



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

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LAND PROTECTION [PEST AND STOCK ROUTE MANAGEMENT] BILL

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (4.03 p.m.): It is a pleasure to join the debate today on the Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Bill 2001. I will say at the outset that I support this legislation. The minister has done a great job of bringing the legislation to this point and presenting it to the House today.

Since the beginning of white settlement, generations of Australians have taken this great country for granted. There is a belief by some that the land from which we harvest our foods is an unlimited resource. It is probably fair to say that that belief can be a reality, but only if we look after our land. Over the decades, trees have been cleared, land cultivated and pastures grazed beyond the capacity of the land and the limits caused by seasonal fluctuations. These activities have resulted in soil erosion, salt invasion and weed infestation.

Every member of this House knows that land degradation is unsustainable. There has to be a change in the way that we, as a nation, manage our land resources. Productive lands are essential to our very existence and we should never, ever think differently. As legislators, as primary producers and as ordinary citizens living in the populated regions, we all have a responsibility to care for the land. We have an obligation to future generations to ensure that our land continues to be productive to meet their needs. We must ensure that flora and fauna can continue to survive and play their role in keeping the balance right.

Although we still have a long way to go, I believe that today's Australians are genuinely more environmentally conscious of our day-to-day activities than we once were. Farmers are thinking more about the long-term viability of the land. In fact, I know from my own experiences that there are many rural producers who are excelling in land management practices. Governments are making the legislative changes necessary to control the slash-and-burn cowboys who, through their selfish and uncaring behaviour, impact on those working against the odds to maintain the land from which they draw a livelihood.

The national weed strategy is the result of a partnership between the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand, the Australia and New Zealand Environment Council and the ministers responsible for forestry. The implementation of this strategy is the responsibility of the executive committee of the national weed strategy. The committee has been working to identify weeds of national importance and working with the states and territories to develop and implement their own weed strategies and management structures. Everyone is focused and working together with the same intent: to put in place structures that will work. However, for any weed strategy to be successful, there needs to be a major injection of funds and a genuine commitment to attacking the weed problem. I understand that the Beattie Labor government currently spends around \$6 million a year on weed control. Late last year, the federal government committed \$5.7 million in funding to tackle the spread of the state's worst five weeds. Those weeds are Parkinsonia, prickly acacia, mesquite, rubber vine and parthenium.

As per usual in these types of agreements, the state government is required to provide contributions equal to or greater than the federal government. It is unclear whether our state's contribution is in addition to the annual commitment of around \$6 million for weed control or whether it is to be drawn from that budget allocation. One thing is for sure: the amount of money being discussed is well below the dollars required to take control of the weed problem in Queensland. The federal

government must take seriously the extent of this problem if we are to have any hope of bringing the rapid spread of weeds under control. Our minister and our state government are committed to the task, but they will continue to flounder unless the federal government is prepared to commit more funds.

I understand that there are more than 60 introduced plant species that are declared weeds in Queensland. That is pretty horrific! A declared weed is a plant that is considered a serious enough pest to warrant enforced control and prohibited sale under the Land Protection Act 1985, which will be replaced by the bill we are currently debating. While there are more than 60 declared weeds, there is limited funding from the federal government. There is no doubt that we welcome the \$5.7 million contributed by the federal government last year. It will help tackle the serious problem of infestation coming from the spread of Parkinsonia, prickly acacia, mesquite, rubber vine and parthenium. However, the federal government's response to other serious weed infestations is a joke and highlights the Howard government's lack of genuine commitment to tackling the Queensland weed problem head-on. For example, last year our government identified \$4.2 million worth of projects under the weeds of national significance program. Identified projects for the control of hymenachne, pond apple, salvinia and cabomba drew a mere \$900,000. We asked for \$4.2 million and we received \$900,000. This is a genuinely disappointing response to the good work done by industry, the state government and the community.

Strategies for the management and control of weeds cannot and will not work without financial backing from the government. It must be understood that governments cannot carry the burden; the community has to realise that this is a community issue and it has to be educated as to the seriousness of the eradication of weeds program. It is no good saying that the problem is out there and that it exists. We know it is there. The community has to be prepared to get behind governments to make sure that the funds are there to take control. It is pretty scary that, when weeds are reported to be costing Queensland around \$500 million a year in lost production, the best the federal government can do is allocate \$6.5 million. This is a national issue that must involve the community if we are to implement strategies that will achieve outcomes that are effective and everlasting.

We need massive injections of funding for research. We need huge commitments of dollars for on-the-ground projects. Those funds need to be separate and clearly identifiable in terms of where and how they are spent. It serves no purpose to put a spin on funding allocations and to have those funds spread thinly over areas of demand.

We need to get serious about the issue of weed control. As I said before, weed control is a community issue. It is an issue that, if not taken seriously, could leave future generations with a major environmental catastrophe. We stand to lose valuable lands to parthenium, giant rat-tail grass, mother-of-millions and the 60 or so other declared plants. There is a need for government to support the committed landowner in respect of neighbours who are poor land managers. I get complaints on a regular basis from landowners who are doing the right thing—good land managers who are working hard continuously to keep their lands clean. But all of their good work is being undone simply because they have a neighbour who has a poor attitude and does not understand what it means to be a good land manager.

Local councils must have the legislative powers to force landowners to take action against the cowboys who have no respect for other landowners or future generations. Local councils must be brought into line over their ad hoc approach to effective weed control and their apparent unwillingness to take on landowners. I see this on a regular basis. Local authorities have had issues of weed infestation brought to their attention. They have the powers. However, they fail to act upon those powers and, therefore, the genuine landowner who is putting in the hard work is disadvantaged.

As I said before, the community must also be better educated about weeds and weed control. We need to make members of the public aware of their responsibilities. The legislation before the House today recognises these requirements and the urgency of the problems that exist. The success and the intent of the legislation is dependent on commitments of ongoing funding, the right strategies and the vigilance of government agencies. If we do not get fair dinkum about the management and control of weeds, we are simply pouring millions of dollars into an out of control weed storm. That is unsustainable for us as a nation and an issue that really has to be taken very seriously before it gets to that stage.

I wish to raise a couple of local issues, one of which relates to the depasturing of stock routes and the fees and other charges made under section 58(4), 'Powers and functions of local governments' of the 1985 act, which is addressed in the bill before the House. That section of the act allowed local governments to collect fees and charges in respect of stock routes or reserves used for travelling stock. A local authority must charge depasturing fees for livestock forced onto a stock route under permit during times of extended dry spells and when landowners' pastures are beyond recovery until it rains. I understand the need for a local authority to collect the fees, which are passed on to the state. However, I have some real concerns about the fee structure.

The fee currently stands at \$1.65 per head per week and is set by regulation. I understand that the legislation to be passed will have the same requirement, but those fees are yet to be set by regulation. The fee that is charged can be varied upon application by the chairman of the local authority to the executive director of the department. Producers seeking to access a stock route due to climatic conditions are usually in trouble and the additional burden of fees can be the straw that breaks the camel's back. What I am saying is that we understand that the fees have to be there. During good times there is no reason why the fees should not be applicable and there should not be any reason for anybody to complain about them. However, when a grazier or a landowner is faced with a difficult dry spell and he finds himself starting to struggle financially, the fees at that level and the rate at which they are applied—on a per head per week basis—can over time become a burden.

The fee should be applied when times are good, but I would like the minister to look at and give serious consideration to a review of how and when these fees and charges should apply. Local councils are well aware of the prevailing conditions and are able to make a commonsense decision about the ability of people to pay at the time. I am not suggesting that they should not pay anything at all. Let us have a look at the structure and the amount of money that those people are asked to pay. A lot of people out there would welcome the minister having a look at that. I understand the difficulties that would arise if changes have to be made. On behalf of my constituents, I say that I would appreciate it if the minister looked at this.

Another issue of concern to me is giant rat-tail grass, or GRT as it is known. As everybody knows, it is an aggressive grass that is spreading throughout Queensland. It was introduced from South Africa in the 1960s as a contaminant in pasture seed and is having a major impact on the pasture grasses in many areas of my electorate and is on the move throughout Queensland. It has the capacity to take over pastures. It is extremely hardy and is rejected by livestock. It is also very hard to identify. I am told that even goats refuse to eat GRT. If that is true, that says a lot about the type of weed it is. Goats will eat just about anything. If they will not eat GRT, we have got a problem.

Harrisia cactus is another cause for concern. Peter Bambling, a constituent of mine north of Dingo on the Dingo-Mount Flora Road on a property called Marion, alerted me to this problem some years ago. Recently, I spoke to him again and had another look at the area which he had pointed out to me several years ago. It is certainly spreading. From speaking with other landowners in the area, I am aware that it is spreading throughout central Queensland as well. This is a native of South Africa, introduced in the 1890s. It chokes out pasture. I was also amazed to learn that it can interfere with the movement of livestock around stock routes or on properties. Cattle are reluctant to go anywhere near it.

Parthenium has been spreading throughout central Queensland and my electorate. It spreads over huge distances every time we have the right seasonal events. Around the Capella, Tieri and Emerald areas I have seen major infestations, with the whole landscape covered in the yellow parthenium flower, which means that that land is useless to livestock. Therefore, it is a real issue for graziers.

I have seen properties down around the Moura area where there is proper management of cattle grazing land which has infestations of parthenium weed. The cattle are put into the area and are allowed to eat the grass to a certain level and they are then moved to another paddock. This practice is having an impact on the spread of parthenium weed. I believe that if these graziers continue to manage their pastures in such a way they will be able to keep parthenium weed under control.

Another pest that has been of concern to me in the electorate of Fitzroy is mother-of-millions. I am alarmed at the way in which this plant is spreading. The way that mother-of-millions has spread through Taroom Shire is incredible.

I know that the minister and the Beattie government are committed to funding research and helping local authorities and landowners control weeds. I am pleased to see this happening. The minister and the government should be complimented. Research involves expenditure of a lot of money. However, whilst research is being undertaken the weeds are still spreading. I believe we need to be out there on the ground supporting programs that attack the problems where they exist—on the property. We need to take control of the problem where it exists.

I certainly do not believe that we can eradicate these weeds through blood, sweat and tears. However, we cannot afford to simply stand and look on and hope that research can come up with the right answers to these problems.

I support the legislation before the House. It is a step in the right direction in providing for the management and control of weeds. The legislation will assist local authorities and ensure that everything possible is being done at the grassroots level. This will help us to take some control of the weed situation in Queensland.
