



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

Hansard Thursday, 2 November 2006

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr KNUTH (Charters Towers—NPA) (4.16 pm): In speaking to the Primary Industries Legislation Amendment Bill, I would like to add that these changes do not address the serious problems faced by rural communities serviced by the underresourced and understaffed department of primary industries. I must acknowledge that the changes are minor in comparison to the huge biosecurity issues that face rural industries in Queensland. In July, the government announced that an additional 10 staff would work in biosecurity. However, in October, a stock inspector at Alpha finished work, and as yet no announcement or replacement has been made. Her duty—to safeguard the tick line and protect the western communities from an outbreak—has been passed on to inspectors 200 kilometres away.

In effect, the industry is worth billions of dollars to the Queensland economy and it has been put at risk. The issue of stock inspectors is a priority. I would like to say to the minister that, along with the member for Gregory and other members, I have been pushing for a stock inspector at Alpha. We received a stock inspector after lobbying for about 14 months. This stock inspector has since moved on or relocated, and we do not want to come down here again and lobby and push and ask for another stock inspector. I believe that person needs to be replaced. That position is a priority.

I also question the changes to the Brands Act 1915, which sees the extension of stock inspector status given to all police. Apart from diminishing the role of the stock inspector, it will also create an additional workload for rural based police officers. Police officers in rural and regional areas are already continually doing the work of a dozen departments—mental health officers, domestic violence counsellors, traffic controllers, drug investigators, learner driver examiners, security personnel and liquor licence enforcers, as well as attending accidents, fires, break-ins and call-outs. Add the role of the stock inspector and it will be impossible to recruit police officers to rural and regional areas.

With this change, can rural areas expect to see the number of police officers in the area increase, or will the existing staff just have to add the role of a stock inspector to the never-ending list of departmental responsibilities? I just cannot see this possibly working even though it might seem to be a wonderful idea. We have been pushing for a police officer for Tieri for nearly 1½ years but cannot get a full-time police officer for that station. This has been an ongoing issue. In relation to turning police officers into stock inspectors, if we cannot get police officers now I cannot see how this can possibly be logical.

The minister in his second reading speech spoke about Queensland's exemplary biosecurity status. I suggest that our biosecurity status has been mostly due to the good management by landholders themselves who deserve to be congratulated for their thankless work to rid the countryside of noxious weeds, feral pests and to protect the industry that their livelihood depends on.

In its June 2002 report the Productivity Commission examined the potential social, economic and environmental consequences of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in this country. The commission reports that the worst case scenario would involve key beef and lamb export markets being closed down for 15 months, that the cost of a foot-and-mouth disease incursion would be between \$8 billion and \$13 billion of gross domestic product, and that its consequences would be felt for nearly 10 years after the event. Even an isolated outbreak that was brought rapidly under control was estimated to potentially cost

\$2 billion to \$3 billion of gross domestic products. Not replacing stock inspectors after they have been relocated or turning police officers into stock inspectors without the necessary training is a recipe for disaster.

The slow response by the department to the possible Hendra virus outbreak is a worrying concern. An independent review has recommended that the state government pick up its act when responding to potential disease outbreaks. The urgency with which the department responds when alerted to a possible incident is nonexistent. Racehorse owners in the Charters Towers area are alarmed and very concerned that they face a real and deadly threat, knowing that they could alert only an answering machine when contacting the department. That is of great concern to racehorse owners. As members would know, Charters Towers has a big problem with flying foxes. When pregnant flying foxes drop their young the placenta falls down on to the ground. I have been informed that that placenta has the potential of carrying the lethal Hendra virus. When there are thousands of virus-carrying flying foxes roosting above people's homes and above horse stables, it is worrying. The department of primary industries can play a role in Charters Towers with the bat issue. I would like to see those bats tested, because it is a big concern for horse owners and Charters Towers in general. They are the issues that I wanted to bring to the attention of the House.