



Speech by
Mike Horan

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH

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NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT REGULATION (NO. 1) 2007

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (8.12 pm): I rise to join in this debate to disallow the Natural Resources and Water Legislation Amendment Regulation (No. 1) 2007. I want to speak about the 83c per cow per week that is charged for the use of the stock routes and the \$3.36 per megalitre charge on water harvesting in all areas of the state—north, central and south.

The current drought is virtually a continuation of a dry time that started around 1991. In all the time that I have been driving to parliament, I have seen water in the Lockyer Creek only in 1996 and 2001, and there may have been one or two other short occasions. That has been much the same for the south-east of the state from Lockyer Creek west to the Great Dividing Range, for western Queensland, and parts of the north-west and the centre of the state. This drought has been like a long slow cancer.

We see a lot of natural disasters and members from both sides of the House have great sympathy for the victims. We do what we can to support people such as those who suffered tragedy when that dreadful cyclone hit Innisfail. Droughts are like a slow cyclone that goes on for 10 or 15 years. The recovery takes years and years. Sometimes it is not as spectacular as a flood, fire or cyclone, but it is just as devastating. It eats away at people for years and years. It is dreadful for the families that live through it. It is difficult on marriages, on families and on whole districts.

There are a number of options to keep breeders going through a drought and one of them is the stock route system. People can send their cattle away on agistment. Agistment on a private property costs more than agistment on a stock route, but the farmer is eligible for a drought subsidy to bring the cattle home by vehicle transport. However, under the DRAS scheme a farmer is not eligible for a subsidy if his cattle is on the stock routes.

When a farmer uses the stock routes, it costs money to have the cattle supervised. For a normal group of 300 or 400 head of cattle, there will be at least two drovers as well as dogs, motorbikes, probably four horses, and a caravan and truck to maintain. The regulation states that they have to move so many kilometres a day. Of course, they have to try to move to where there is water or cart water in. There is a huge cost involved in managing those cattle, which is why it is so cruel to enforce this charge in the midst of a drought. Again I say that, whenever there has been a natural disaster, all in this House have done whatever we can to support the people involved. In the midst of this natural disaster, we have to provide some assistance.

During the estimates hearings I raised the problems that these people face and the fact that they cannot apply for any drought assistance to bring their cattle home. Some cattle have travelled hundreds of kilometres from a property under the watchful eye of paid drovers or the family. Some farmers have pulled their kids out of school—they cannot afford the school fees anyway—and they live on the road for two or three years. Some shires have blocked the stock route or closed it off because it is out of feed or water. In that case, they can be stranded in the middle of central Queensland. How do they get back? There is only one way to go back. All the feed behind them has been eaten out, so they have to truck the cattle home. However, they are not eligible for a drought subsidy under the rules applied by QRAA. That is another

reason why we should not be charging 83c per head in the midst of the worst drought that the nation has ever seen.

Like the other speakers before me, I appeal to the minister to listen to this debate. It is about the humanitarian way that we look after Queensland families. In this House we support a lot of things. We support the subsidies that are paid in metropolitan and south-east Queensland. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on subsidising bus and train travel so that people do not have to pay exorbitant costs that are probably beyond the average worker. We understand that is necessary and we support it. These good hardworking Queensland families contribute to the export industry of our state and they need this modest help during the period of the drought.

I also want to speak about water charges. Four years ago these water charges were introduced by the government out of utter spite following the Premier's failed attempt to close down Cubbie Station. I believe that that was one of the blackest moments in this state's history. Another incident occurred one Sunday night not long after when *Four Corners* aired a program that drew untrue comparisons between the cost of water there and in the cities. They did not show the true cost of water. They did not allude to the fact that places like Cubbie had to pay every single cent of the cost of providing the water infrastructure, yet they are not allowed to take water unless the river is in flood and is so many metres above normal level. It has not been full since 1991.

That aside, the Premier tried to close down Cubbie Station and divert the water to the Narran Lakes. They found that was impossible because it went over so many kilometres of sand, rivers and so on. It just was not practical. Then he tried to say that it was causing salinity problems, which was proven wrong. Eventually he went out there to attend one of the largest and most emotional public meetings that I have seen in my life.

The hall at Dirranbandi was chock-a-block. There were people out in the streets with loudspeakers. They were all young families because Cubbie Station is a system of share farmers. The town is full of young married people with little kids who have 1,200 acres each and one tractor. They rely on the water. That is their income. I remember one young man with a child in his arms standing up and saying to the Premier, 'Premier, if you cut off this water will you pay the lease fees on the machinery that I am trying to pay off because this is my living?' It was comprehensively defeated that night and then within weeks we had this vicious charge put on anybody who harvests water. It was a vicious and spiteful payback to irrigators generally but mainly to get at Cubbie Station.

This is actually paying for nothing. The vast majority of these water harvesters harvest overland flow. Some are harvesting from the flood of streams which come from a system where there is a dam or a weir. West of my electorate on the Darling Downs it is from overland flow. Farmers have had their properties laser-levelled so that when it rains they can catch the water in a sump and then suck it up into a ring tank that they have built at a cost of half a million to a million dollars. They have borrowed the money for it and it has been sitting there for years and years empty because it has not rained. It is their own infrastructure that they have put in place. There is never going to be a need for a dam on the Condamine River such as was talked about at Elbow Valley up near Killarney. That was talked about years ago. That dam would not hold as much as the ring tanks on the Darling Downs hold. There are about 300, 1,000 to 1,500 megalitre ring tanks. The storage on farm is there but it has not rained and they have not been able to get the water. They have gone into debt with borrowings and interest to do it. To be charging \$3.36 a megalitre for nothing—for fresh air because that is what it is in most cases—is absolutely wrong.

I do not think anybody minds paying a fee if they are actually paying for water that has come from a system that has cost the government millions of dollars, such as a dam, and some water is let out and they can harvest some of that. They do not mind paying for that, but this is paying for the infrastructure that they have actually put in themselves. They have borrowed money, bought dozers and worked for hours to build it. For probably three out of four years most of that infrastructure sits empty. If they get one good year when it rains and water floods across their place, they catch the water, suck it up, pump it in and they then have 18 months water supply. They are going to be charged just for the honour of having the guts to borrow the money, extend their debt, and work hard to make an income for themselves and pay their staff and all the people who drive the trucks and the headers, the agents in Toowoomba who buy and sell the grain and the people who work at Fisherman Islands. All these people down along the chain get jobs through the primary risk that these people took.

I think this was an interim fee. It is not fair. I think this fee is un-Australian. I think this motion tonight to disallow this regulation should be taken notice of. I hope the minister has listened to what I have said about this issue. I know that he would have. This is important. Let us be fair about the things that we do. People do not mind making a contribution to some form of infrastructure, but they do not want to pay for nothing. No-one wants to pay for nothing. That is what this charge is. They are paying for fresh air. It is unfair, it is dishonest and it should be struck out, particularly when we consider what is happening with the stock routes at this time of such stress in the worst drought we have ever seen in this state. I appeal to the

minister to take notice. There is a lot of genuine thought behind the motion to disallow this regulation and I would ask him to take notice of it.