



Speech by

Hon. Tim Mulherin

MEMBER FOR MACKAY

Hansard Tuesday, 20 February 2007

PLANT PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

Hon. TS MULHERIN (Mackay—ALP) (Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries) (12.35 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

As a matter of urgency, I am proposing that the Plant Protection Act 1989 be amended to allow the Chief Executive of the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries to amend declarations of approved sugarcane varieties as required and also to allow Bundaberg growers to plant sugarcane smut-susceptible varieties this March.

Sugarcane smut is regulated under the Plant Protection Act 1989. The disease was detected in June 2006 in and around the Childers area. In early November 2006 it was also detected in Mackay. Scientific opinion now is that smut is widespread and well established and it is no longer possible to prevent or control its spread. Accordingly, the state government has moved from containment and eradication to long-term management driven largely by industry. However, the current legislation was framed to deal with pest incursions and disease outbreaks, not with widespread, long-term disease management and economic recovery, as we are presently faced with.

In November 2006, Dr David Watson was contracted to assess and report back to the Queensland government on the economic impact of sugarcane smut on the Queensland sugarcane industry and identify ways of facilitating economic recovery. In framing the recommendations of the report, Dr Watson observed—

- that in an economic sense the incursion is manageable by the sugar industry in the normal course of business;
- that government should not be directing how local areas are to manage the incursion but rather should adopt a facilitating role in the management process;
- that there is considerable uncertainty with respect to the epidemiology of smut in Queensland and the practical aspects of farm management of the disease; and
- that there is considerable urgency to increase the number of smut-resistant varieties of cane available, both to improve the yield and CCS characteristics of the cane and to ameliorate the risk to the industry of a reliance on too few varieties of cane.

The report's recommendations include—

- factors that should be included in regional response plans for each Plant Quarantine Area;
- allowing the planting of sugarcane smut-susceptible varieties in the Bundaberg-Childers area;
- consideration of whether any mechanisms designed to facilitate additional plantings of smut-susceptible cane in the Bundaberg area should also be made available to other areas;
- that the government should consider augmenting industry research and plant-breeding activities to increase the variety and availability of smut-resistant cane; and

- that the government deliver smut management information and decision support tools for epidemiology, on-farm surveillance and farming systems practices.

Bundaberg growers have strongly expressed a desire to plant susceptible varieties this autumn as they are currently at a disadvantage to other cane-producing areas. The Watson report found that there would be an economic advantage for them in allowing the planting of 2,000 hectares of susceptible varieties in the coming weeks. However, as part of the original June 2006 containment and eradication response, smut-susceptible varieties were removed from the Bundaberg approved varieties list in August 2006, leaving Bundaberg growers with insufficient planting material for an autumn 2007 planting. Furthermore, the current operation of the Plant Protection Act 1989 will not allow for the relisting of smut-susceptible varieties for planting. This has resulted in an inconsistent outcome whereby only Bundaberg growers are not allowed to plant susceptible varieties.

The government is therefore moving quickly and decisively to amend the act so as to provide the power to amend the approved varieties declaration. As a matter of urgency, I am proposing that the relevant legislation be changed to mitigate against risk to the government caused by the inconsistency of the application of the act between the other pest quarantine areas. This would allow the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries' chief executive to amend the declaration of approved sugarcane varieties as required and also allow Bundaberg growers to plant smut-susceptible varieties this March.

There is only a small window of opportunity to facilitate a March planting for these producers, and the government does not want to exacerbate the problems already caused by the inflexibility of the act and its subordinate legislation to take on board economic recovery from pest and diseases. There may be some in the industry who oppose the planting of susceptible varieties as they perceive this may increase the risk to them of contracting the disease. However, the weight of national scientific evidence suggests that smut in Queensland cannot be eradicated or contained. The Australian government's National Management Group's refusal to fund eradication is a strong argument for allowing the planting of susceptible varieties.

With the establishment of the new agency Biosecurity Queensland, there will be a further substantial review of this act in consultation with industry, which will deal with other important policy issues. In the meantime, the industry and government should not be saddled with the unintended consequences of an outdated section of the Plant Protection Act.

I commend the bill to the House.