



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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WATER

Dr LESLEY CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (11.40 a.m.): The year 2003 is the year of fresh water and last Saturday, 22 March, was World Water Day with the theme of water for the future. The sustainable use and management of our freshwater resources is one of the greatest challenges facing the world today and is of particular significance here in Australia, the driest inhabited continent on earth. The bottom line is that we cannot take our water supplies for granted, not even in far-north Queensland, the home of the Golden Gumboot in Tully where rainfall is measured in metres. Parts of the southern tableland were drought declared last year and their urban water supplies were severely restricted. Water levels in the Copperlode Dam that supplies Cairns dropped to 65 per cent, not low in comparison to some places but low enough to have Cairns City Council put restrictions on garden water use in place, which are still in force.

The provision of a water supply for our growing region to meet the needs of industry and growing urban areas has been a topic of hot debate in the Cairns area with the community polarised with respect to the need to build another dam to meet future demand. It was into this environment that Natural Resources Minister, Stephen Robertson, released the Barron River water resource plan, local authorities, December. The plan confirms that dam building is premature. Firstly, we must use the water that we have much more efficiently—a basic principle underpinning the plan. The Barron River water resource plan then takes an approach that recognises that for good, economic and environmental reasons we must find better ways of using existing supplies rather than building new infrastructure as a first resort. Only when we have used our existing supplies to their full potential should we consider the case for building new infrastructure. In taking this approach, the planning incorporates an important safeguard that will ensure that if demand trends change, a review of the plan can be triggered. This will ensure that the community's water needs are catered for in a timely fashion.

In reaching his decision, the minister evaluated numerous assessments, including appraisals of population growth expectations, the economic outlook for the irrigation and other sectors, and the condition of the plan area's ecological health. Significantly, this work indicated that the Cairns water allocations would be adequate to meet projected growth until at least 2022, well beyond the 10-year life of the plan. Even so, the plan makes available 4,000 megalitres per year of unallocated water from the Lower Barron River for the Cairns City Council. Supported by outcomes that establish environmental flow objectives to maintain healthy waterways in the plan area, these measures will provide for an exceptional level of water resource development that will serve the Cairns community's needs for the life of the plan and well beyond.

I acknowledge that increasing water efficiency is a challenge when we live in the wettest part of Queensland where some people still think that because rain falls from the sky in such large quantities it is limitless and should be free. But it is a challenge I have accepted because effective demand management and improved water efficiency and water recycling can defer or even avoid the need for large dam building projects. The current water usage for Cairns is approximately 515 litres per person per day. The council has set its target of holding consumption at the 2001 level, which was 475 litres until the year 2011. Using water more efficiently is just plain commonsense because it saves money in terms of deterring or avoiding capital costs for new water infrastructure, reduces operating costs associated with water plumbing and water treatment and saves ratepayers money in their water bills. Based on consumption rates elsewhere, including here in Brisbane where demand management

techniques have been introduced, that 350 litres per person is achievable and would extend the life of the existing water supplies for Cairns to about 2045.

To that end, I initiated a series of three water forums which were held recently in Cairns for the Cairns City Council, industry and the general community. I thank the Environment Minister, Dean Wells, and the Natural Resources Minister, Stephen Robertson, and officers from their respective departments for their assistance. I particularly thank Mayor Kevin Byrne and other sponsors of the forums such as the Cairns International Hotel, James Cook University and the Cairns and Far North Environment centre. Guest speakers at the forum included two internationally renowned experts, Tim Waldron, the CEO of Wide Bay Water, and Dr Stuart White, Director of the Institute of Sustainable Futures, a commercial arm of the University of Technology in Sydney which has produced many of these cost planning studies. Such studies provide a rigorous assessment of the relative cost of all of the options available to supply the water services people need in a particular area. The response to all three forums was excellent and I hope that the Cairns City Council responds positively to the offer from the Environment Minister to assist with the preparation of a least cost planning study for Cairns with a contribution of \$15,000.

In the meantime, I will be working with all the stakeholders in Cairns to develop an education campaign based on the successful strategies being used by Brisbane City Council, which has already reduced consumption to 300 litres per person per day and aims for a further seven per cent reduction. I am also well aware that other councils, particularly those on the Sunshine Coast, are doing excellent work in terms of providing incentives for people to install water tanks. Indeed, I have recently installed my own.