Speech by

Mr D. BRISKEY

MEMBER FOR CLEVELAND

Hansard 8 August 2002

DRUGS MISUSE AMENDMENT BILL

Mr BRISKEY (Cleveland—ALP) (4.32 p.m.): I rise to speak in support of the Drugs Misuse Amendment Bill 2002. The amendments in this particular bill simply provide for the lawful commercial production of industrial hemp fibre and seed in Queensland. As members would be aware, the previous amendments to the act allowed only for research into industrial hemp fibre, with no provision for research into hemp grain or grain oil. However, industrial hemp grain and grain products are considered to have important high-value commercial opportunities. The proposed amendments in this bill address this deficiency by including industrial hemp grain and derivative products in the legislation. Four years down the track, the trials have produced some significant findings that may present Queensland with an opportunity to establish itself as a world leader in the production of industrial hemp fibre. The successful passage of this bill will allow the industry in Queensland to conduct further research and explore field production on a much larger scale.

The amendments are also designed to facilitate commercial interest in growing, handling and processing industrial hemp through the issuing of DPI licences for research and commercial fibre and grain production. It is hoped that this can pave the way for the creation of a new industry within Queensland's agricultural sector. As we all know, a number of Queensland industries are facing difficult times. Industrial hemp's versatility and compatibility with current farming systems makes it a viable and environmentally sound alternative for crop rotation with traditional crops such as cotton and sugar or indeed, where appropriate, a sound replacement crop which will bring renewed vigour to a number of rural communities and diversification of its economic base. Industrial hemp could provide a number of opportunities for existing farmers wishing to diversify and can provide an additional source of income as a rotation crop.

The move toward industrial hemp as an alternative crop has been met with some scepticism—some of which stems from a lack of understanding of the plant and its capabilities and uses. Mention the word 'hemp', for example, and the narcotic substance cannabis, or marijuana, immediately springs to mind for many people. Of course, there are vital differences between the two, and it is important not to confuse them. The fundamental difference between the two lies in the level of narcotic THC. In industrial hemp the THC level is less than 0.3 per cent, compared with between three per cent and 10 per cent in narcotic hemp. Industrial hemp cannot be used as a substitute for marijuana because its THC content is too low to produce any type of psychotropic effect. The two plants do, however, look remarkably similar in appearance, though industrial hemp is taller and less branched than marijuana.

There has been a worldwide resurgence of interest in hemp for production of a whole range of products over the past decade. Much of the research to date has concentrated on hemp as paper products, although the potential for other industrial uses, and in particular textiles, is also promising. Industries globally are now searching for ecologically sustainable renewable, recyclable fibre sources, and as a result the demand for renewable natural fibres is growing rapidly. With this, industrial hemp products internationally are experiencing a substantial increase in demand.

In addition to this there is a significant market for products produced from industrial hemp grain. With these market opportunities the development of a commercial industry has the potential to provide significant opportunities for deriving economic, employment and environmental benefits to rural and regional Queensland and the state as a whole. Industrial hemp fibre has excellent properties for a range of uses from geotextiles to building materials and car components. Industrial hemp oil produced from grain has a number of uses ranging from paints to soap. New processes and new products that could open new markets for Queensland production, processing and value adding of industrial hemp are currently being researched and trialled.

The use of industrial hemp fibre as interior motor vehicle components has been a growing phenomenon over the past few years. Cost advantages, a comparative weight reduction, occupational health advantages and the plant's good environmental credentials mean that we may see it emerge as a preferred material for use in this market. As an example, the European Union has stipulated to its members that 95 per cent of each car produced must be recyclable by 2015. With its biodegradable nature and tensile strength similar to fibreglass, hemp fibre is ideal for manufacturing products such as insulation and reinforced composites now being used as internal moulding in some luxury European cars. With these targets the EU estimates that over 100,000 tonnes per annum of processed hemp fibre will be required by car manufacturers by 2005, up from 40,000 tonnes per annum in 1996. The important factor for us here in Queensland is that at least 70 per cent of this fibre will need to be sourced from outside Europe. In terms of textile production, fabrics containing at least 50 per cent of hemp fibre have been shown to block the sun's UV rays. In fact, many fashion houses, including Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein, now offer hemp fashions across the world.

A high-yielding variety of industrial hemp that is developed to thrive in the tropics has the potential to give Queensland a competitive edge over other states and temperate countries. As a valuable, low-cost biological resource with rapid growth capabilities and little need for costly herbicides or pesticides, Queensland cannot afford to miss the boat on this emerging agricultural market. I commend the bill to the House.