



Speech by

JOHN MICKEL, MLA STATE MEMBER FOR LOGAN

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NEW SOUTH WALES-QUEENSLAND BORDER RIVERS AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MICKEL (Logan—ALP) (4.05 p.m.): This is important legislation for the towns and farms which straddle interstate borders and put up and work with two state systems of water management and coexist with a joint state system—all operating in one catchment. Currently, there are four government agencies directly involved in water resource management and rural water supply delivery in the Border Rivers catchment. The Border Rivers Commission, established more than 50 years ago, enables the joint construction of works for water conservation and flow regulation and their asset management. The Department of Natural Resources and Mines has regulatory oversight and delivery of Queensland's share of water in the border streams. The Department of Land and Water Conservation is its New South Wales counterpart. SunWater has accountability for storage operation, asset management and rural water delivery to its Queensland customers.

A report to the Border Rivers Commission on water infrastructure management and water delivery services in the Border Rivers stated—

In a catchment where two state jurisdictions apply, management of natural resources becomes complicated with various state agencies using different policies and approaches for delivering services and landholders then having to operate their businesses with varying regulations. All these factors lead to uncertainties and inefficiencies, resulting in frustration and often tensions.

A briefing paper prepared by one of the most professional agricultural groups around, that is, Goondiwindi based Border Rivers Food and Fibre, said this of the arrangement—

With the possible exception of the Murray, no other catchment operates under such a restrictive regime. The water is the same, water users have common needs and aspirations, towns service their surrounding districts regardless of the border, and generally speaking the Borders Rivers sees itself as a single productive unit. In this context, the current arrangements are artificial, counterproductive and out of date.

Typical of the constructive way this group sets about its business, it proposes a solution which I put to the minister. It suggests a Border Rivers water management authority to lease water storage space in the dams from state governments, take on ownership of Boggabilla Weir, distribute water to consumptive users and manage consumptive use of off-allocation water, unregulated water and ground water. I commend that suggestion to the minister for his consideration.

This bill is part of a wider process of water reform. Water entitlements are now separated from land title. This will provide greater flexibility to irrigators and proper recognition of the value of water entitlements held by irrigators. Irrigators will receive commercial benefits from these entitlements by allowing their transfer in the water marketplace.

The results of water trading in other states are quite revealing. As the *Australian* noted—

Water is switching from thirsty low-value enterprises such as pasture or rice to the big money-spinners of grapes, olives, tomatoes and almonds.

Australian farmers lose 23 per cent of the water they take from rivers, dams and the ground through evaporation and seepage. One of the paradoxes of the new market is that farmers are using more water, based on the latest national land and water resources audit.

Most water sales have involved farmers giving up entitlements they were not using—the so-called sleeper licences. And when that is taken up, other farmers are using that water.

The rural water use efficiency initiative is one way the Queensland government is supporting all irrigators, regardless of their level of water right and security in maximising the economic benefit of every megalitre they use. This \$41 million initiative helps irrigators to move towards operating an irrigation industry best practice and to remain competitive in national and international markets. The resultant efficiencies in water use will help irrigators increase productivity, produce a higher quality product and increase their yield while reducing operating costs.

The Border Rivers area is highly productive and is internationally competitive. I am told by the Border Rivers Food and Fibre Group that up to \$400 million of cotton, fruit, vegetables, grapes, cereal grains and lucerne is generated in a good year. This involves the use on average of 350,000 megalitres of water, which is less than 40 per cent of mean annual flows. The jobs generated from this are estimated at 1,000 farm jobs, with another 1,900 employed as a direct result of irrigation.

A small group of small business representatives I met with at Goondiwindi left me in no doubt that many small businesses, whether they be retail, wholesale or service sectors, relied upon irrigation. I stress that much of this activity—cotton, wool and grain—is export-related activity and thereby has direct economic benefits for Australia as a whole. It is more questionable if the irrigation is for domestic activity only, particularly if the result is to put more and more of a product on the domestic market, thereby lowering domestic commodity prices for farmers who have already been, and are, profitable.

The farmers with whom I have spoken are worried about the Murray-Darling negotiations. I know that the minister has met with local producers. I encourage all honourable government members, particularly those on the Scrutiny of Legislation Committee, to visit places like Goondiwindi and hear first-hand the problems of farmers and businesses. These groups want the minister to stand up for Queensland in negotiations with Senator Hill in any discussions on the Murray-Darling system. The Border Rivers system developed later than the catchments in other states. Locally, people do not want Queensland to carry a disproportionate burden of the Murray-Darling cap.

The Border Rivers Food and Fibre Group is a highly professional group. I commend their executive director, Mr Bruce McCollum, for his energy and dedication to the task. He is a congenial host and a forceful advocate for his district, and I thank him for his ongoing courtesy. I thank him also because I believe that agro-groups throughout Queensland could learn from the activities of his group and the manner in which they put their case.

Primary producers want to know that the Queensland minister will be aware of their concerns when the Murray-Darling issues are discussed in the state cabinet. They are also fed up to the back teeth with the fact that Senator Hill will not go out there and talk with them and listen to them. I commend the minister for meeting with the producers at Goondiwindi. I know that he will continue to argue their case, particularly Queensland's case, with Senator Hill. This bill is about creating greater certainty and efficiency in the management of water resources from those rivers that flow between both states in the Border Rivers district. I commend the bill to the House.
