



Speech by

Hon. STEVE BREDHAUER

MEMBER FOR COOK

Hansard 12 November 1998

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Marine Pollution Incidents

Hon. S. D. BREDHAUER (Cook—ALP) (Minister for Transport and Minister for Main Roads) (9.53 a.m.), by leave: During the month of August 1998 there was a spate of marine pollution incidents that occurred within Queensland ports and coastal waters. While the physical response to each incident was completed in a professional and expeditious manner with minimal environmental damage sustained, Queensland Transport is continuing to pursue the culprits.

Investigations into two incidents, one at Cairns on 6 August and the other at Hay Point on 12 August, are now complete, and prosecution briefs are being prepared and pursued under the Transport Operations (Marine Pollution) Act 1995. I wish to remind members that the maximum penalties that could be imposed for a conviction under the Act are \$262,500 for an individual and \$1,312,500 for a corporation. In regard to the incidents at Cairns and Hay Point, action has also been initiated to recover all reasonable expenses associated with the investigation of and response to these incidents from vessels known to have caused pollution. Likewise, investigation of an incident that occurred at Brisbane on 21 August is almost complete, and Crown law will be briefed in due course.

Where the source of pollution is currently unknown, as in the case of slicks near Edward Island in the Whitsundays on 22 August and off Frankland Island south of Cairns on 25 August, an extremely rigorous process has been adopted to attempt to identify the polluter. Samples of oil were taken from over 20 ships, and an exhaustive matching process has been undertaken by the Queensland Government laboratory. To date, the results of this analysis have not produced a conclusive match. This highlights the extreme technical difficulty in achieving a positive match when comparing samples of fresh oil from a ship with samples taken from the sea. Nevertheless, no stone has been left unturned, and samples from possible source ships have been sent to New Zealand for further analysis. These tests are not yet complete.

No further action is to be taken against the Royal Australian Navy concerning a spill of approximately 90 litres of diesel fuel from the HMAS Brisbane in far-north Queensland on 24 August. Under the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, or MARPOL, which is the basis of the Marine Pollution Act, defence ships are exempt from prosecution. However, the Royal Australian Navy has been reminded that it has a responsibility to act in a manner consistent with present international convention and State legislation.

Following the spate of incidents in August, I have sent strong letters of concern to the Australian Chamber of Shipping, the Australian Ship Owners Association and the RAN to remind these organisations of the environmental significance of the Great Barrier Reef and the penalties in place under the Marine Pollution Act for illegal discharges. Recent collaborative action between Queensland Transport, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has resulted in implementation of a number of actions that focus on prevention and better detection of pollution from ships.

Immediately following the spate of incidents, a standard alert message was prepared and is being broadcast from the ship reporting centre at Hay Point—REEFCENTRE—to all ships entering the Great Barrier Reef, reminding masters and crew of their obligations under the Marine Pollution Act and of the inherent penalties for non-compliance. Other key actions include—

increased surveillance and detection for ships transiting the Great Barrier Reef and Queensland coastal waters;
submissions to the Marine Environment Protection Committee of the International Maritime Organisation seeking increased international awareness;
increased pursuance of all cases before the courts; and
ongoing media coverage of cases to maximise media exposure of these incidents.

It must be remembered that the events of August were quite abnormal and unprecedented in the history of Queensland and that every possible avenue is being vigorously pursued to preclude similar occurrences in the future. Queensland Transport officers are and will be working tirelessly with the Australian Maritime Safety Authority and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority to introduce a broad spectrum of additional preventive measures against marine pollution incidents.

By way of conclusion, I would like to draw to the attention of members the fact that the Government will soon have three new vessels to help respond to marine pollution incidents in Queensland waters. Two vessels, an oil recovery vessel and an oil response vessel, should be in service by March 1999, and both will be stationed at Thursday Island in the Torres Strait. Given the volume of shipping plying these waters, the vessels will play a lead role in protecting the marine environment of this significant waterway from oil spills. In addition, a new multipurpose vessel, primarily to be used for hydrographic surveys but having marine pollution response capabilities, will also be in service in our coastal waters. This vessel will spend a considerable amount of time in far-north Queensland but will be available to respond to marine pollution incidents anywhere in our waters. The vessel will be commissioned in early 1999. The total cost of these vessels, all being built in Queensland, will amount to approximately \$2m.
