



Speech by

## Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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### PLANT PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

**Mrs MENKENS** (Burdekin—NPA) (3.57 pm): I rise to make a contribution in the debate on the Plant Protection Amendment Bill 2007. This bill partially repeals section 11A of the Plant Protection Act 1989. The bill is aimed directly at the Bundaberg region where sugarcane smut is a considerable pest. Under the current legislation smut-susceptible varieties cannot be planted in the Bundaberg region. However, the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries has been advised that there is not sufficient stock of sugarcane smut-resistant plant stock available for planting this year. As planting begins early this year—and certainly in quite a few areas it has started—there is an urgency attached to this bill.

As we know, sugar cane is one of Australia's most important primary industries with it contributing \$1.75 billion a year to the Australian economy. Bearing this in mind, Queensland contributes 95 per cent of the total sugarcane production in Australia. There are over 4,000 cane-farming businesses in Queensland that employ thousands of workers. Australian producers are renowned for having some of the highest productivity in the world. Sugar cane is processed up and down the coast of Queensland. I understand there are 28 sugar mills across Australia.

These mills own over 4,000 kilometres of tramways for the transport of cane. As we know, Australia is second only to Brazil in raw sugarcane production. Only about 20 per cent of our sugar is consumed locally, with the remainder exported to countries such as Asia, the Middle East and North America. Sugar is one of Queensland's most important industries and any disease such as smut which could have high damaging effects must be looked at quickly and seriously. Smut has been evident in the Ord River cane-growing region for some years. For quite a few years the east coast of Australia was the only area in Australia that was smut free, something that farmers in Queensland were very happy about. Sugarcane smut was first found at Childers in June 2006 which certainly created a shockwave throughout the farming industry from cane growers to farmers alike. However, shortly afterwards smut was then found at Mackay and Ingham. There is a massive distance between those places—in fact, it is an enormous distance—which shows just how widespread the pest has become and it has not been proven how smut has travelled. Currently there are 74 infected farms in the Bundaberg-Childers area. Some 1,600 hectares of cane have been inspected in this area, and at this stage the findings have been reported as reasonably minor. However, there are a further 12 infected farms in Mackay and 19 in Ingham.

Sugarcane smut is a type of fungus which causes disease of sugar cane and lowers the yields ranging from about 30 per cent to 100 per cent. The disease spreads by forcing the cane plant to produce a smut whip which is infested with the spore. I have not actually seen it, but from photographs I have seen it does stand out quite well. That is how it is detected—that is, to visually see the whips. Smut does this by entering the germinating buds in the soil. One of the problems is that smut spores can live in soil for up to 12 months if the soil is dry but only up to three months if the soil is damp. When these infected buds begin to grow, the smut alters the normal growth to produce a smut whip. The smut whip replaces the flower that naturally grows on the cane and contains spores. Smut spore is highly infectious to sugar cane and can spread in all sorts of ways—with wind, clothing or machinery. These tiny spores are detected in the air and, as I understand it, there are many smut detectors in these areas that are picking up the fact that the spores are right across the sugar industry area.

Smut does not survive processing and the fungus is harmless to humans and to animals. The smut problem is being tackled by farmers and the DPIF with great diligence. There is active inspection of the cane in the affected areas in an effort to keep the problem as minimal as possible. The finding of smut north of Mackay really established it as a widespread problem. Smut sightings are reported as soon as possible to the involved parties such as the growers, the industry and the media by cane-growing industry bodies such as Canegrowers and BSES Ltd. It is unknown how smut originally entered Queensland. There is also some evidence that perhaps smut did not affect Mackay from Bundaberg and it is possible it was a separate infiltration.

Now the industry is changing from a process of eradication and aggressive biosecurity to a strategy of economic recovery based on control and containment of smut. This is only common sense due to the fact that there simply is not enough smut-resistant cane to go around. Not enough of it has been bred and there is just not enough plant stock. On top of that, smut-resistant cane has a lower yield than conventional cane in some areas, and I will talk more about that later. Bundaberg farmers were being unfairly treated, especially when farmers in other areas like Mackay and Ingham, where smut has been sighted, were not restricted to the varieties of sugar cane that Bundaberg farmers had to endure. The practical reality of this is that smut-susceptible cane must be planted so that farmers in the Bundaberg region can start to recover economically. This bill requires urgency as planting is due to begin in autumn 2007.

It is time to listen to the experts and face reality. The original legislation was not drafted in a way that took into account ground level practicalities. The legislation cannot really stand up to even legal scrutiny. The government could be easily found liable of spreading a plant pest with the legislation in its current form. Allowing the chief executive to make decisions is a way around this to allow the government to greatly reduce its legal liabilities regarding sugarcane smut. I do support this bill, as it changes the focus from complete eradication of smut to control of the pest and encourages revitalisation of the sugarcane economy in the affected areas. I also support the bill on the notion that it allows the Bundaberg sugar industry to have the same access to sugarcane varieties as the other affected areas of Mackay and Ingham. Sugarcane smut-resistant varieties have a lower sugar yield than more conventional types of sugar cane, so an immediate economic loss presents itself, which could cause further hardship to farmers.

This legislation also seeks to protect from possible future legal challenges by giving the chief executive the power to make decisions which could potentially spread a pest. This is necessary legislation due to the fact that the DPIF report encourages the planting of susceptible varieties in the absence of resistant varieties due to the obvious massive financial loss that would be needlessly worn by the Bundaberg regional growers. The *Economic impact of sugarcane smut on the Queensland sugarcane industry* report was produced as an independent report by Dr David Watson, an independent economist. The basis of this was a steering committee which was chaired by Dr Watson, and a set of principles was laid out and from that the major recommendations were made. The committee also had wide consultation throughout all of the cane-growing areas in Queensland.

The major recommendation from Dr Watson's report is that local pest quarantine areas should prepare a regional response plan to be developed prior to planting this year, but, as I said, in certain areas this has already commenced. In the Burdekin there are farmers already planting. It was outlined that in an economic sense the smut incursions are manageable by the sugar industry on a local level in their normal course of business. The regional plan should address issues such as an assessment of the risks of smut infestation on the region; a proposed course of action where smut is detected in each region; a program for reducing smut susceptibility in the region and for reducing the rate of spread of smut; a program of surveillance, propagation and distribution of clean, smut-free plant material; and encouragement of maximum planting of smut-free varieties.

There is an urgency to develop, grow and produce more smut-resistant varieties of sugar cane. Those varieties that are available are not necessarily the varieties that perform best in every area. Varieties of cane are developed to produce maximum yields according to the varying conditions of the climate, the water and, most importantly, the soil type. As these conditions vary enormously across all of the growing areas, there could be a significant downturn for many growers after planting some of the current smut-resistant varieties because they have not actually been developed for those specific soils. I certainly know that in the Burdekin area some of those smut-resistant varieties grow very well in the Upper Burdekin River irrigation area because there are heavy clay soils. However, once they come into the lower river soil areas they certainly do not produce as well. I have no doubt in time that the BSES scientists will have significant success in these different areas. Prior to that, there will be a decrease in yields in some areas from the tried and well-tested cane varieties that of course have been previously used for many years by cane growers. In my area of the Burdekin delta, so far there seems to be no identification of any incursions of smut.

**Mr Mulherin:** Touch wood.

**Mrs MENKENS:** I accept that, Minister. Let us just say touch wood. I do have to really commend the office of the BSES and the other agencies—the DPIF—for their hard work and vigilance in working long hours across the area in their efforts to detect any signs of smut.

The Burdekin area has quite a significant proportion of smut-resistant cane already planted. I understand that this area has the highest proportion. Growers in this area were aware that they may be needed to share some of their available planting material with other areas that do not have the same amount, and I understand that that has been happening. The Burdekin has encouraged the development of a seed planting scheme to ensure that heavy demand on planting material could be met.

The concern from all areas in the sugar industry is that plant cane stocks are clean and that controls are in place to ensure that growers do not plant infected stock. Growers have also expressed concerns about abandoned and feral cane. Growers were concerned that this cane could cause what could be called hot spots for smut. They needed to have confidence that such cane could be destroyed immediately. This also raises another problem in that it would be very unfortunate if this placed significant imposts on growers who may have had to walk off their lands, if the cost of eradication of that rogue cane was put on some of those ex-growers. I wish to particularly recognise the excellent work of officers and scientists from the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations and what they have achieved in this area. As soon as the first smut incursions were detected, the BSES officers sprang straight into action and have worked alongside the DPIF, and their initial and ongoing efforts must be sincerely acknowledged.

This bill is before the House for the simple reason that the government did make a rather uninformed decision in the recent past and now the ramifications have quickly presented themselves. The government has now realised, to its credit, that control and management is a more realistic option than eradication. It just took it a little longer than the other states to figure this out. The inherent risk in this bill is that it transfers the problem of risk management from the government to the cane growers. It has been acknowledged though that affected farmers have been incredibly helpful as it is only logical that they would take necessary steps to protect their own livelihood. It is important to acknowledge that every effort that is being made to control and, hopefully, contain this disease. It does impact upon the economic viability of farmers and it will impact right across Queensland. To that extent, I have pleasure in supporting this bill.