



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Wednesday, 22 August 2007

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

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (8.32 pm): It is with great pleasure that I rise to support the disallowance motion as moved by the member for Darling Downs. If the coalition's disallowance motion is passed tonight, the gross inequities which currently exist in the water supply system managed by this government will become a little fairer. It will fundamentally mean that this government will fairly share the risk involved in the business of water supply to an industry which creates enormous amounts of wealth for Queensland and community wealth and jobs.

A point that I think most members opposite do not really understand is how we actually produce wealth for this country. We can either make it, mine it, grow it or show it. Quite frankly, if you are not directly involved in one of those activities—make it, mine it, grow it or show it—then as a business you are just taking in each other's washing; you are just recycling the wealth that those four primary activities create. I would have to say that one of the reasons those opposite do not fundamentally understand how wealth is created is that they have never been involved in small business in their lives.

Government members interjected.

Mr MESSENGER: Maybe a few of them. They are either a teacher, a union rep, a union hack or maybe a lawyer—that covers the whole gamut of experience from those opposite.

Government members interjected.

Mr MESSENGER: Okay, a police officer.

Mr HINCHLIFFE: I rise to a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I take offence to that. I am not from any of those categories.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms van Litsenburg): Would the member—

Mr MESSENGER: I withdraw, if you want me to, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you.

Mr MESSENGER: SunWater, the government owned corporation which manages water in my district, is not doing a very good job. It allowed farmers to go out and invest significant money into crops without warning them about the impending decrease in water allocations. It took two weeks longer to finally announce the allocations. Meanwhile, farmers went out and bought extra water at \$700 a megalitre and then woke up the next day and found out the extra water had been allocated to them, so the thousands of dollars they spent on water was wasted.

We know we are battling one of the worst droughts in recent living history—we all know that—but it is a fact that we are also battling one of the worst managed government owned bureaucracies. There is no communication, no empathy or understanding and no helping hand from the government which should be willing to share the risk during the bad times. That is the important principle—that this government in times of drought, in times of crisis, should be willing to share the risk. All we have is this Labor government with its hand out, wanting record charges for basic infrastructure. The farming and horticultural industries in my

part of the world—the Bundaberg and Burnett industries—contribute almost half a billion dollars to Queensland's economy. It is around \$350 million in the horticultural industry and around \$120 million in the cane industry. That is \$0.5 billion worth of wealth created for our state.

In the past few weeks my office has been flooded with phone calls from desperate farmers seeking my assistance with regard to surface water allocations announced by SunWater in January this year. One farming family I was approached by are Dean and Rosilyn Akers, who are small crop growers in the Burnett who currently grow sweet potatoes and zucchinis. I might add that they are the largest producer of sweet potatoes in Australia, growing 400 acres a year. According to Mr Akers, two years ago farmers in the area were allocated 100 per cent of their water allocation by SunWater and then back in March it was cut down to 46 per cent. However, from 1 July this year their water allocation is down to three per cent but they are expected to pay for the 100 per cent allocation.

Mr Pearce interjected.

Mr MESSENGER: I take the interjection from the member for Fitzroy. Yes, sure, it has gone from 100 per cent down to 46 per cent but then it has gone down to three per cent. Why wasn't there better management on SunWater's behalf? Why the sudden drop? Why couldn't there have been better communication from the SunWater officials? I think the officials are just lousy. In fact, they may as well not be there because we know they get their orders from Brisbane. We all know it is centralised in Brisbane—whatever they want. There is no consultation or consideration for the local people.

Anyone with common sense could see that this would result in crops dying and a significant number of employees losing their jobs. Mr Akers's situation is that 60 jobs will be lost as a result of his reduction in allocation and, might I say, the mismanagement on behalf of SunWater. Mr Akers has informed me that there are other tomato, English potato, snow pea and melon farmers just about to lose everything else as well.

Quite frankly, farmers in my electorate are being robbed by SunWater and robbed by this government. No farmer can profitably manage their business and survive the climatic vagaries when this government, through its corporation, dictates such massive drops in water allocations while still demanding 100 per cent payment for irrigation water. Mr Akers believes that the sensible solution would have been to allocate the south side—which is the area in the Burnett where the farmers are currently struggling—with 20 per cent so that all the farmers could finish off the crops that have already been planted and hold off planting until water allocations are increased. Mr Akers stated—

All our money is out there in the ground at present, we have prepaid soil, fertiliser, plant, water, spray etc to try and grow a crop to retrieve our upfront money plus a little more to make a living. This situation will be a total right off if more water is granted.

I have taken up this matter with the minister for natural resources. He is well aware of that and I hope this reinforces it for him. I ask that this situation be urgently investigated and a short-term solution be found so that our hardworking farmers, their families and their workers who contribute to the wealth of our community are looked after.

Another local example is that of Geoff Mansell from Exotica Plants, a nursery at Cordalba. He also contacted my office raising concerns with SunWater's grossly unfair water management policy. Mr Mansell wrote—

We purchased a water allocation from Sun Water after 2/04/07. We purchased High Priority, Peak water, the most expensive, as we need water all the time for our wholesale export nursery business.

Once again, this is a business generating wealth and export dollars for our community—export dollars that we need to pay for all those other imports that come into our country. He continues—

After we had paid our deposit we were informed that all allocations, including High Priority, for the new water year beginning on the 1st of July this year could be announced to be anywhere between 0-5%.

Never was it mentioned that we would be on a different allocation from existing High Priority purchasers who had their purchases finalised prior to 2/4/07, and therefore be discriminated against in this new water year by reducing our allocation to zero and giving existing customers 85% of their allocation.

We understand that these are critical times with water but do not understand that the water allocation we purchased in good faith prior to the beginning of this new water year is subject to this discriminating action.

We have also received a copy of a new document titled 'Critical Water Supply Arrangements for the Bundaberg Water Supply Scheme' which has come into force from 01/07/07. Why, I ask, have we been subject to this act when we purchased water prior to its commencement date?

It has been mentioned that we purchased a 'dry allocation'. This I believe is a purchase of a water allocation that is useable after the catchments have a certain amount of water in them. We did not purchase such an allocation and have in fact been using our water prior to 01/07/07! This I believe gives us just as much right to have our allocation at 85% as we are an existing customer.

Therefore, for some reason, which we do not understand, SunWater is discriminating against its customers who purchased water allocations after the 2nd of April this year.

We also accept that mistakes can be made and think that a better option is to lower the high priority allocation to a lesser amount and make the cut-off point the start of this new water year.

Another interesting point I will make is that last weekend Childers held its annual Multicultural Festival and at the festival I was surprised that SunWater had a booth with the logo in large letters, 'Water for Life', promoting Paradise Dam. I did not go in but assume they were selling allocations there! This I don't understand.

On the point of Paradise Dam, it is the only dam that has been built in this state for 19 years—that is including the Goss years and right through. It is no wonder that the people of the south-east corner, as mentioned by the shadow minister, are faced with drinking recycled toilet water because of the inaction and unpreparedness of this government.

Time expired.