



Speech by

Annastacia Palaszczuk

MEMBER FOR INALA

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GENE TECHNOLOGY AMENDMENT BILL

Ms PALASZCZUK (Inala—ALP) (5.21 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Gene Technology Amendment Bill 2007. I congratulate the member for Greenslopes for giving a very comprehensive contribution to this debate before the House today.

In 2006 an independent review of the Queensland act recommended that the state's legislation and the Commonwealth's Gene Technology Act should not differ and that the changes to the Commonwealth act as recommended by a statutory review in 2005 should be adopted by Queensland. Both state and Commonwealth legislation is needed to achieve a nationally consistent scheme that provides full regulatory coverage for gene technology, since constitutional powers do not allow the Commonwealth's gene technology legislation to reach all research groups in Australia. Under the intergovernmental Gene Technology Agreement 2001, all states and territories have committed to maintaining corresponding legislation.

The amendments proposed in the Gene Technology Amendment Bill 2007 are by and large designed to improve the regulation of gene technology in Australia. The amendments will not affect the operations of Queensland's gene technology legislation, nor will they change the act's underlying policy intent or the overall legislative framework. The proposed amendments are the culmination of a long public consultation process and an independent statutory review process. Through the national review, in which Queensland participated, the changes proposed in this bill have the support of the intergovernmental Gene Technology Ministerial Council.

One of the amendments of the Gene Technology Amendment Bill 2007 is the introduction of emergency powers to give the Commonwealth minister the ability to expedite the approval of a dealing with a genetically modified organism in an emergency. This was stated at length by the member for Hinchinbrook and also reinforced by the member for Greenslopes. However, it has also been noted by both members that the states and the territories must be consulted prior to making any decisions in this regard.

I now want to turn to the specific amendments other than the emergency powers. The bill will recognise a Gene Technology Ethics and Community Consultative Committee that commenced on 1 January 2008 under the Commonwealth's Gene Technology Act 2000. This is contained in clause 33 of the bill and replaces section 107. This new committee combines the previous Gene Technology Ethics Committee and the Gene Technology Community Consultative Committee into one body. The new committee will provide advice to the Gene Technology Regulator and the Gene Technology Ministerial Council on ethics and community consultations. As the explanatory notes state, the combined committee will also be—

... providing advice on risk communication and community consultation in relation to intentional release licence applications.

The Senate Community Affairs Committee's report into the Commonwealth's gene technology legislation found that most stakeholders commented favourably on the proposed amalgamation of the ethics committee and the consultative committee into one central body. The bill also ratifies amendments

to the process for assessing applications for licences dealing with genetically modified organisms. These are two sets of amendments in this section of the bill but I do not wish to expand on those here today.

In conclusion, it has been pleasing to see the recent use of the emergency powers to address the equine influenza outbreak. It shows that the safeguards that have been put in place are sufficiently robust to ensure that these powers will be used expeditiously. In closing, I think the minister made this point clearly in her second reading speech, when she said—

... the recent outbreak of equine influenza for the first time in Australia is being controlled through not only the containment of horses but also by the use of a genetically modified vaccine. This vaccine is routinely used in Europe and the United States and without the recent changes to the Commonwealth Government's gene technology legislation the vaccine would have taken up to 255 days to be released for use in Australia.

We can only imagine what would have happened if that had been the case. She further said—

This power will only be used if there exists an actual or imminent threat to the health and safety of people or to the environment.

I commend the bill to the House.