



Speech by  
**Curtis Pitt**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

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## **GREAT BARRIER REEF PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (3.50 pm): I rise to support the Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill 2009. My electorate is the heartland of sugarcane growing. It is also right next to the spectacular Great Barrier Reef. I have heard endless criticisms of the bill from the LNP, in many cases resorting to untruths, misleading comments and scaremongering about what might happen under the new regime. Contrary to these claims, the legislation will not penalise farmers who are already carrying out responsible farming practices that are compatible with good reef health. It is essential to me—and to those in my electorate—that both the sugar industry and the industries relying on the reef are protected and conserved.

There are two sugar mills in my electorate—one at Gordonvale and one at Babinda—and there are many people in outlying areas whose livelihoods rely on the sugar industry including workers at the South Johnstone mill. The Mulgrave central mill at Gordonvale, which was established in 1896, crushes over 1.3 million tonnes of cane per year from 17,000 hectares of surrounding farms. This is around 10 per cent of the area of my electorate. The Mulgrave mill contributes over \$106 million to the economy and sustains more than 1,200 local jobs. Similarly, the mill at Babinda continues to be an integral part of the community, surviving fire damage in 2006 and battling ongoing rumours that its days are numbered.

There is no question as to how much value the sugar industry contributes to the local economy. I acknowledge that many growers have been great stewards of the land that adjoins the Great Barrier Reef—some for five generations. These growers have managed that land responsibly and diligently, and in many cases have been looking to have their children and grandchildren continue the family business. They know that farming of all types has an impact on the environment. They also recognise, as does the rest of the world, that the Great Barrier Reef is without a doubt one of Australia's most important assets.

The Great Barrier Reef provides the basis for substantial economic activity. Tourism is the single largest industry operating in the reef, attracting more than two million visitors each year and generating about \$5 billion in economic value each year. The reef is crucial to employment in the local community. It underpins around 50,000 Queensland jobs in the tourism sector alone.

Over recent years the Queensland government's primary focus in managing the reef has been to achieve a sustainable balance between the recreational use of the reef and the desire to protect its iconic natural and cultural values in the face of development and agricultural practices. The poor quality of water running into the reef from the catchments is a major threat. The Reef Water Quality Protection Plan agreed between governments in 2003 was not delivering the level of improvement in water quality that was necessary for the continuing health of the reef. Through measures identified in the reef plan signed by federal environment minister, Peter Garrett, and the Premier last month, it is expected that by 2013 we will halve the run-off of harmful nutrients and pesticides and ensure that at least 80 per cent of agricultural enterprises and 50 per cent of grazing enterprises have adopted land management practices that will reduce run-off.

I give my full support to this bill, and here is why. Firstly, if the cane-growing industry is going to thrive and expand, it must reduce its environmental footprint collectively and it must find a way to reduce its input costs. This regulation will ensure that every cane farm will reduce its environmental footprint by using

less fertiliser and chemicals, collectively making way for the sustainable expansion of the industry. The regulation will also assist farmers to reduce their input costs from using less fertiliser.

Scientific evidence suggests that fertiliser from farms is ending up in waterways throughout the catchment, and ultimately on the reef, every year. It is not hard to see at today's radically fluctuating fertiliser price that there are significant savings to be made by ensuring that only the optimum rate of fertiliser is applied. Not only is it good for the environment; it also makes good business sense. While the costs and benefits to individual farmers will vary, those farmers using precision farming techniques are already showing savings of around \$3,000 per year in reduced fertiliser costs. This saving will escalate over time in line with the rising price of oil and gas.

I know that 2009 has been a mixed season for cane growers in the Far North, both in terms of weather and output. While there was reduced tonnage at most mills, CCS levels were up, as were sugar prices. But dry conditions are already putting a question mark over the 2010 season, a reminder that lean times can return without warning and growers need to find savings wherever they can.

The second reason I support the bill is that I respect the science behind the decision to regulate. While the recently released reef outlook report identified that the reef is generally in good condition, importantly it highlighted that, unless we take strong and effective management action now, the health of the reef may decline significantly over the next 50 years. There is substantial and credible scientific evidence to indicate the reef's health is suffering long-term decline from the nutrient, pesticide and sediment run-off from broadscale agriculture in its adjacent river catchments.

A paper that this government rates highly is the 2008 *Scientific consensus statement on water quality in the Great Barrier Reef*, which was released by 13 leading scientists after reviewing 500 technical papers. It confirmed the presence of sediment, nutrients and pesticides in the reef—up to 60 kilometres offshore—in amounts that will cause it harm. Also, in 2006, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's annual marine monitoring report found high concentrations of the agricultural pesticide diuron at many river mouth sites.

Peer reviewed science, also in 2006, by leading reef scientists documented the marked decline in the richness of coral for 400 kilometres south of Cooktown, right next to my electorate. We know that new science—recently or about to be published—reiterates the growing problem of pesticides and herbicides in freshwater and marine environments. A 2009 paper published by Bob Packett and others indicates serious atrazine contamination in the reef catchment. Also this year, the Australian Centre for Tropical Freshwater Research at James Cook University studied the effects of pesticide residue run-off in the Tully-Murray, Burdekin-Townsville and Mackay-Whitsunday regions over that last four wet seasons. The results in the Tully-Murray area found that run-off from herbicides used in cane farms was responsible for toxic levels at nearby Dunk Island and was sometimes at concentrations which would directly affect seagrass and coral reef species.

Like all good scientific debates, there will, as the member for Cook said, be those who agree and those who are sceptical. There will always be someone who can provide one-off cases where a proposed solution may not achieve its desired goals. However, the ability to google a topic or find a disaffected person to speak out does not mean that we should dismiss the compelling wider body of evidence that has been presented and must be taken into account. I am satisfied there is enough evidence by enough respected scientists to support the government's decision to regulate. The simple question we need to ask is: what would be the consequences if we choose to ignore these experts or spend many more years in debate?

One thing that the majority of scientists agree on is that the reef is under threat from several quarters, principally climate change. Unfortunately, there are aspects of climate change that are beyond our scope to fix. Therefore, we must focus on what we can do right now to make the reef as resilient as possible to cope with the effects of climate change.

Thirdly, I support this bill because it will guarantee that all cane growers adopt the best farm management practices for the environment. There is something to be said about the tail wagging the dog. Community and industry views move with the times on a number of issues, but sometimes legislative change is necessary to reclaim the lead role in a debate. Take, for example, the smoking bans in force around the state. Only a couple of decades ago, this would have been unthinkable. Tobacco companies sponsored every major sporting event and some even considered smoking in any public area a basic human right. Here, the carrot and stick approach was never going to cut it. If we had to rely on smokers to change their ways, we would still be waiting. Yet because of the legislative response, these days smokers are fast becoming the exception to the rule and overall health levels are improving.

Some farmers have already changed their management practices. Those with the knowledge and the financial wherewithal to change—but will not—will now be regulated to ensure they do. Those in a financial position to change—but lacking the knowledge—will have the benefit of free support, tools and extension services from this government. And those willing to make the changes—but lacking the financial resources—can take advantage of the Australian government's current reef rescue funding.

I have heard plenty of arguments that the reef rescue package was going to achieve what this bill sets out to do but without the so-called big stick approach. My response is this: if farmers, as their lobby groups suggest, are following best practice and posing minimal threat to the reef, they should have little trouble in meeting the proposed requirements of the legislation.

While it is not at the forefront of debate, the next reason I support the bill is nonetheless important. The bill is a logical complement to the work being undertaken by the reef plan and the implementation funding from Reef Rescue. Despite what the opposition spokesperson for climate change and sustainability says, the regulation will be underpinned by a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation program in conjunction with the reef plan and the Australian government.

A detailed survey will be made of farmers in the regulated catchments to determine what farm management practices are currently in place at levels effective for the reef. This will provide baseline data to report on in each subsequent year of the program. This will be invaluable to policy makers and researchers in the future.

I would like to take this opportunity to compliment the Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability, Kate Jones, on her work with stakeholders on this bill. The minister gave a commitment to cane industry representatives that they would be consulted closely and that she would heed the technical knowledge of those on the ground affected most by this legislation. Through the reef implementation task force, the minister has ensured stakeholder views have been incorporated wherever possible and that industry representatives were actively engaged regarding how the regulations will be implemented to ensure they are practical and create as little burden as possible on the industry.

I would also like to recognise the degree to which groups like AgForce, Canegrowers and the Queensland Farmers Federation have engaged with the government during this consultation process. Collectively, they have raised some important concerns on behalf of their membership, such as those relating to alternative methods of pesticide application and the regulation of no-spray buffers.

As a result, the government has changed its approach in these areas and will use environment risk management plans in the first instance. Concessions on these and the subsequent amendments to the bill are a good example of government listening to industry and parties working together to reach an appropriate outcome.

This bill is based on sound scientific evidence that the reef is in trouble. The legislation will help to detox the Great Barrier Reef and give it a fighting chance to recover from the pollutants that for too long have entered its catchments. It will provide a basis for farmers to make cost-effective changes to their farm management practices that will help protect the reef in the future. It does not present an onerous time or cost burden to farmers who are already doing the right thing. It does not punish those who are carrying out responsible farming practices that are compatible with good reef health. It supports and enhances this government's reef plan and the Australian government's Reef Rescue initiatives. But most of all, it just makes good sense.