



Speech by

Hon. Kate Jones

MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE

Hansard Thursday, 4 June 2009

GREAT BARRIER REEF PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

Hon. KJ JONES (Ashgrove—ALP) (Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability) (11.29 am): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

This bill delivers on the Bligh government's election commitment to introduce a regulation to reduce the discharge of dangerous pesticides and fertilisers capable of killing what is arguably Queensland's, if not Australia's, finest natural asset—the Great Barrier Reef. The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is the world's largest coral reef ecosystem and one of the most complex natural systems on earth. It directly contributes \$5.8 billion annually to the economy and supports approximately 63,000 jobs. This includes jobs in the tourism and hospitality industries, such as hotel workers, dive boat enterprises and tour operators. It includes the jobs in our commercial fishing industry, bringing fine Queensland seafood to the world. It includes jobs in the recreation industry, like charter boat operators and the recreational fishing industry.

The fact that the reef is under threat cannot be ignored. Climate change and the crown-of-thorns starfish are putting the reef in serious jeopardy, but another threat comes from agricultural pollution. This is a threat that can be addressed.

The *2008 Scientific Consensus Statement on Water Quality in the Great Barrier Reef*—a report prepared by a task force of eminent scientists—says that—

...water discharged from rivers into the reef continues to be of poor quality in many locations and that land derived contaminants, including suspended sediments, nutrients and pesticides are present in the reef waters at concentrations likely to cause environmental harm.'

In 2003, the Queensland and Australian governments made a 10-year commitment to the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan—reef plan—to address the diffuse pollution from agriculture, specifically broadscale land use, and to halt and reverse the decline in water quality entering the reef. One of the key strategies of reef plan is to help farmers adopt best management practices. Reef plan says that there is a need for immediate regulation and future regulation 'where there is a risk that voluntary approaches will fail to deliver significant water quality improvements'.

Credible and undeniable science is telling us that the voluntary approach is not working and will not deliver the 2013 goal of reef plan—to halt and reverse the decline of the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef lagoon. If we want to do all we can to save the reef it is time for earnest intervention action.

The Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill introduces provisions to reduce the impact of agricultural activities on the quality of water flowing into the Great Barrier Reef. It contains both prescriptive requirements and a risk management approach that will expedite change in farm management practices that cause pollution at least cost.

The bill establishes a new chapter in the Environmental Protection Act. This ensures regulatory efficiency by building on existing, well-tested administrative and enforcement provisions, such as appeals, investigations and enforcement tools.

To reduce the impact of the regulatory requirements, the bill has been tightly targeted to apply to the highest risk activities in selected Great Barrier Reef catchments. The bill applies only to the priority catchments of the Wet Tropics, Mackay-Whitsunday and Burdekin Dry Tropics due to the amount of land based pollutants originating from these areas and their proximity to offshore reefs.

The activities prescribed by the bill are cattle grazing on properties with over 100 head and commercial sugarcane farming. These activities encompass the greatest land area in the catchments and are therefore the highest pollution contributors. However, and I want to reiterate this point, farmers who have acknowledged their responsibility for the health of the reef and have voluntarily adopted sustainable agricultural practices should not be adversely affected by this bill.

Underpinning the bill is a requirement for operators to keep records of the application of agricultural chemicals, fertilisers and soil conditioners, soil-testing results, and cattle stocking rates. This may appear to be seeking confirmation of a fundamental farm management activity, but this simple requirement will build a picture of management practices in the catchments, and help farmers make better management decisions for their businesses and for the reef in the future.

There is no debate to be had that applying too much fertiliser increases the risk of run-off into watercourses that flow to the reef. This bill requires operators to closely manage their application of nitrogen and phosphorous by soil testing, calculating an optimum application rate and applying fertiliser at no more than that optimum rate. This will reduce the incidence of overfertilisation that results in nutrient run-off into waters. A methodology for calculating the optimum rate may be prescribed by a regulation and the Department of Environment and Resource Management will develop a calculator to help farmers establish their optimum fertiliser rates. This will be made available online, on disk and in a paper based format. Training and support will be made available to assist farmers to adjust to the new requirements.

As an additional benefit, ensuring that fertilisers are applied at no more than the optimum amount will save farmers money through reduced fertiliser loss. In the Mackay-Whitsunday catchment it is estimated that some 60 per cent of fertiliser applied is lost to the atmosphere in run-off or remains in the soil. At current prices of between \$800 and \$1,250 per tonne, this is no small amount of money lost to the environment.

Environmental risk management plans, commonly referred to as ERMPs, will build on the more specific regulatory requirements of the bill by entrenching the adoption of best management practices for higher risk operators. Based on risk and hazard assessment, these plans are a way that farmers can clearly deliver solutions to water pollution with measurable targets while ensuring flexibility to take account of new technology and changes to management practice. Draft plans will be submitted to the department for accreditation.

Again, these requirements will not affect property owners and farm managers who are already doing the right thing. Those with existing environmental management plans, whether voluntary or prepared for another purpose, that meet the requirements for environmental risk management plans can submit those to the department for accreditation.

Environmental risk management plans will be required for sugarcane-growing properties of more than 70 hectares in the Wet Tropics catchment and cattle-grazing properties of more than 2000 hectares in the Burdekin Dry Tropics catchment. However, as the minister responsible for administering the Environmental Protection Act, I will also have the power to declare an environmental risk management plan where necessary on a needs basis to improve the quality of water leaving the property or to prevent environmental harm.

The decision to extend the environmental risk management plan requirement to identified hot spots will be based on best available evidence. For example, a hot spot may be identified by using remote sensing data to locate properties with high risk of sediment loss due to low groundcover or using water quality monitoring to identify areas with high nutrient impacts. However, an environmental risk management plan may also be required on an individual property basis as a compliance tool for poor operators.

There is no direct offence for failure to comply with an environmental risk management plan. Instead, an authorised officer may issue a direction to a farmer to take or stop action to ensure implementation of the environmental risk management plan. Failure to comply with a direction notice will be an offence with a maximum penalty of a \$30,000 fine for individuals.

For some of the worst-performing farmers, meeting the requirements of the bill will prove challenging. I will ensure that a comprehensive communication and extension program is in place to support landholders with all the tools, assistance and advice necessary for a smooth transition to compliance.

The Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill must be considered as a stimulus—an incentive to take immediate action to target water pollution at the source, an encouragement for a permanent shift to sustainable agricultural practice and a valuable adjunct to existing reef management initiatives. I commend this bill to the House.