunities.

**Mr DALTON:** Forgive my ignorance on this subject; I am very new to this area. Commercial fishermen in Mackay are very concerned there is no progress on looking again at the NX licences for their industry. Is there any progress on returning to negotiation or looking at the science in that area?

**Mr Bolton:** The decision to phase out the gillnet fishery, including the NX fishery, to June 2027 was a decision of the former government and the Commonwealth government, so I cannot really comment on that. What I can say is that the department is very much focused on ensuring that our commercial fishers can continue to fish. In the absence of a change of policy, we are focusing on other technologies. We are working very closely with the commercial fishing industry to trial alternative gear such as arrowhead traps, fish traps and a range of other traps that are used around the world already to commercially catch fish at volume, which is what keeps our commercial fishers sustainable and, more importantly, economically sustainable and profitable.

**Mr DALTON:** Can you understand the frustration of consumers when they find fish that could be caught offshore imported from overseas?

**CHAIR:** That is asking for an opinion on a policy position, with all due respect.

**Mr SMITH:** Chair, I think that we need to hear the answer.

**CHAIR:** Over to you, member for Bundaberg, for your question. We can talk about the previous government's fishing policy all day if you want.

**Mr SMITH:** Thank you, Chair. Mr Bolton, as you said, the department works with various other departments. I imagine that you work with the department of environment quite a lot as well. Has there been any directive to the Department of Primary Industries to work towards advocating to the department of environment for the Bundaberg region to be exempt from current reef regulations?



**CHAIR:** That is asking about policy.

**Mr SMITH:** No. It is asking if the department has been directed to work with the department of environment to exempt the Bundaberg region from current reef regulations.

**CHAIR:** You have a bit of latitude there. I still think it is asking for opinion on policy, to be fair, but I am happy for you to answer that.

**Mr Bolton:** I will keep it very brief. The department has not been directed.

**Mr SMITH:** I have a follow-up question, Chair.

**CHAIR:** Keep it within the previous question.

**Mr SMITH:** Absolutely. Has the department been directed by the minister to work with the department of environment to review vegetation management laws?

**Mr Bolton:** I am happy to take that question. Again my answer is very brief. It has not been directed.

**Mr G KELLY:** I am a sixth-generation farmer. You mentioned in your introduction about saving the climate in the next 25 years. Farmers get blamed for a lot of issues moving forward with climate change. Is moving forward to save the climate in the next 25 years going to cost the person on the ground, the actual producer, or are those things that are going to help coming in from other branches of the tree? That is something I get hit with a lot. Who is paying for this? At the moment we cop a lot of the bills.

**Mr Bolton:** A change in climate is something that we are very much concerned and aware of—for example, sea temperature change. Sea temperatures have increased 1.1 degrees Celsius over the last 10 or 15 years. We are now seeing tropical species that up until now have been traditionally caught up in North Queensland. We now have resident populations of barramundi in rivers in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast stretching down to the Tweed border. They are catching coral trout in Sydney Harbour. Those species were never found as far south in the past. We are looking at what the implications are, particularly for our commercial fisheries. We are starting to see a retraction of snapper distribution. Normally they are off the South-East Queensland coast, but we are now seeing less and less. We think they are moving further south with the colder water.

In terms of the broader agricultural portfolio, we are looking at changed rainfalls and patterns. What does that mean in terms of water scarcity or water insecurity and how do we work with producers to understand what that is going to look like in 15, 20 or 35 years time? We are growing some crops now that might be growing in a vastly different climatic future. For example, we might have significant rainfalls at this point in time, but it might change over time so what does that mean for that particular crop? What do we need to be doing now to be ready for that future? It might include research into various types of alternative genetics or strains of whatever we are growing there so it is fit for the future. It might be reimagining what we are producing in that region and trying something totally different that will be more suited for that future climatic pattern.

**CHAIR:** Member for Traeger, do you have another question?

**Mr KATTER:** It is really broad and I apologise for its vagueness. Often in reports, studies and things I see an imperative in agriculture and primary industries—I do not think it is often asserted as an imperative—to preserve that space for small private enterprise with links with communities. Does that play a role when we are talking about these things? It is pretty easy to aggregate interests. Farm lobby groups and the big guys will have the time to engage and roll out programs and new trials. There are a lot of little guys out there who used to form a big part of the market but now they form a diminishing part of the market. They play an absolutely essential role in our communities because usually they are the ones who get their tractor repaired in the town. They do not have a FIFO workforce. They are the ones who prop up a lot of these little towns we represent. At this high-level policy area we are talking about new initiatives and schemes. If it is not embedded at the top part, you can start going down roads that play inadvertently into the hands of the big corporates. I will give you an example. With water policy they say, 'It's great, we'll roll out some water on some big cotton farms.' That is a lot different to a smaller water scheme that would have a hundred smaller farmers who buy their gear in town and are less likely to have service agreements with the big guys that bring in FIFO and that sort of thing.

**Mr Bolton:** I will not comment on the water—

**Mr KATTER:** Yes, but I just wanted to use that as an example.

**Mr Bolton:** Yes, absolutely. We undertake a range of different compliance activities across the portfolio, whether it is in Queensland Boating and Fisheries Patrol, animal welfare and biosecurity, even intensive livestock. Our focus is always on education, so it is about working with our producers wherever they are to make sure that they are aware of their obligations or requirements and then really looking at compliance enforcement as the next step. So it is education, and if they are still repeating activities we might then look at fines or prosecutions.

Broadly speaking, though, a lot of good regulation is based on good business. Certainly, what we have seen changing over time is that the consumer is demanding greater responsibility coming from our primary producers, and often what we regulate is tied to consumer expectation as well. It makes good business sense that our primary producers are doing the right thing because, one, it gives them maintaining market access to what they are currently selling to but, two, enhanced management and best management practices might actually open up new markets and new opportunities, and that is a very key focus of the blueprint moving forward—that is, understanding what those changing factors are and how we can work with industries that are then embracing best practice and it is not a burden but is a market opportunity.

**Mr KATTER:** Yes, I accept that, but I would say in response that there is still probably an unintentional market bias, and that might be the best way to describe it. It is always better as a story or as a case study, but with those PIPES loans and the QRIDA stuff in the middle of the drought, my electorate was worst hit—had the biggest proportion of drought—and we were four or five years in. I am rubbery on the numbers, but we were well into the drought and I think two of those drought loans had gone out in my electorate and in the southern and central, where you have a higher critical mass closer to services and closer to officers that could engage easily, you had, like, 300 of the loans going out. There is clear evidence that some of these people are on 100,000 acres trying to hold it all together and they do not have time to educate themselves, so there needs to be support out there, but we cannot even get a permanent biosecurity officer in Cloncurry. It has to be done cognisant of the fact that you push this stuff, but it will have a bias against some of those far-flung areas, which means that your AA and Stanbroke or the big ones can more easily comply given they have a head office in Brisbane or wherever. It will have an unintended bias in a lot of cases against those smaller private operators who you probably intentionally would like to participate but need some help or support to because they are often busy trying to keep things together.

**CHAIR:** Do you have a question to add to the end of that, Robbie?

**Mr KATTER:** Yes. I would refer back to my original question: is there something at the policy level that says that anything we do has to be cognisant of how it will impact on that proportion of small private enterprises, because my observation has been that the rollout of policy and more compliance just keeps having a bias against those smaller ones?

**CHAIR:** You just have to rephrase it. You cannot really ask the department to comment on a policy position, so maybe—

**Mr KATTER:** In the hierarchy of orders or policy directions you are giving, does that play a distinctive role in it? I imagine the answer is no, but is there a part of your charter that says that while you are rolling out or giving this advice you take into consideration the inadvertent impact it could specifically have on smaller private enterprises in a sector?

**Mr Bolton:** In everything we do we acknowledge that we deal with a range of primary producers within our ecosystem—from some very large, vertically integrated producers down to multigenerational mum-and-dad producers. Everything we do has to serve every single one of those stakeholders. A key focus of the department moving forward is leaning back into that extension program, and you mentioned about working with our primary producers so that they are focused on the day-to-day living and producing on the land. How do we help them do what they need to do? I know in the current disaster that is unfolding up in Ingham and North Queensland QRIDA has a number of liaison officers that are going to be working with industry, with the affected producers, to help them prepare their applications, so in my mind that is certainly a focus that we will continue moving forward.

**CHAIR:** Are you happy, Rob?

**Mr KATTER:** I am happy I have had an attempt at answering the question. I do not think you could do it any better than that, but, yes, I appreciate that.

**CHAIR:** I want to come back to the sowing seeds fund—the \$30 million that was announced in November—and maybe for the committee's benefit some examples of the technologies and practices that we hope to see which might come out of that. My understanding is that we are looking to industry to guide us in that space. Is that a fair assumption?

**Mr Bolton:** Absolutely. The blueprint will set the 25-year vision. Coming off that, we are going to have a series of five-year action plans that will identify what those potential opportunities are. The sowing the seeds fund—the \$30 million sowing the seeds innovation fund—will then be targeted at those types of innovations. Some of the examples that I have seen over the last couple of days at evokeAG include things like new technology to detect pregnancies within cows and other livestock. That has the potential to save weeks and thousands of dollars in vet fees and time delays and enables our livestock producers to better manage their herd. For example, if you have cows that are early gestation—early pregnancy—they will put them into other parts of their pasture that better support that early pregnancy. Similarly, it informs future genetic breeding decisions about what they might do and how they do it, so those sorts of advancements are going to be absolutely critical. Another example we saw through previous evokeAG activities is swarm technology. I might hand across to Ash to give a little bit more information about that, but these are the types of technologies that we are looking to invest in and give us that return on that investment.

**Mr Bacon:** Thank you, Director-General. As Graeme mentioned, swarm farms are a new technology that has been implemented up in Emerald, produced through Central Queensland members of the community. Working with the Central Queensland smart cropping farm up there in Emerald, they have gone through and tested and prototyped automated machines to be able to continually work on farm to maximise their productivity and profitability in the exercise that they do. I know that they now are moving product all across Australia and internationally. Their technology that they have adopted is very much informing precision pesticides management, for example, so reducing the cost involved in putting pesticides and herbicides on their property. They are tackling that workforce matter, because they are able to put these robots working safely on their farms continuously throughout the day and in safe conditions as well. These are real genuine innovators that are being showcased at evokeAG right now, and there are plenty more. As the director-general said, about 2,000 people are attending that event, and we are not just talking about agtech—it is going to play a critical role—but there are new things in biotechnology about how we manage water on farm and how we manage absorption and soil condition to maximise our benefits through this process. Building on the back of evokeAG, we have a real opportunity to unleash that potential in Queensland.

**CHAIR:** Because we are talking about Central Queensland, I notice Beef Week 2027 is being talked about. Given the lessons learned and the KPIs, maybe at future committee hearings we might get some more updates on how you will measure the success of 2027 going forward in terms of Beef Week.

**Mr Bolton:** Part of the close-out from Beef Week will be an evaluation about what went well. I can advise that it was considered a highly successful event. We had more than 119,000 movements through the gates and representatives from over 35 countries. I am also very aware that the government has committed a further \$4.5 million in funding for the next event, which will be in 2027. Before we get to that point in time, we will be looking to obviously do the review in terms of lessons learned and then working with the organisers to make sure that Beef 2027 is bigger and better.

**Mr MARTIN:** I understand that previously DPI had a program where locals could collect fire ant bait from electorate offices. I have been told anecdotally that this has ceased. Is that the case and, if so, why has it stopped? Should the government not be making it easier to fight fire ants?

**Mr Bolton:** That was a pilot trial that we undertook where we provided bait and a register to local MPs in their electorate offices. Part of the distribution of that bait is that we got very tight record-keeping requirements from the APVMA, which is the regulatory authority that manages the use of these pesticides. We are now at a point where we are evaluating that pilot to see how well it worked and what are the lessons learned with a view to continue that.

What we found through the early analysis of that is that some officers were not doing the appropriate record keeping, so part of that is to understand why that was—whether it was too hard and what was underpinning some of that—and then working with the electorate officers to better educate them and then hopefully continue that program. At the end of the day, our intention is to make it as easy as possible for community members to get access to fire ant bait. They can do it through a number of ways already. They can get on to our website at [fireant.org.au](http://fireant.org.au) and self-register and the Fire Ant Eradication Program will mail out bait to the household and will continue to do that at regular periods to allow them to do self-treatment. This is just another option for making it easier for our community and the intent is to keep it going.

**Mr G KELLY:** How are we going with the Mossman mill? Where are we at? What is the movement?

**Mr Bolton:** We have been working very closely with the local growing community up there and also the Mulgrave mill operators. The primary focus was last year's crush and we are very happy with the way that resolved. The government supported the growers and the local mill up there for that particular season. The focus now is on the current season, as per the government's commitment, and we have a fairly high number of growers that have signed up to the next round of securing the harvest and crushing of this year's cane. In addition to that, we are working very closely with the local growers to look at what those future opportunities are, so cane may not be what is going to continue forward. We are not taking that off the table—that is still subject to ongoing discussions with the mill up north—but we are very much looking at what the alternative potential cropping opportunities are so that we keep that community growing produce in one form or another.

**Mr G KELLY:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** As there are no further questions, that concludes the briefing with the Department of Primary Industries. We thank you for the information you have provided today. We will adjourn proceedings and resume at 11.30 for a briefing from DNR. Thank you very much for your attendance.

**Mr Bolton:** Thank you to the committee. We appreciate your questions.

**The committee adjourned at 11.12 am.**