



Speech by

Hon. V. LESTER

MEMBER FOR KEPPEL

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APPROPRIATION BILL, ESTIMATES COMMITTEE G

Hon. V. P. LESTER (Keppel—NPA) (3.28 p.m.): I thank all those involved in our Estimates hearings. I want to communicate to the Natural Resources Minister a grave concern I have that there seems to be an ever-increasing tendency to want to increase the price of water to the consumer, particularly to primary producers. An attempt was made to link water allocations with rates in the Mareeba Shire. Fortunately, the people there, supported by others who thought that this could happen to them, really put on a turn and the proposal was not proceeded with. I admit that that was to be a trial, but we did not reach the point of the trial. It is not good enough, and it is a great concern to everybody. If the price of water for consumers is too high, the simple facts of life are that they will lose confidence and they will not have the capacity to produce, and we as Queenslanders will be far worse off. Many of our goods will have to be imported when we could well grow those primary products ourselves.

I would also like to see budgeting for dams that we can build. There are plenty of dams, at least 11, in Queensland that can be environmentally sustainable. We only need to look at what has happened in St George. I can recall going to St George some years ago and, to be fair to everybody, it did not inspire me greatly. I have been there recently and the mind boggles at how much development has occurred around that area. Development simply means jobs. It is as simple as that.

I know Emerald very well because I was there well before the Fairbairn Dam was built. Emerald's population then was about 3,500 people; it is now between 12,000 and 14,000 people. The Fairbairn Dam is also providing sustainability for a great number of towns in the region. That dam is probably responsible for millions and millions of dollars by way of taxpayer contributions each year that is then distributed to all other parts of Australia.

I want to deal briefly with national parks. Currently, we are spending some \$5.50 per hectare on national parks. That compares with some other States which spend over \$10 per hectare. I simply say that we are going to have to collectively put a bigger effort into maintaining and improving our national parks. We need to make our national parks more attractive for visitors. We have to have sufficient rangers and other staff to give people the information that they need. I would like to think that we could get to the point at which rangers could conduct seminars about plant species, animals and so on.

The other great concern that seriously needs addressing at a State and a Federal level—and I am not saying that the Minister is not doing anything about it—is the issue of the enormous spread of giant rat-tail grass. On Tuesday, 8 August in Rockhampton I attended a seminar and I was astounded to learn that this plant is spreading at an enormous rate and at this point there is very little that can be done to contain it. Although many people are trying to find a solution, we are probably going to have to pump more money into solving this problem. If members look at this map, which I am happy to table, they will see the extent of this problem. It starts up in Mareeba and goes right down the coast to south of Brisbane. Now it is finding its way out west. Climate does not seem to be a great barrier to this grass. It is very tough. Cattle cannot even digest it. The seeds—hundreds of thousands of them—go straight through the beast and are spread far and wide. This is a problem that we are just going to have to do more about.

Time expired.