



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Hansard Wednesday, 18 April 2007

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, BOWEN SALT WORKS

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (9.43 pm): In May last year Graham Odger, a Bowen constituent, noticed that two-thirds of his mango trees on his 28-acre farm—including trees as old as 40 years—were defoliating. Many had lost all their leaves, even the normally tough neem trees alongside them. Subsequent tests proved that the defoliation was due to airborne saline emissions. His farm happens to be across the road from the Cheetham owned Bowen Salt Works.

Negotiations with Salt Works management proved confrontational, with accusations that the trees were affected by lack of water or underground salinity. However, photographic evidence showing knee-high green grass at the base of these trees makes these claims ridiculous. It was not until three months later and many phone calls that the EPA finally decided to investigate. Significant points from these investigations include the following. The minister's letter dated 3 October stated—

Cheetham Salt does not require a development approval or registration certificate but it does have a general environmental duty under the EPA Act.

Another significant point is an EPA letter on 2 November which stated—

Tree defoliation appears to be from an external emission source. An EPA air specialist has indicated that the tree defoliation was likely caused by the deposition of a substance (salt) in high concentrations on the leaves. Most significant areas of defoliation appeared to be in the path of the plume that was observed coming from Cheetham Salt.

Subsequently, Mr Odger has experienced a further major damage to his trees, and 150 mango trees are now severely defoliated. Last year he lost his entire mango crop as a result of this poisoning, and he claims the severe damage that has again occurred this year has set his crop back another five years. As well as this damage caused to his principal source of income, a three-year old Colorbond shed is almost eaten out with rust, as are vehicles and equipment. Independent tests taken at his own expense have shown heavy concentrations of sodium chloride—that is, salt—on the saltworks side of the trees but not on the other side of the trees. The EPA still claims there is no conclusive evidence that these emissions are coming from the saltworks, even though the direction of the prevailing winds and salt plume when the drier is going does seem to state the obvious.

Mr Odgers and I have no complaint against the staff of the EPA. They have done their very best but are seemingly powerless to act or have any jurisdiction over this environmental hazard. This is an expensive department that has no teeth; it does not have any real legislative powers to act in cases such as this.

I understand that the saltworks has just been issued with a renewed lease from the Department of Mines and Energy and also from the Department of Natural Resources and Water. I seriously question whether these departments are even aware that this factory is causing significant environmental degradation; else why has this lease been renewed?

Mr Odgers is a farmer and small-business man. He has battled for years and this is the absolute last straw. His income and his harvest have been severely affected, and his property and machinery is rapidly deteriorating and becoming worthless. He is unfortunately now completely powerless and at the mercy of a large corporation.

Time expired.