



Speech by

Hon. S. ROBERTSON

MEMBER FOR STRETTON

Hansard 31 July 2001

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT
Condamine-Balonne WAMP

Hon. S. ROBERTSON (Stretton—ALP) (Minister for Natural Resources and Minister for Mines) (10.17 a.m.), by leave: I rise today to reaffirm Queensland's commitment to finalising water resource planning for the Condamine-Balonne River system. It has been claimed that because some data behind the water resource planning process was recently challenged in the Land Court, the entire process is now 'fatally flawed' and cannot be relied upon. This is incorrect, selective and misleading.

To those holding this view I say: firstly, the Beattie government remains committed to the finalisation of water resource planning for the Condamine-Balonne in order to then finalise our cap arrangements in accordance with the Murray-Darling Basin agreement. Secondly, the existing moratorium on water development in the system will continue. I am committed to finalising these plans consistent with our legislative framework so that they provide a sound balance between the ecological, social and economic values of these Queensland catchments.

In regard to the recent water licence appeal in the Land Court, I would highlight that this case is another example of the difficulties with the old Water Resources Act in making incremental decisions on water diversion applications. It highlights the uncertainty that the old legislation created for water users and the environment, and reinforces the benefits of the Beattie government's Water Act 2000 which provides the longer-term planning framework to deliver greater water entitlement certainty, as sought by water users.

As a result of the Land Court case, up to an additional 8,000 megalitres of water can be diverted from the Condamine-Balonne system in an average year by one cotton grower. One megalitre equals one million litres. As I said, all of that water will go to one private enterprise, increasing diversions by three per cent.

While some interests have claimed that the Land Court settlement shows the WAMP process is fatally flawed, this interpretation is itself a flawed and selective representation of the evidence and proceedings in this case. A full and objective examination of the evidence and proceedings shows that: firstly, there were no adverse findings by the Land Court in respect of the science behind the Condamine-Balonne WAMP. Secondly, there was no concession by either party or finding by the court with respect to the merits of the case.

In fact, court transcripts of the case reveal that scientific experts appearing for the appellants, that is, a cotton grower from the Lower Balonne, conceded that the Lower Balonne was overcommitted with water harvesting licences and required remedial action. They conceded that the existing hydrology modelling and impact data relied on by the department was still the best evidence available. They also conceded that if the amount of water being diverted from the system was in the order of 50 per cent on average, then a real connection between flow and ecological degradation—

Mr Seeney interjected.

Mr Hobbs: You have been caught out and you know that.

Mr SPEAKER: Order! The member for Warrego will come to order.

Mr ROBERTSON: For the benefit of members opposite, I repeat: the appellants conceded that if the amount of water being diverted from the system was in the order of 50 per cent on average, then a real connection between flow and ecological degradation would be expected, particularly when the

lag effect is taken into account. It was also conceded that the application of the precautionary principle would be appropriate in such circumstances.

In conclusion, whilst some issues were identified in regard to the technical aspects of one small part of the ecological science, fundamentally the hydrology and ecological science available does provide a sound basis for progressing the Condamine-Balonne water resource planning process. Further analysis is now being undertaken to verify the results arising from earlier sampling.

The government rejects the notion that the science underpinning this planning process is fatally flawed. I repeat that the Beattie government is committed to the proper preparation and finalisation of the Condamine-Balonne plan, in order to then finalise our cap arrangements in accordance with the Murray-Darling Basin agreement. Until then, because of our commitment to the sustainable management of our natural resources, the existing moratorium will remain in place.
