



Speech by

Mr DOUG SLACK

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard 5 October 2000

NATURE CONSERVATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SLACK (Burnett—NPA) (11.59 p.m.): I rise to support the contributions made by the Opposition spokesperson on Natural Resources, the member for Moggill, and the member for Caboolture. There is no doubt that the State needs to put an adequate area of land into the reserve category, and the Minister and all other members of this House would agree. There is also no doubt that there is a requirement to make an adequate area of land available in the criteria for judging a national park. The future protection of the ecosystems in Queensland requires a reasonable area of land to be enclosed in that estate. I understand that the estate currently stands at between 4% and 5%.

Mr Welford: About 4%.

Mr SLACK: The objective has always been to acquire a 5% representation of the State within that category. However, it also has to be recognised that adequate land needs to be provided for recreational use, and it has to be provided in categories and localities that are readily accessible to those people who wish to use it.

Mr Welford: I couldn't agree more.

Mr SLACK: I am pleased to hear it. If that is the case, why has the Minister not been able to outline to the Parliament exactly what the position is for recreational users? Why has he not been able to give them some certainty, some assurance, to gel with the platitudes that he has made at the meetings that he has had with them in the past? No doubt he has been unable to convince many of those recreational users that their interests are going to be protected through what is contained in this Bill that we are debating tonight.

In common with other members who have spoken before me, I have had representations from recreational users, particularly horse riders and trail bike riders, who are uncertain as to their future in respect of the use of land. I do not have to go through the issue in depth to point out to the Minister the reasons for their uncertainty. However, if he looks at page 9 of his second-reading speech he will see that he refers to the fact that many of the issues raised in the consultation phase of the Bill, particularly by recreational groups, are matters for negotiation as part of the 10-year allocation process—uncertainty. It is heightened by a later statement. He says—

"While virtually all existing recreational activities presently taking place on the land can be accommodated on one or more classes of protected areas, the final distribution of certain uses will need to be carefully assessed."

However, there is no guarantee there in respect of what I was talking about earlier, that is, easily accessible localities for the people who are currently using the parks.

I assume that in the assessment process the Minister is going to look at the ecological effects of its current use. That is fine to a point. However, if the Minister is trying to assure those people that they are going to have access to areas that they currently have access to, but at the time he does this assessment he might remove that access. Obviously they would be concerned. Honourable members can understand that concern when the Minister has given them no assurances to date in terms of what they will be able to access in the localities that are convenient for them to access.

Talking about localities and convenience, horse riding is a very costly exercise. Many of the people involved in horse riding are genuine people who are not wealthy but who love their horses. They love horse riding and they make sacrifices in other areas to accommodate that love. Any extra cost to them makes it prohibitive. It is almost prohibitive to many of them now, but the parents and friends of young people in particular all help out so that they are able to continue with their hobby.

I am fearful about what will happen with respect to trail bike riding in particular. If the Minister removes the access of trail bike riders to recreational areas that they currently enjoy, those people will tend to break the law. They are highly mobile, particularly the young people. They will take to land that is not really meant for that purpose and, in doing so, break the law. That is something that we do not want to see happen. I have seen instances of that happening where there is not enough recreational land. People have trail bikes or horses and they look to use public land. In using public land they put pressure on the activities on that public land. At times it can even be dangerous to ride horses or trail bikes in certain areas. There is no question that adequate recreational land needs to be provided in areas which are easily accessible to the people.

If the Minister wishes, as most of us do, to see that the national park estate is provided for, there is a very good way in which he can acquire more land. If he is genuine, under the tree-clearing guidelines or the vegetation guidelines land-holders will have to set aside areas of vegetation that are under threat or endangered. I do not see why this Government cannot come to some arrangement with those land-holders, particularly the land-holders who have an area of vegetation that is categorised by assessment as being an endangered area, so that that area of land can be claimed by the Government and put into a type of national park estate at the expense of the community.

The Minister is expecting land-holders to provide a community benefit at their own expense. That is where the legislation is wrong—very wrong. The Vegetation Management Act does not provide for land-holders who will be adversely affected, and in some cases, as the Minister knows, that will be to the extent of hundreds of thousands of dollars—not just thousands of dollars. In consultation with the land-holding organisations, the Minister should establish a way in which he can add that land to the national park estate.

I know that if many land-holders who have that type of land were compensated for it, they would proudly look after that land and keep it in its current state as their contribution to the national park estate. They would know full well that they were doing a service to the community in ensuring that that land is preserved in its current state for future generations and that it is ecologically sustained on their properties. That is one way that the Minister can increase the national park estate.

To be fair, I think the Minister should do that. I would imagine that he has given that consideration, but whether he is prepared to put up the dollars is another matter. That is what this really hangs on. The Minister is not prepared to put up the dollars. He has tried to push the Commonwealth into putting up the dollars, but the reality is that it has always been the prerogative and the responsibility of the State to acquire the land for national parks. The Minister could compensate land-holders and retain most of the land in the form in which it is currently being used, that is, for a recreational purpose. At the same time he would be expanding the national park estate.

Having said that, I am very concerned about the five-year transitional period that the Minister is talking about. There are instances in which that in effect puts a freeze on activities or demands on that land that have already been recognised. I am referring there, for instance, to a case that I know of in the Miriam Vale Shire. In the future a road will be needed to connect the Agnes Water area—which, incidentally, is the fastest growing area in Queensland—with Gladstone. That has always been recognised as a future requirement. However, this Bill means that the reserves through which this road is proposed to go will be transferred to the status of a five-year holding period. It was not set aside from that category initially to be used for that purpose in the future.

Commonsense tells me and it should tell the Minister that, where an area of land has been identified for a future purpose, it should not come into the category of the five-year assessment process. It should be set aside initially to guard against the uncertainty that comes with the future of a road development. I am sure that there are other situations such as this throughout the State. There is no doubt in my mind that there is a failure to provide for this situation in the legislation before the House. In specific circumstances, the Minister should be able to provide for exclusion of land that is earmarked for future development to ensure that uncertainty is removed for local authorities—in this case, the Miriam Vale Shire.

I return to the issue of recreational land versus national park. There is no doubt in my mind that in many instances where land has been included in the national park estate there has been a lack of management of that land. The local government investigation into the resources allocated for national parks highlighted that issue. There is no doubt that there has not been adequate fire control measures, adequate burning off periods and so on, to protect that estate in the long run. There are forestry roads and activities occurring within those areas which protect the area. Once it goes into national park, unless there are allocated resources, there is a risk of increased damage to the natural environment by

many things, including wildfires. That in itself is further reason why there should be adequate land set aside from the estate and kept in the recreational area. This does not take it out of the preservation area; it maintains it in a preservation area for particular use.

I have also had representations in relation to the legislation before the House from graziers with permits for cattle grazing. Many of those graziers are not big graziers, particularly in Gin Gin, Bundaberg, Mount Perry and Monto, which is located in the electorate of the member for Callide. They have small areas and have an additional area of forestry which they hold special leases for, whether it be leasehold or freehold, because that makes the core area of their enterprise viable. Once this additional area is removed from their income-earning capacity, they will be unviable. I would hope that the Minister will take that into consideration when assessing and implementing the effects of this Bill. At the end of the day, there is no doubt that this Bill will pass through the Parliament. The Government has the numbers. As I remember the Leader of the House once saying, it does not matter how much we on this side of the House jump up and down and how logical our arguments are, the fact is that the Government has the

numbers and will do what it likes. It will pass this legislation.

However, there are human elements to this legislation, and I have referred to them. In particular I mention people with stock grazing permits. They are dependent on those permits. I hope that this Government will show some compassion in allowing permit holders to continue to operate in the way they have. Most of them are operating in accordance with nature conservation practices. They are not abusing the land. Even if they were, I am sure there are rules and regulations the Minister can enforce to ensure that they do not abuse the land. It is light grazing, which does not affect the land. In actual fact, keeping the vegetation, undergrowth and grass down prevents damage to the natural ecology of the land by severe fires and so on.

It is with regret that the Opposition cannot support the Bill before the House because of the flaws contained in it. Those flaws relate to the uncertainty created by the legislation. That uncertainty should have been allayed by the Minister to the groups who have made representations, but it has not.
