



Speech by

**HOWARD HOBBS**

**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

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Hansard 9 April 2002

**LAND PROTECTION [PEST AND STOCK ROUTE MANAGEMENT] BILL**

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (6.05 p.m.): When I was the minister in 1997 this bill was near completion, but it just seemed to drag on. It was something that even in my time seemed to drag on and on. I am not sure why it did drag on for so long, but it did. I must thank all of the members of the Rural Lands Protection Board, the local government people and the departmental people who slogged on over those years. To say 'The years shall not weary them' is pretty appropriate in this case because they soldiered on, but the process was very slow. The wheels of government do turn slowly, but this was incredible. However, the bill is before us now, and that is good.

**Mr Robertson:** It is a quality product at the end of the day.

**Mr HOBBS:** There are a few parts that could be improved. There is general acceptance of the principal behind it, but the shadow minister has highlighted a few matters of concern. In the past, the Rural Lands Protection Board did not really get a fair go from the department. I do not think that there was a lot of recognition of the great work that it did and I do not believe that it had the resources it needed. I am not sure whether that is the case at present, but that was the case in years past. I would be surprised if that situation has changed.

Interestingly, in his second reading speech the minister said that pest plants and animals cost Queensland over \$600 million a year in lost production; in other words, 20 footbridges. I ask members to imagine the annual funding for 20 footbridges going to the western Queensland area, because that is what we lose each year.

**An honourable member:** A pedestrian-led recovery!

**Mr HOBBS:** That is right. Anyway, that puts in perspective the vastness of western Queensland. It is very hard to explain such distances to people. When one lives in those areas one tends to get used to the long distances, and when one lives in the city one tends to live in and understand that patch. I guess it is hard to believe that Queensland has 72,000 kilometres of stock route, but we do. The stock routes are a great asset and we must keep them open.

In many instances, legislation has the teeth to ensure that the laws of the land are abided by. However, in many instances we do not have the people to control noxious weeds and feral animals in such vast areas. In many instances areas have been overrun—particularly areas of Crown land—because the government has not done the right thing. We need a mechanism to ensure that legislation is followed, because if one person or land-holder in a group does not want to play the game it can be very hard for the rest.

Weeds are one of the greatest causes of biodiversity loss. In recent years, believe it or not, we have seen more of that in our national parks and Crown land. We are losing biodiversity faster in our national parks than we are in a lot of the normal grazing areas. This is something that people must be made to understand. We just cannot lock up everything.

**Mr Rowell:** This legislation is not going to do anything for it.

**Mr HOBBS:** That is right. It will not really affect it. In fact, if anything, it makes the situation on crown land worse. I will give members an example. At one stage I went up to look at the Starcke station in the gulf country. George Quaid had left the place and it had been bought by the state government. At the time Premier Goss introduced legislation into this parliament and he virtually resumed the land. That place was a reasonably well-run cattle station. When we went up there, it was absolutely run down.

There were hundreds—probably thousands—of acres of sicklepod, which is a noxious weed, totally out of control. Nobody was looking after it. That is one good example of what was supposed to be pristine country—it was not necessarily, but that was the government's view at the time—that had to be bought and had to be locked up to preserve its great qualities. It is full of sicklepod. Nobody wants it. Even the Aborigines do not want it now. It was probably one of the best bits of land in the gulf. The cost involved in trying to reclaim that land would be quite enormous.

I refer to stock routes. I really believe that many councils do a damn good job. I am not aware of many that do not do a good job. A lot of the councils take their responsibility very seriously and already they have good management plans in place. In many instances this legislation will probably help to formalise them and make sure that there is continuity across-the-board. I do not think that there is any harm in that. Certainly, I believe—and, of course, so do some of the land-holders—that in many instances the councils have done the right thing.

Tonight there has been a lot of talk about wild dogs and dingoes. I will not cover the same ground exactly, but I will say that in relation to wild dogs we are facing a huge plague. I can recall when I was a child in some parts people had to continually maintain their dog fences because the number of dingoes was so bad. Up to about 40 years ago those fences were still being maintained, but over the past 35 years there has not been the same degree of need to maintain them. So now we have the situation where the number of dingoes is increasing. I think that it is probably an evolutionary thing that relates to the type of food that is available for various animals. But there are many dingoes and the state government has to play a role in assisting councils to make sure that people control dingo numbers. They should make sure that people set baits for dingoes or manage them in some other way. If the beef industry or the wool industry is experiencing good times, people should be able to afford to manage the dingo population, because if they do not it will result in a huge cost on society as a whole. For instance, we have heard many reports of people getting out of the sheep industry and going into the cattle industry. When that happens, the population of towns decreases because fewer staff are needed for the cattle industry. A lot of those sheep towns are losing their shearers and other people associated with the shearing industry. So that is a flow-on effect.

The other issue that is particularly very important is one that comes up occasionally—it sneaks up on us—and that is the problem of locusts. For instance, locusts tend to start in one area. They hatch, then they band and away they go. They can be in plague proportions and travel right over the border down to southern areas. At present, locust numbers are building up in a few spots. Basically, they are under control. But every year I find that when we have a locust plague, it is very, very hard to get the plague locust commission involved. Basically, its role is to make sure that it can stop a plague if it goes interstate. But it is really hard to get it to focus on the fact that a plague that is starting in Queensland will be in New South Wales in due course. Often the commission argues about the size of the area in which the locusts are hatching. A lot of times there are difficulties in being able to spray locust plagues in national parks. I know that the minister is not responsible for national parks, but he should talk to his colleague about this issue. What happens if a huge number of locusts hatch in our national parks? We are told that they cannot be sprayed because something else might be harmed. But the reality is that if we do not kill these plagues of locusts on the spot, they will do a huge amount of damage. My view is that if the state government does not manage locusts that hatch in state forests and grow to plague proportions, then the government should pay compensation to those people who lose their grass and their crops because of that plague.

Previously I mentioned the effective management of the stock route network. I think that the local governments have not done a bad job. Certainly, out my way the stock routes are in pretty good shape. I do not doubt that the facilities can always do with a bit more money spent on them to upgrade them—fencing the dams and facilities—but overall they are not too bad. I congratulate a lot of the councils on the great work that they do in that regard.

The local government area plan must also take into account the state, regional or catchment level natural resource management plans and those developed by neighbouring local governments. That will probably serve a useful purpose. I think that in many areas we have to think more in terms of catchments.

In relation to the spread of noxious weeds and contamination, I can recall that a long time ago I pushed very strongly to get wash-down areas put in from the central highlands so that we could try to reduce the amount of parthenium that was being spread. We did get some of those wash-down areas put in. I believe that they work quite effectively, because whenever I drive past one, I see trucks, headers and tractors being washed down. At least something is being done.

My view is that land-holders should also not let a machine come onto their place if it has come from a contaminated area without that machine being washed down in their backyard. At least if the machinery is washed down in the backyard, land-holders can watch the plants that come up as a result. We have seen instances of outbreaks of parthenium being let go. Once it is out of control, it is so very, very difficult and costly to try to keep it down. We have to do everything that we possibly can. We

probably need some sort of ticketing system. I know that it might be a bit expensive to implement, but if, for instance, a header goes into the central highlands, I believe that it needs to have certification that states that it has been washed down. This could be a voluntary type of arrangement. We probably could not get someone to certify all of this machinery, but at least we would have some sort of record of machinery being washed down.

There is an issue in relation to agistment on stock routes. I would not say that that has always been a contentious issue, but it has been an issue that councils have always managed. People put stock on their stock routes, they apply for the council for agistment, and these approvals are approved or denied. In most instances, councils give approvals for probably a month at a time, but usually it is up to about three months. After that time, that stock has to move off. The stock routes should not be used as a spare paddock. People are supposed to make sure that the fodder on those reserves is maintained for future travelling stock. That is pretty important. I do not doubt that there are always people who try to use the stock routes a bit more than they should. In the minister's second reading speech he stated—

Permits can only be issued on the same land for the permit holder for a period up to two months.

I think that two months is probably too short in the areas that are further out. It might be all right in the smaller stock routes, but further out there are stock routes which are quite long, probably 6,000 to 10,000 acres, and they must be well managed. We do not want them flogged by overuse. If a council believes that it can responsibly let it go for three months, I do not see why it should not be allowed to do so. We do not want them to become fire hazards, which does happen. A lot of stock routes do have a build-up of fodder and they certainly can become a fire hazard.

There are a number of issues in relation to land protection and I could continue all night but, generally speaking, I believe that the members who have preceded me today have covered the issues pretty well, and I endorse the words of the shadow minister.

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