



Speech by

Hon. Kate Jones

MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE

Hansard Thursday, 8 October 2009

GREAT BARRIER REEF PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. KJ JONES (Ashgrove—ALP) (Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability) (6.18 pm), in reply: I thank all the honourable members who have taken part in this debate tonight. You will note the amendments that I have circulated, and I table the explanatory notes for those amendments.

Tabled paper: Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill, explanatory notes for the minister's amendments to be moved during consideration in detail [\[1053\]](#).

This bill is vital if we are serious about protecting the Great Barrier Reef for future generations. This is one of our major election commitments and this delivers on the promises that we made to Queenslanders. Our government was elected with a mandate to introduce these regulations and the Premier set a target to reduce the discharge of pesticides and fertilisers in key reef catchments by 50 per cent in four years. Today we have seen the LNP split. The members for Dalrymple and Burdekin are in denial that the reef is in any trouble. We know that they are climate change deniers. Today we find that they denied that reef quality is also an issue.

We have seen the members for Mirani, Dalrymple and Burnett oppose the bill. I do believe that the shadow minister has a genuine interest in this issue. I think his comments reflected that, as opposed to those of his colleagues. The member for Mirani admitted that in the past cane farmers have used excess chemicals but was hopeful that things were changing. Conversely, the shadow minister has acknowledged that the reef is under threat but has circulated amendments to defer the action that is required now.

If we are serious about reducing the degradation of Queensland's, and indeed Australia's, finest natural asset, all members will vote for this bill tonight. The reef is essential not only environmentally but also economically. We have heard tonight that it is worth about \$6 billion to the Queensland economy. Some \$3.5 billion of that goes into local towns and communities bordering the reef.

The opposition is risking rising unemployment and the devastation of communities adjacent to the reef by opposing this. More than 63,000 people are employed in jobs dependent on the health of the Great Barrier Reef. If the reef continues to deteriorate and be impacted by run-off, those industries are gone.

For almost a year now we have been working with industry with regard to this. Since I became the minister this year that consultation has intensified, including five technical task force meetings, three implementation task force meetings, which I chair—I instigated these after I introduced the bill because of the concerns from industry; I have been working very closely with them as a consequence—and stakeholder meetings.

I take this opportunity to thank industry for their participation. I know that there are elements of the bill that they do not support, but overwhelmingly they have participated very constructively. They have made sure that the bill we are debating tonight reflects best practice in industry and ways that will be practical for farmers to apply on the ground.

With regard to the reef implementation committee, the following organisations have participated in making these amendments: the Australian Cane Farmers Association, Queensland Dairy Farmers Association, Growcom, CropLife, Queensland Farmers Federation, Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations,

CSR, the Fertiliser Industry Federation of Australia, Proserpine Sugar, Australian Sugar Milling Council and Dow Agrosiences. Mr Ian Ballantyne from Canegrowers said to me in a letter—

The Technical Working Groups have been invaluable in developing objective, science based and practical measures.

I have listened to the concerns raised by farmers and farming groups. Many are already carrying out best practice—and I agree with that—on their farms. Therefore, they will be impacted minimally as a consequence of this legislation. But those who are not carrying out best practice will need to shape up, and I make no apology for that.

Consultation has resulted in the continual improvement of the legislation. We will remove the requirement for recorded stocking rates but include proper cover management in management plans that will be required of all graziers in the Burdekin catchment. Likewise, the threshold for the regulation of grazing properties has been raised from 100 standard cattle units to an area of more than 2,000 hectares to remove the lower risk coastal fertilised pasture graziers and hobby farmers from the legislation.

Mr Elmes interjected.

Ms JONES: I thank the member for that. I know this is something that the shadow minister was concerned about. To be quite specific, the original definition of 'cattle' in the bill included dairy and now it does not. Dairy farmers are exempt from this legislation.

We have also agreed to recognise equivalent plans under the Delbessie Agreement and land and water management plans as environmental risk management plans. We are also working with Meat & Livestock Australia to align the environmental stewardship model of its livestock production insurance program with the proposed environmental risk management planning for graziers in the Burdekin catchment.

The industry endorsed nutrient calculation method requires farmers to take account of nutrient applications from all sources including mill mud. However, due to the variable content of the nutrients in mill mud—industry acknowledges that they cannot quantify it—this has not been mandated immediately. I have agreed to that as a consequence. I have been listening to stakeholders—I will continue to listen to them—and been prepared to make adjustments to this legislation and will continue when going forward with its implementation.

The opposition seems to want to debate the science until there is no reef left. Those opposite are oblivious to the hundreds of peer reviewed research papers indicating the relationship between intensified catchment agriculture and degradation of marine ecosystems. Even industry does not agree with them. They know that they are causing water pollution and have asked the federal government for \$300 million to help them to reduce their pollution, not just for a few recalcitrant farmers but for all their operators. I want to reiterate the point that the member for Sandgate made earlier. What we have heard from the opposition tonight is that on the one hand it supports Reef Rescue and the money from the federal government for Reef Rescue but on the other hand it debates the science which is the basis of the \$200 million made available by the federal government.

What those opposite are saying—not the shadow spokesperson but his colleagues who undermined him—is that they want farmers to access \$200 million of Australian taxpayers' money yet deny the science which is the basis for using that taxpayers' money. I will quote the member for Dalrymple, who said it was rubbish. He said that the science that underpins this is rubbish. It is the same science that underpins the \$200 million of Australian taxpayers' money being spent right now to encourage industry to move to best practice.

I want to make it very clear that I support this amendment. At the recent reef MinCo that I had with Peter Garrett we released an assurance—I think the member for Hinchinbrook raised this—that farmers who are covered by this regulation will be entitled to money under Reef Rescue. There is no doubt about that. That was released in the communique after the MinCo. I want it on the record so that all members can tell their constituents, whom they are genuinely inquiring about this for, that I as minister can assure them that as part of the communique from the reef MinCo they will be entitled to that funding.

Even industry agrees with the fact that we need to see change here. I ask members opposite why tourism, fishing and recreation industry operators have seen vast areas of the reef degraded over recent decades as the catchment agriculture and use of fertiliser has increased. Ask these reef dependent industry operators why they see 400 kilometres south of Cooktown, where the catchments are dominated by cattle and cane production, that the reef's biodiversity and the richness of species is declining significantly.

I note that the honourable member for Noosa supports the industry endorsed method of reducing fertiliser to the optimum amount, known as Six Easy Steps, in the cane industry. This is the basis of the government's methodology for calculating the optimum amount of fertiliser for cane growers and relates in the bill directly to the needs of the crop.

Members may also be interested to know that industry disagrees with the opposition's assertion that only a few recalcitrant farmers are responsible for the vast load of pollution affecting the reef—for example, the 20 million tonnes of sediment that came from the Burdekin River in 2007. Industry has also said that the new legislative requirement for soil testing will result in massive increases in soil testing, possibly 800 per cent above current levels. Soil-testing laboratories will need to vastly increase their capacity to analyse soil. They are already doing this in anticipation of the new regime.

Contrary to what the opposition would have us believe, currently very few farmers are analysing their soil to determine the optimum amount of fertiliser as set out in Six Easy Steps. I acknowledge and support Canegrowers's position that more and more are. Not only will this legislation require all cane farmers to do this; the funding package has resources to provide them with the tools and assistance to do so. The claims made by the member for Condamine are wrong. About as much funding is provided for this assistance as is provided for compliance.

Advice from the Marine and Tropical Science Research Foundation, which I think the member for Hinchinbrook was also quoting, is that less than 10 per cent of the pollution load that affects reef health comes from sources other than catchment agriculture, which is mainly cattle and cane production.

I also want to pick up on a point about sewage treatment. I want to put on the record that since July 1998 the government has committed more than \$247.7 million in subsidies to upgrade 49 of the high and very high priority sewage treatment plants, including \$66.76 million for the Townsville city waterways upgrade project. Some 30 sewage treatment plants have direct or indirect impact on the Great Barrier Reef.

Links between nutrient enrichment and crown-of-thorn starfish population outbreaks are well known and supported. I was very surprised to hear the opposition deny that. This is widely acknowledged in other coral reefs around the world. In good water quality conditions the coral recovers quickly; in poor water quality conditions coral recovery is very slow or nonexistent due to an environment where pest species can cause further damage to the reef.

Contrary to claims by the member for Noosa, there are 36 sites across the reef for load monitoring at the catchment level. Burdekin is but one of those. In total we have 42 paddock level sites that will monitor the effects of land use practices on local water quality.

Essentially, this bill introduces provisions to reduce the impact of agricultural activities on water quality flowing into the Great Barrier Reef. It contains both prescriptive requirements and risk management approaches to address farming practices that cause pollution.

I make this commitment in the House: I have worked very closely with industry for the last four months and I will continue to do that to make sure that what is implemented is something that they can use and is manageable and also achieves our water outcomes. I commend the bill to the House.