



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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FISHERIES AMENDMENT BILL

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (2.39 pm): The legislation before the House, the Fisheries Amendment Bill 2006, comprises 35 pages and 46 clauses. The bill amends the Fisheries Act 1994. I note that one of the primary objectives of the bill is to enshrine in legislation the shark control program for bather protection. It has been a successful program. I noted with interest the member for Sandgate's comments. I find many of his comments to be common sense.

I know that the drum lines are only used off the beaches in the Burnett area. There are no nets. I could be wrong but I am pretty sure that we have not yet recorded a fatal shark attack in the Burnett area. I was recently at a surf-lifesaving dinner at Moore Park and was speaking about sharks with one of their representatives, Craig Holden. I am pretty sure that we have not had a fatal attack in that area. That area is not covered by nets. I welcome the review that the Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries is undertaking and the community consultation that will be part of that.

Mr Mulherin: We have undertaken the review. It is out there. If we want to expand the shark safety program it will only happen when we consult with local government and Surf Life Saving Queensland to see if there is a demand there.

Mr MESSENGER: I take that interjection. It would be great if local representatives could also be kept in the loop as part of that review process.

The bill also provides for a compensation scheme. I note that the shadow minister, the member for Toowoomba South, has some concerns that there is going to be no compensation for marine park complementary zones declared. I have some questions about that. I want the minister to elaborate on the formula that will be used to derive the amount of compensation to be paid to people.

The bill consolidates declaration-making powers under the act to provide for a centralised and less complex statutory regime. It also provides for a mechanism whereby authorities are automatically suspended or cancelled where fees are outstanding. It provides for the removal of certain restrictions on temporary quota transfers, which is a good thing. It also allows the chief executive to sell seized fisheries resources that were seized in a live state. Does this money go back into consolidated revenue or is it spent within the fishing industry?

I note that there was extensive community consultation. I am pleased to see what I describe as strong and meaningful community consultation. Many times in the past the fishing industry has been consulted but it has felt that the consultation was meaningless. In terms of this bill they feel as though they have been listened to.

This is legislation which affects Queensland's fifth largest primary industry. It is an industry which is made up of hardworking, resilient, family-minded people, many of whom take great physical risks to earn a living. As well as the physical risks there are significant mental risks. I have met many a fisher or fisherman's wife and it is not often that I have seen them cry. They are a hardy lot. They are a tough breed. We have seen too many fishermen crying in the last few years because of the undue pressure that has been placed on them and their families through government meddling and regulation.

This industry is directly responsible for employing over 20,000 Queenslanders in harvesting, processing and marketing the catch. The shadow minister, the member for Toowoomba South, made the point in his speech that the extreme green movement has an undue influence on this government and has painted Queensland commercial fishers as environmental vandals. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I remind this House of one of the most outstanding fishing advocates, Mrs Anne Whalley from the Burnett. Anne wrote to me and said—

Personally, I am aware that the 'Born to Fish' fisherman is highly conscious of his environment because he needs to have a sustainable fishery so that he is assured of an income for life.

Anne also points out that the east coast trawl plan requires mandatory usage of bycatch reduction devices in all beam trawl operations throughout Queensland, which is another strong environmental initiative.

Turtle exclusion devices for the trawl industry were invented by one of my constituents, the former president of the QSIA and very talented fisherman and artist, John Olsen. I know that John was a strong advocate for fishers and continues to do a lot of work in the background. The QSIA web site states—

Queensland fishers work closely with fisheries and environmental scientists to ensure their catches are sustainable. They are at the forefront of efforts to minimise impacts on the environment. They observe limits to the amount of catch and the timing and location of fishing operations.

The amount of their catch and fishing effort is monitored both through compulsory log books and through leading edge technology: satellite based vessel monitoring systems that not only track vessels' positions and provide on-board communication and management information but can also allow the catch to be recorded in real time.

I know that we have had a lot of legislation in both federal and state parliaments regarding fisheries. I think one of the best things that we can do to protect our environment is to considerably increase the resources we allocate to our fisheries officers. We need more fisheries officers. We need more people on the ground monitoring those bag limits. It is quite ridiculous the number of fisheries officers, given the huge coastline they have to cover.

According to the QSIA web site under the heading 'Seafood, the economy and jobs', seafood production creates jobs, generates significant economic activity and attracts tourists. Seafood itself is increasingly being recognised for its health giving qualities. Commercial fisheries production in 2001-02 was around \$407 million. This value more than doubles by the time it reaches the retail/export level, resulting in an economic contribution of over \$800 million. The Queensland seafood industry is well established as a vital, strong and stable segment of the state's economy, especially at a regional level. The Bundaberg-Burnett commercial seafood industry on those figures is worth about \$37.1 million and generates 829 commercial fishing jobs. The Bundaberg seafood industry at around the \$37 million mark is the second largest in Queensland, only being beaten by Cairns at \$53 million.

We see mention of providing compensation when a fisheries management plan affects the rights of our fishermen and women. I think it is about time. It is great news for the fishing industry, but it should have happened a lot sooner. I have comments to make towards the end of my speech from local fishers who make that exact same comment. It is like shutting the door after the horse has bolted. It appears the government is trying to do the right thing by our fishing industry. It might be the looming state election, which is just around the corner, that might be prompting the state government to do the right thing by our fishers and not alienate a whole industry.

Another important issue was covered by the shadow minister and that is fuel costs. With the ever increasing cost of fuel many owner operators of trawl fishing vessels are struggling to viably run their businesses at a profit. Michael and Belinda Buckingham, constituents of mine, are a classic example of this. They are owner operators of trawl fishing vessels in the east coast otter trawl fishery. Their business is enormously affected by the high, unstable fuel costs. At today's rate of around 80c per litre for diesel—that is, after receiving the off-road diesel rebate and the GST component—their vessel, which carries some 6,500 litres of diesel at an average of 90,000 litres of diesel per year, costs them about \$5,655 every production trip. That is a massive \$2,470 increase per production trip in two years. In May 2004 they were paying a rate of around 49c a litre which added up to around \$3,185 per production trip.

Michael and Belinda have calculated that in May 2004 fuel represented a cost of about 21 per cent of their average income from a production trip. In November 2005, fuel represented a cost of 32 per cent of the average income from a production trip. By April 2006, fuel now represented a cost of approximately 38 per cent of the average income from a production trip. The Energy Grants (Credit) Scheme as it has operated has saved their business from having to directly pay out that \$34,000 in fuel costs annually. They say that several fuelling facilities have already indicated that, should the proposed changes be introduced by the federal government, the commercial fishing businesses—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr English): Order! I would ask the member to very, very quickly explain to me how proposed changes at the federal government level relate to the bill that is currently before the state parliament today.

Mr MESSENGER: Thank you for your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker.

A government member: It wasn't advice; it was an order.

Mr MESSENGER: For your direction. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure you will enjoy the point I am about to make, and I will make it very quickly. Today I join with my state coalition colleagues—the shadow minister for primary industries and fisheries and the member for Toowoomba South—and ask that the federal government reassess its plans for the Energy Grants (Credit) Scheme. I would have thought that the production costs and the survival of our fishing industry were relevant and vital points that members of this House would welcome hearing, instead of having their heads stuck in the sand and not giving two figs for our fishing industry.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! I am going to seek some advice so I ask the member for Burnett to resume his seat. I suggest the member be very, very careful. If those comments were directed at me and the direction I gave you, they could be deemed to be a reflection on the chair. No other members in the House commented apart from when I pulled you up on relevance. So, if those words were directed at me, they will be deemed to be a reflection on the chair.

Mr MESSENGER: Mr Deputy Speaker, I was not directing those comments at you. I was directing those comments at other members on the opposite side of the House who were rudely interrupting and suggesting that my microphone should be turned off.

I urge all Queenslanders to eat Queensland fish. Recently, we saw the launch of an initiative of the Queensland Farmers Federation that said every family needs a farmer. I remind the House that every family also needs a fisher. It might mean that, while we look at the 70 per cent or more of imported seafood on display in our local supermarkets, we at least display a preference for fresh Queensland seafood.

Russell Anderson is a spokesperson for the QSIA in Bundaberg. Russell has been in contact with my office and he asked that these comments be made with regard to this bill. He said that it is a long overdue bill. He said that, under the reef line fisheries, Beattie reduced the 1,700 licences back to something like 242. They would ideally like to see the compensation backdated—although they are not expecting the Premier to actually do that based on his track record—particularly when the government ripped net licences off the fishermen last year, reclaiming 40 per cent of them. In Russell's opinion the legislation had to be changed. Overall it is a step in the right direction, but he believes there is a sting in its tail—the compensation could go further in this legislation. Whether it is through sustainability or environment protection, they should be compensated.

Margaret Stevenson is also a prominent spokesperson in the fishing industry. She is grateful that the government is going to at least give some rights, but she is suspicious that the government could start taking measures for a sustainability purpose without proving it will be for a sustainability purpose. She claims that there is a loophole whereby the government could get out of paying compensation.

Margaret also makes the comment that their rights should have been acknowledged and considered before they caused heartache and took away licences. Now it is all said and done and they are going to bring in the compensation but, as Mrs Stevenson says, it is after the horse has bolted. What about all those who have gone through the heartache and gone bankrupt in the process? She would like people in this House to think about those people. A lot of fishermen have the attitude that they will believe the changes when they see them. Margaret also says that she hopes they are allowed to become profitable enough to pay for the high fees.

Margaret also wanted me to refer to reports by Dr Walter Starck, who has dived on reefs all around the world for 50 years or so. In an article titled 'Environment: Debunking myths about the Great Barrier Reef', Dr Starck was quoted as stating some relevant figures. He said that, of the 346,000 square kilometres of reef and lagoon area that make up the Great Barrier Reef, the total catch from the Great Barrier Reef is just 17 kilograms per square kilometre annually, and the annual harvest figures average around 7,700 kilograms per square kilometre on other Pacific reefs. Experts say that this is a sustainable level of harvesting and that that rate of fishing allows stocks to be replenished.

In closing, I would like to quote from Jocelyn and Peter Bowman. They have a trawler business and they have been hit badly by GBRMPA and the closures for the green zone. Their annual turnover is down by 40 per cent. This in turn has affected not only them but their deckhand, whose wages have been dropped. They are also having difficulty selling their catches as the markets are drying up and there are far too many government regulations in place to actually sell the seafood. They currently have 1.2 tonnes of seafood in a freezer that they are unable to sell. Jocelyn also pointed out that our major chains are not giving the consumer the opportunity to buy local seafood as these major supermarkets are choosing instead to purchase imported seafood because it is cheaper. Imported seafood has flooded the market, so our local fisher men and women are suffering because they cannot even get their catch into the supermarkets.

Once again, I state that I rely on Queensland seafood. I put it above all others. I remind members of this House and other people listening to this broadcast on the internet that they should choose Queensland seafood. Supermarkets import vannamei prawns, which have God knows what inside them, when they could easily choose fresh Queensland seafood.

The commercial fishing industries have been flogged and disregarded by this Labor government. Without compensation, this government has already wiped out thousands of jobs by closing and banning fishing and crabbing in many areas of our state. This legislation almost falls into the category of too little too late.