



Speech by

Dr LESLEY CLARK

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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WATER AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Dr LESLEY CLARK (Barron River—ALP) (9.23 p.m.): I welcome the opportunity to rise in support of the Water and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2003 because it provides for the continuing progress of the Beattie government's water reform agenda and deals with practical implementation issues that have arisen as part of that process. For example, a new water licence will not be granted if it will have an adverse effect on someone who already has a water entitlement or if it is going to cause environmental harm. Currently, these moratoriums can be put in place only after a water resource planning process has commenced. In practice, a number of water sources around the state are reaching their limits. To protect both the environment and the interests of existing entitlement holders we need to have the capacity to stop the taking of further water immediately. This does not mean that all development will be stopped in these circumstances. Rather, the act provides that these moratorium notices will need to be reviewed annually to ensure that these decisions are responsible and publicly accountable.

In far-north Queensland we have embarked on a process of sustainable water use management so these sorts of moratoriums will not have to be put in place. The moratoriums are a legacy of poor decisions of the past. In far-north Queensland we are intent on avoiding those mistakes. The Barron River water resource plan sets out for the next 10 years how much water will be available for irrigators, urban/industrial use and for environmental flows of the river itself.

The plan indicates that there will be no need for any additional water storage to be constructed in the life of the plan. While an additional 4,000 megalitres was provided for the Cairns urban water supply, the plan did not provide for any additional water for irrigators, because the maximum historical use of allocations in the Mareeba-Dimbulah water supply scheme has only ever been 70 per cent of the existing 161,000 megalitres currently allocated, with an amount of some 50,000 megalitres still available for use.

However, given that current rainfall conditions are such that the last two wet seasons have failed and the Tinaroo Falls Dam is at 42 per cent, it is likely that for only the second time irrigators will be allowed less than their full allocations. SunWater has indicated that farmers should expect only about 60 per cent of their water allocation for the 2003-04 year. The final allocations will be announced in July and this estimate could be revised upwards at that time or hopefully later in the season. The member for Tablelands, who spoke earlier in this debate, indicated that the Barron River water resource plan is flawed and that, therefore, the Nullingda dam on the Walsh River should be built. She has failed to make the distinction between an appropriate response for drought conditions as opposed to one for increased demand for water.

The appropriate response in the current circumstances is provided for in this legislation and in the water resource plan and the associated resource operations plan, namely, water trading, so that those people who do not need all of their allocation can sell it to those who do need additional water. The temporary transfer of water via water trading is one of the actions endorsed at a water forum I attended at the invitation of the Mareeba-Dimbulah water supply scheme customer council in Mareeba last month, along with representatives from the EPA, DNR&M, DSD, SunWater, the Mareeba Shire Council, the Cairns City Council and the Tableland Economic Development Corporation, to address the needs of tableland irrigators in the current drought and to look at future demand for water.

Other actions endorsed at that time included greater use of water ordering, the extension of water efficiency measures in both rural and urban communities, and the targeting of water losses and leaks from the MDIA channel irrigation system by SunWater. I agreed to approach the minister to determine whether it was possible to extend the funding of the current water use efficiency officer, and I would appreciate his consideration of this request. All of these actions will be coordinated by a drought action committee, whilst another committee will be formed to monitor the Barron River water resource plan. I commend Canegrowers CEO Murray Smith for organising that valuable forum.

There are still many people who believe that another dam will be required to be built to supplement the water supply in the Cairns region as demand for water from agricultural and urban uses grows. However, I am pleased to say that there is also a growing recognition that all possible action must be taken to improve water efficiency, recycling and conservation to reduce demand to delay the need for additional expensive infrastructure for as long as possible. In that respect, I am pleased to report that the Cairns City Council has accepted the offer of Environment Minister Dean Wells for \$15,000 towards the commissioning of a least cost planning study—a positive outcome following the water efficiency use forum that I organised in February this year. The terms of reference for that study are currently being developed by the Cairns City Council and EPA officers, and I hope that it will be completed by the end of the year to assist in sustainable water use planning by the Cairns City Council.

Although the catchment of the Copperlode Dam, the main water supply for the Cairns City Council, received good falls recently, there is still a need to be water wise. I commend the Cairns City Council for its initiative to have a stand at the Tropical Garden Show last weekend which focused on water conservation and recycling. However, I was disappointed to have confirmed the fact that, unlike some other councils, Cairns City Council still has no policy on the installation of water tanks.

Apparently there was great interest from the public and maybe it is appropriate for the council to seriously address this issue. I have recently installed a 6,000 gallon water tank that will provide enough water for me to water my garden through the dry season. I am sure that many more people would take the same opportunity if there was encouragement from the council. Some local authorities such as Brisbane and, I believe, Maroochydore provide financial incentives for residents to install water tanks. I hope that such issues will be examined in the least cost planning study and I welcome its findings.

In the interim, we all have a responsibility to use water as efficiently as possible. The framework of this legislation that is before the House recognises the need for us to manage our precious water resources sustainably for future generations. I commend the minister for his continuing commitment to water reform and I commend the bill to the House.