



Speech by

Hon. R. WELFORD

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard 25 May 1999

REGIONAL FOREST AGREEMENT

Hon. R. J. WELFORD (Everton—ALP) (Minister for Environment and Heritage and Minister for Natural Resources) (6.17 p.m.): I have pleasure in seconding the Deputy Premier's amendment. I wish to take up the challenge of the Opposition spokesman when he says, "Let us take the politics out of this." Let us take the politics out of this and let us look at some of the facts.

The first fact is that the Opposition had the opportunity, as the Deputy Premier said, to progress the RFA and deal with it substantially before 30 June last year. The Opposition failed to do so. In 1997 the Opposition and the Howard Government jointly commissioned a report to follow up the five-yearly review of sustainable timber allocations for State forests. That review was first requested in January 1997 and was ultimately delivered in December 1997. That was six months before the Beattie Government came to office.

The then coalition Minister for Primary Industries, Mr Perrett, said on 2 October 1996 in this place—

"The DPI Forestry data collection and yield calculation system has been externally audited, and is open to external scrutiny, for example, by the Department of Natural Resources. Documented operational procedures are based on sound research carried out over many years."

What did that data show? It showed that under current management arrangements and normal operating conditions some areas would reach the end of commercial operations by as early as 2007 and would need reductions of up to 40% to be sustainable in the long term. These are the facts that we are dealing with.

The reality is that all the options presented in the directions paper—the options that the Opposition seeks to exploit in order to scaremonger in regional communities—are options which, of themselves, do not say anything about job impacts. The challenge for any Government is to take one of those options, or a variation of it, and create new opportunities for new jobs in regional areas of Queensland where mills are currently operating.

This simple fact needs to be recognised. Regardless of which party was in Government today, if that Government did nothing we would lose jobs simply because the current operation of the timber industry in State forests is not sustainable. On the evidence accumulated and gathered by the previous Government—on its own data and on data confirmed independently by external consultants—the current harvesting rates are not sustainable. So doing nothing is not an option.

The next point that needs to be recognised is that the RFA process is a Federal Government process that dictates certain outcomes. One of those outcomes is that we provide a measure of resource security in the long term for the timber industry. That is what we are looking to do, but it may be a combination of State or non-State forest areas; it may be just non-State forest areas. These are matters that a Government should responsibly address in a way that is designed to protect jobs and create new jobs in the timber industry into the future.

That Federal Government RFA process also requires that a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system needs to be considered. The range of scenarios identified in the directions paper simply addresses various qualifying factors for identifying what is a comprehensive,

adequate and representative reserve system. Ultimately, whoever is in Government is going to have to make a decision about what criteria are satisfied by meeting that Federal Government requirement. It is the Federal Government's forest policy statement that requires that a comprehensive and adequate and representative reserve system be secured. We need to identify what criteria meet that and then achieve that within the guidelines that the Federal Government has set.

However, it does not matter whether we go from having nothing in that reserve system or whether we have 500,000 hectares in that reserve system; the reality is that jobs will be lost unless something else is done, and that is what this Government is about. In the context of this RFA process, this Government is about taking the initiative. Whether the Federal Government is prepared to stick with us or not, the initiative that we are taking is to create new industries through new resources, through new plantations and new opportunities for industry development in those regional communities, whether they be forest-based industries or ancillary industries that are related to forests, such as ecotourism or other commercial recreational opportunities that might be available.

Time expired.
