



Speech by

**Hon. Tim Mulherin**

**MEMBER FOR MACKAY**

Hansard Tuesday, 6 March 2007

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## **PLANT PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Hon. TS MULHERIN** (Mackay—ALP) (Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries) (4.19 pm), in reply: I would like to thank all the members who contributed to the debate on the Plant Protection Amendment Bill 2007. Today, the government is reinforcing its commitment to a national billion-dollar industry. Since June last year, when sugarcane smut was first discovered at Childers, the Queensland government has acted on the best available information for the benefit of the industry. From a science based, industry approved, containment and eradication approach to a long-term economic management approach supported by Canegrowers, BSES and the Australian Sugar Milling Council, this government's support for Queensland growers has not wavered.

This commitment was further shown by the commissioning and later the adoption of the independent report, titled *Economic impact of sugarcane smut on the Queensland sugarcane industry*, by Dr David Watson. It was a report commissioned in November last year, again based on the best available scientific advice, immediately when it became clear that sugarcane smut was widespread and established and that it was no longer possible to prevent or control its spread. Dr Watson, in consultation with industry and after travelling to the affected areas in Childers, Bundaberg, Mackay and Ingham, produced a thorough and independent assessment of the impact of the disease on the sugar industry.

Dr Watson's appointment, questioned by the member for Toowoomba South during this debate, was strongly supported by the industry. I also note that Dr Watson's appointment and independence was strongly supported by the member for Mirani. At the same time, the member implied that, if either the department of primary industries or the BSES were given the task of conducting this independent review, they would also have been impartial. The criticism by the member for Toowoomba South is based on a flawed premise and one that he repeats ad nauseum—that this government has continually slashed the DPIF budget and staff. As a result, the member for Toowoomba South has suggested that DPIF did not possess the experience or expertise to conduct such a review.

At the risk of repeating myself—again—the DPIF is undergoing a period of renewal and reinvigoration and is appointing new staff. It is no secret that the DPIF is offering VERs, with the key word being 'voluntary'. At the same time, we have been very conscious of the expertise we have in the department and we aim to continue to tap into that knowledge through an alumni. But there are times, and this was such a time—supported by stakeholders—that a totally independent report was needed to point the way forward. So not only was there strong support for Dr Watson's appointment but also there has been overwhelming support for his report and recommendations.

The recommendations included that normal planting should continue uninterrupted, that the industry should replace smut-susceptible varieties with smut-resistant varieties during their normal cycle, that decisions relating to the approved variety lists for planting should be made on the basis of consultation with and advice from BSES and industry in each of Queensland's six pest quarantine areas, and that the government should increase its input into research and the breeding of smut-resistant varieties of cane. This legislation, which amends the Plant Protection Act, will ensure that the recommendations contained within the Watson report can be implemented.

The current operation of the Plant Protection Act 1989 does not allow for the relisting of smut-susceptible varieties for planting. This has resulted in an inconsistency whereby only Bundaberg growers are not allowed to plant smut-susceptible varieties of cane. This amendment will provide the chief executive with the power to amend the approved varieties declaration. This is not a *carte blanche* return to the planting of susceptible varieties. As Dr Watson said in his recommendations, the course to follow remains that the industry should replace smut-susceptible varieties with smut-resistant varieties during their normal cycle.

This amendment will allow the Plant Protection (Approved Sugarcane Varieties) Declaration 2003 to be changed so that growers may be able to lawfully plant highly productive, smut-susceptible varieties. It will mean that growers and millers will have more certainty. It will also mean that growers in the Bundaberg-Childers region—PQA5—will be treated like those in other PQAs.

In August 2006, when the industry and government were aiming to contain smut, varieties susceptible to smut were removed from the schedule of approved varieties that could be planted within PQA5. Already requests have been received from a number of growers in the Bundaberg area for approval to plant varieties that were removed and that are currently not on the approved varieties list. These requests will be considered in light of an agreed regional industry smut management plan, as recommended by Dr Watson, in making changes to the approved varieties declaration. A change to the act would mean that DPIF's chief executive will be able to change the approved varieties declaration. In making his decision on changes to the approved varieties declaration, the chief executive will take into account independent scientific advice on sugarcane pest management, as well as advice provided through the regional industry smut management plans.

The independent scientific advice will be in two areas: firstly, it will be evidence of levels of pest resistance and whether the variety is a host of the range of pests for that PQA and, secondly, it will be dependent on the regional industry smut management plan for each PQA. So in the case of PQA5, where some growers are keen to plant susceptible varieties, the steps for a change in the approved variety declaration are that the legislation is passed and receives royal assent, that the regional industry smut management plan for PQA5 is submitted and considered, that the chief executive receives the two parcels of independent scientific advice, that the chief executive then determines any changes required to the declaration and that the new declaration is then gazetted. The government is aiming to have all steps completed in time for the autumn planting of cane in PQA5 and prior to the main planting periods for all other PQAs.

The member for Burnett asked whether Dr Watson's recommendation regarding the planting of 2,000 hectares of smut-susceptible cane had a one-year benefit. In answer to that question, Dr Watson's modelling shows a slight economic benefit in terms of net present value over seven years for PQA5 if up to 2,000 hectares of susceptible varieties are planted this year. Dr Watson noted that this is only a net benefit for 2007 and not in subsequent years.

Meanwhile, work on smut-resistant varieties will continue. BSES Ltd, the company owned and funded by the sugar industry, has the sole responsibility for the breeding and release of new sugarcane varieties to the Queensland industry. It began breeding and selecting for smut resistance as soon as smut was first detected in Australia in the Ord River area in Western Australia in 1998. Usually, it takes between 12 and 15 years to breed, select, evaluate and release a variety. BSES is currently releasing some new smut-resistant varieties. So it has done extremely well to achieve this outcome in just under nine years.

Once a variety is released, it then needs to be multiplied to provide commercial levels of planting material. That is currently being undertaken by BSES and other parties using new technologies to achieve the rapid multiplication of suitable varieties. This work supports the proposals made in the Watson report and it is supported by the decision of both the Queensland government and the industry to move to smut-resistant varieties as soon as they are available. The government is continuing to examine Dr Watson's recommendations to determine further government financial investment for the management of smut.

Dr Watson has recommended that the government should deliver smut management information and decision support tools for epidemiology, on-farm surveillance and farming systems practices. He also recommended that the government urgently consider augmenting industry research and plant breeding activities to increase the variety and availability of smut-resistant cane. DPIF is consulting with industry and research providers to explore options to effectively invest funds to introduce Dr Watson's recommendations and facilitate industry recovery.

While support from the majority of industry has been strong throughout the battle against sugarcane smut, it is rarely possible to make everyone happy all of the time. The government does not profess to have done every little thing right during the battle against the disease, but what we have done is act on the best available information in consultation with industry.

Throughout, the Australian Sugar Milling Council, Canegrowers and BSES have worked with the Queensland government. Their support has been evident since the Sugar Milling Council and

Canegrowers signed a 'Heads of Agreement' with the Premier for in-principle support for legislative reform in the sugar industry in 2004. That agreement remains the basis for ongoing engagement on all sugar legislative reform matters.

Canegrowers is the nationally recognised industry representative body under the plant health deed, and as such was asked to represent growers on Dr Watson's Smut Steering Committee. Canegrowers also had the nominated industry liaison coordinator during the biosecurity response for smut. Canegrowers also had the capacity to distribute information about smut and its management through a range of information channels which are not exclusive to its members. This was vital throughout the campaign.

This has brought some criticism, specifically from the Australian Cane Farmers Association, and not surprisingly repeated by the member for Burnett, despite ACFA members having been informed of the report and having access to departmental briefings. All members of the sugarcane industry have had access to Canegrowers information throughout the smut response, regardless of whether they are members or not.

On release of the Watson report, Canegrowers released a statement stating that they welcomed the changes proposed in the report and in this legislation. The General Manager of Canegrowers, Ian Ballantyne, stated that the legislation 'would allow greater flexibility whilst ensuring industry's thrust is still firmly fixed on introducing resistant varieties as soon as possible'. The Chairman of the ACFA, Ross Walker, on the other hand publicly commented that the Watson report 'came out with information members already knew' and instead was critical of the strategy, the role played by his organisation's rival, Canegrowers, and of the government.

In the face of criticism, I once again should reiterate that this government has worked extremely closely with industry stakeholders. I should also stress that the majority of the sugarcane industry has generally maintained a positive attitude since midway through last year and I thank them for that. It also would be remiss of me not to mention the role the federal coalition government has played in support of Queensland's cane growers. It has done nothing other than turn its back.

**Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Ms Palaszczuk): Honourable members, I note that there is currently an evacuation of the Annexe occurring. I am advised that it is likely not a false alarm and is a possible fire, so please do not leave the House for the Annexe.

**Mr MULHERIN:** The federal government has not contributed financially, while the Queensland government committed more than \$15 million. What is more, the federal government could not even be bothered taking part in Dr Watson's working party.

At this junction I should mention criticism from the member for Toowoomba South over the approach to the federal government on cost sharing, although I also should acknowledge the opposition's support for what we are doing today. The member for Toowoomba South has suggested that the government wasted considerable time in a political exercise attempting to gain financial support from the federal government for eradication or containment.

Firstly, I should point out that at no time, while the Queensland government was attempting to gain federal government support through the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed, did the state government stop working with industry against smut. The Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed is a nationally agreed cost-sharing arrangement for emergency plant pest responses. It applies in situations where it is possible to eradicate or contain the pest.

In the instance of sugarcane smut, the Queensland government and the sugar industry, based on scientific knowledge, put forward a response plan for cost sharing. The other parties under the deed, including the federal government, did not agree that smut could be contained and therefore no cost sharing was forthcoming. Queensland continued to unilaterally implement the biosecurity response to sugarcane smut in the Bundaberg-Childers area until November 2006, when it became apparent that there was a multi-point incursion of the disease across the state.

Following the national decision in August 2006 not to cost share the sugarcane smut biosecurity response, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries initiated a dispute resolution process under the national cost-sharing deed. This process is ongoing and does not affect the legislative amendments being proposed. Queensland has resubmitted a response plan to the National Management Group so that further consideration can be given to cost sharing the initial biosecurity response to sugarcane smut that Queensland undertook in good faith. But today is about what is being done, not about what is not being done and petty politically motivated nitpicking.

The Plant Protection Amendment Bill 2007 will ensure certainty for growers. It will allow them, following Dr Watson's report and in conjunction with a regional smut management plan, to make an informed choice on their future in this very valuable industry. Throughout this whole sugarcane smut battle it has been the Queensland government that has stood up for Queensland growers. The Queensland government has been prepared to put its money where its mouth is to support our primary producers. At this time I would like to thank the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries staff who have worked tirelessly on this bill. I commend the bill to the House.