



Speech by

Rosa Lee Long

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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PLANT PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (4.16 pm): I rise to make a brief contribution to the Plant Protection Amendment Bill 2007. This bill is a response to the outbreak of sugarcane smut disease in and around the Childers area which was detected in June last year. Unfortunately, it has spread to other sugar-growing areas of Queensland and is now as far north as the Herbert district centred around Ingham in north Queensland. Thankfully, sugar cane on the Atherton Tablelands has so far escaped infection from this disease. It can only be hoped that this will remain the case.

The recent outbreak of black sigatoka on banana farms on the coast was kept out of the tablelands paddocks and there is some basis from that experience to hope that smut will also fail to make it up over the coastal ranges. Whether it does reach local growers or not, it is a sad fact that it is now a permanent part of the Queensland sugarcane industry. As the minister said in his second reading speech, the only option now is management as it is too late for containment and eradication.

Cane smut has struck at a bad time for the sugar industry. It has been battling harsh conditions both environmentally and economically for more than a decade. The industry saw perverted world markets, drought and other pest problems which delivered unsustainable returns for years. Just as those prices began to improve, Cyclone Larry devastated huge areas of cane lands in the far north, particularly on the coast. Thankfully, on the tablelands the sugar crop has recovered fairly quickly, unlike the tree crops such as avocados, lychees and macadamias. Now it is faced with the cane smut which reduces productivity markedly. The general solution is to move to smut-resistant varieties. However, these two are also less productive than normal varieties and so inevitably farmers are faced with reduced incomes of one severity or another.

The bill today allows for a number of strategies to minimise as far as possible the impact of smut. They include permitting for very specific reasons the continued planting of smut-susceptible varieties of cane for a specific period of time and in specific areas. Other provisions allow for the chief executive to make, amend or even repeal plant declarations in certain circumstances. That is mainly when the restrictions made under those declarations are no longer justifiable, especially when they relate to an inability to control the spread of pests. While it is understandable in this context, it is important to remember that there are on average 20 new pests, plants, animals and diseases being introduced into Queensland every year. Our rural industries underpin our economy. They support countless towns and cities across the state and employ huge numbers of Queenslanders. We need to do much better at keeping these kinds of problems outside our borders and outside Australian borders. I support the bill.