



Speech by

Lawrence Springborg

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

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PLANT PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr SPRINGBORG (Southern Downs—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (8.47 p.m.): I rise to support the Plant Protection Amendment Bill 2004. As the shadow minister for primary industries has indicated, the Nationals are very supportive of the legislation before the parliament. Certainly some issues of deficiency showed up following the recent citrus canker outbreak in central Queensland. It was a devastating outbreak and it has been necessary to ensure that legislative amendments are made to address that for the future. We really need to make sure that our response is adequate and that the legislative tools exist to ensure that the department is able to do its job.

Like many members, I was concerned when that outbreak was first reported. Certainly a degree of blame shifting and finger pointing went on at the time. Personally, I expressed some concerns about the issue of ongoing surveillance. I think that was a deficiency. Without wanting to plough old ground, I suppose that that is a concern we have. Regardless of the sensitivities of property owners who may find themselves potentially under surveillance, this whole episode has shown us that one can never have too much surveillance and these problems can be sitting below the surface and they need to be properly monitored and addressed. The question of how that particular devastating disease came into the country still has to be resolved, as does the question of what action may be taken against any individuals or corporations as a consequence of that.

I wish the department in Queensland and the federal authorities all the very best in trying to isolate the cause and then hopefully being successful in some prosecutions further down the track. I understand that some fairly sophisticated work is being done to try to identify that citrus canker strain. It is beyond the bounds of reasonable credibility and belief to think that that citrus canker strain just blew in on the wind from wherever. I think it is highly unlikely that it came in on somebody's shoe or on somebody's skin. We know that there are certain standards of proof that need to be applied. I wish the authorities all the best in trying to isolate the cause of that outbreak.

Biosecurity is one of the biggest issues that we face in agriculture in this state and in this country. I suppose tied in with the recent events from around the world is bioterrorism. There are opportunities for individuals to seek to compromise the pristine agricultural environment or the disease-free status of Queensland or Australia. Therefore, we need to be doubly vigilant at state and national levels to ensure that we are not only able to respond but also to be proactive in our approach to identifying these problems, making people aware of what to look out for in terms of potential disease outbreaks and having all of the legislative tools in our armour to be able to respond and tackle it up front.

I would encourage the government to put more resources into the area of biosecurity in Queensland. We have concerns that biosecurity is not sufficiently resourced. We believe that there should be more resources in the area of biosecurity in this state. The citrus canker outbreak manifested itself in the citrus industry. We never had a problem like that before. We have magnificent citrus in this state—some of the best in the country if not in the world. We had one outbreak of one citrus disease and then virtually the whole state was quarantined.

I would like to acknowledge those people in authority in the industry who worked very hard to make sure that the protocols could be put in place to open up the southern markets to our citrus fruit. There was no way we were able to consume all of that in Queensland. It was going to be virtually impossible.

We need to be ever vigilant in the future. Whilst it may be fair to say that we are never going to be completely prepared for that sort of outbreak, it identified the lack of skilled and trained staff able to move in very quickly and respond to it. Sure there were people moved from within the department to address that immediate problem. Some other people were brought out of retirement.

I would encourage the government to never drop the ball in terms of biosecurity staff. We have raised in the past in this place in a range of debates the need to ensure that we have the stock inspectors, the agronomists—a range of people in the area who have the skills and can provide information to those in industry. As we found out with the citrus canker outbreak, those people were absolutely invaluable because their skills were quickly updated, they were multiskilled and diversified so that they were able to go in there and assist in that area. The people brought in were very professional. But I think we did find a deficiency because we did not have the skilled staff necessary immediately, but in the end I think it came together quite well.

This legislation is a response to a number of issues that arose. One of those was the owners of diseased properties seeking injunctions to prevent eradication. Frankly, out there in the general community people think that is nuts. I am sure the minister thinks it is nuts. There are general natural justice principles that most people think we can abide by. But if we have a virulent disease problem—we know that other properties are at risk, we know that it can spread very quickly on the wind or by some other vector—then we have to get in there and eradicate it.

Mr Palaszczuk interjected.

Mr SPRINGBORG: As the minister said, if it rained we would have been in big trouble. I would love to see it rain, but not necessarily at that time. We had that very immediate problem. People can go to court and apply for injunctions. That extends the time to make the response that one needs to be make.

We absolutely welcome the greater disease surveillance powers. That is something that we indicated had been identified as a deficiency. We have to have the capacity to allow inspectors to access records, wherever located, to trace the movements of potentially diseased plant matter. There is no other choice.

The bill seeks to increase the penalties for breaches of the act. Frankly, I do not think that any penalty can be too great for a breach of the act with regard to matters that we are dealing with. We are looking at a multimillion-dollar citrus industry not only in Queensland but across Australia. If somebody wants to breach the act, if somebody wants to treat the law with cavalier intent, then frankly we have to jump on them. The need for the clarification of the right of the state to carry out necessary treatment or destruction within a pest quarantine area is important as well. When we were briefed by the minister's officers I was quite intrigued how that was done. They did it extremely well. That destruction work has to be done and the ongoing treatment work has to be done as well.

I now turn to another area of potential plant disease that concerns me. A problem for people in my electorate, particularly in the apple industry, is fire blight. Fire blight is a very devastating disease. Fortunately, we do not have it in our apple orchards in Australia. We should never have it happen. Stanthorpe is Queensland's only commercial apple-growing area. I am not saying that there are not people around with apple trees in their backyards. A lot of the varieties of apples that are grown out there are grown in southern states but they come on first in Queensland because of our climate and our altitude.

If we ever have a fire blight outbreak in Australia, Stanthorpe or the Granite Belt is going to be most affected. The reason it will be most affected is the climate—the humidity and a range of factors. There is no way on earth that we should have any risk of this whatsoever. Therefore, I am very concerned that Biosecurity Australia has even suggested in any way whatsoever that we should be opening up the Granite Belt or Australia to the importation of apples which may cause a fire blight problem.

This whole notion of minimal risk, as being some sort of acceptable protocol, I find completely and absolutely brainless. There can be no guarantees. It should be zero risk. The treatment protocols in New Zealand quite frankly mean that fire blight spores can still be within the fruit. The chlorine baths will never reach down in the stem to knock that out. The risk is too great.

I find it extremely strange that we may be able to bring apples in from New Zealand where there is a risk of fire blight—however minimal it may be—but Queensland is subjected to a far stronger protocol when it exports apples interstate. We will not be able to put our apples into places like Tasmania because of the risk of codling moth. It is a rare affliction in apples. But we are going to have stronger protocols and stronger quarantine barriers within our country than we may have for apples coming in from New Zealand.

If nothing else, this citrus canker outbreak should have proven to us that no apples should come in from New Zealand. The risk is far too great. We have to stop it. My constituents who are apple growers are

saying, 'I told you so.' If we can have citrus canker come in so easily and potentially spread so easily, then how are we ever going to be able to identify and control a fire blight outbreak.

It has taught us something. I know that the costs have been high, but I say in conclusion that we support this bill. We think it is a good bill. I just say on behalf of the apple growers in the electorate of Southern Downs: let us now use this particular example to rally against the importation of apples from fire blight places throughout New Zealand and the rest of the world.