



Speech by

Steve Wettenhall

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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GREAT BARRIER REEF PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr WETTENHALL (Barron River—ALP) (5.40 pm): It gives me great pleasure to rise in support of the Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill 2009. In the short time that I have available I wish to concentrate on one of the key aspects of this bill which is, of course, the science that supports the measures that will be undertaken by this government through this legislation and which is denied by and large by the members of the opposition in speaker after speaker after speaker.

Before I do that I wish to make a couple of points. It has been pleasing to hear the contributions from government members acknowledging the importance of industries in the Great Barrier Reef catchments other than grazing and cane. Members on this side of the House have acknowledged the incredible importance of industries like tourism, commercial fishing and recreational activities that take place as a result of the Great Barrier Reef being located where it is and being in good condition. Members opposite have ignored the other industries or given them cursory attention.

Mr Cripps: They are not in the bill.

Mr WETTENHALL: Including the member for Hinchinbrook, and one wonders why when the whole purpose of this legislation is to improve the water quality of the Great Barrier Reef lagoon on which those industries depend. It is convenient perhaps to ignore those industries—tourism, commercial and recreational fishing and other recreational activities—that all depend on a healthy Great Barrier Reef. That is why this government is determined to do all that it can to improve the quality of the water that flows into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.

Mr Elmes: Where's the sewage pumping facility at the Cairns port?

Mr WETTENHALL: Only by doing that will the long-term health of the Great Barrier Reef on which all of those industries depend be preserved. The member opposite mentions sewage. I will talk to him about sewage. That is why this government has invested tens of millions of dollars supporting local governments, including the Cairns City Council, now the Cairns Regional Council, to upgrade their wastewater treatment facilities to improve the quality of water that flows into the Great Barrier Reef. This government recognises that it is not just about agriculture and grazing; it is about taking an approach that is looking at all of the sources of pollution that are flowing into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon. Those opposite know it—and if they do not know it, they should.

We know the reason why the members opposite—who have made what in some instances have been hysterical contributions to this debate—want to ignore tourism, commercial and recreational fishing and other industries that depend on a healthy reef. It is because they want to go back to their constituents and tell them that they stood up for the farmers in the parliament. They do not have the fortitude or the inclination to look the farmers in the eye and say that these measures are necessary to protect the Great Barrier Reef and ultimately ensure the long-term viability of those industries.

Those opposite should go back to their constituents and tell them the truth. They should tell them what the scientists are saying. Members opposite have come in here and said that the science does not support the legislation. They have come in here and said that if all that was being said by the scientists was true why would the farmers be pouring all of this fertiliser onto their farms and why would the graziers be

letting their topsoil wash into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon? That is a good question that is at the fundamental heart of this legislation.

Every speaker on this side of the House has acknowledged that a great many farmers have embraced new farming practices and technologies to reduce the impact of their farming activities on the Great Barrier Reef. What scientists have told us, and what members opposite refuse to accept because they are not willing to go back to their farming constituents and look them in the eye and tell them the truth, is that the science supports this legislation.

Mr Elmes: You didn't listen to what I said, did you?

Mr WETTENHALL: The scientific case for action is overwhelming. Contemporary agricultural science is the backbone of the implementation of this legislation. Science will form the basis of the monitoring program that will prove this legislation is effective.

Mr Elmes: What monitoring program? What farms are you going to monitor? You are not going to monitor one farm.

Mr WETTENHALL: The member ought to listen. He has displayed a high level of ignorance about the science up until now.

Mr Elmes: Well, tell me how you are going to monitor.

Mr WETTENHALL: If the member listens to what I have to say he might learn something. As recently as January 2009 three of Australia's, if not the world's, leading marine scientists published a report in the prestigious international scientific journal *Science* about the declining coral calcification—that is, hard coral growth—on the Great Barrier Reef. Their opening statement reads—

There is little doubt coral reefs are under unprecedented pressure worldwide because of climate change, changes in water quality from terrestrial run-off, and over exploitation.

If the experts who dedicate their life to the study of marine environments tell us there is little doubt then it is possible that we should have little doubt. Certainly we should not be using doubt as an excuse not to do as much as we can to protect the reef. Of course, science is never about absolute certainty. In any case, no-one in their business or daily life waits for absolute certainty before taking action to mitigate a high-risk threat. To do so with the reef would mean losing much of its value before we did the sensible thing and took preventative steps.

The Australian Institute of Marine Science, which has been studying the reef for more than 20 years, recently advised this government of the critical importance to—

...reduce the land run-off of nutrients, sediments and pesticides to maximise coral recovery after large scale and more local disturbances including coral bleaching, cyclones and outbreaks of the coral eating crown-of-thorns starfish.

There is much science from many experts to be quoted. I ask: who of us here is qualified to question this? If there is doubt or dispute about this science, why are the sugarcane and grazing industries spending millions of dollars in research and development to come up with ways to improve their farm practices and the quality of their water run-off? Why did they seek \$300 million from the Australian government to help them reduce their impacts on the reef? Why are they endorsing reef plan and Reef Rescue by supporting a voluntary approach to meet water quality targets so strongly? Perhaps it is not this science that agricultural run-off is detrimental to the reef which is in dispute.

The bill puts forward two prescriptive measures to reduce the run-off of fertiliser and chemicals. Firstly, it proposes that farmers do not apply fertiliser containing nitrogen or phosphorous to the soil unless they have conducted a soil test and undertaken calculations to show how much fertiliser is actually needed by the crop. That is the optimum rate. The bill specifies that the fertiliser is not to be used at more than the optimum rate for that property. The optimum rate will be established by a calculator developed by agronomists and agricultural scientists and tested for practical application by farmers.

Despite the fact that these measures are undeniably science based, it does not take much science to work out that using no more fertiliser than is actually consumed in production makes good business sense. It is an efficient business input, not a waste. That notion is not new. A clause in the 1996 Canegrowers code of practice recommends that farmers carry out regular analytical testing of their soils to determine their nutrient status. It also recommends that they use the results to ensure the quantities of fertilisers match the crop needs and determine if nutrient leaching is occurring. Secondly, restrictions on the use of several chemicals which science shows exist in toxic quantities in the waterways of the reef catchments are being proposed in an amendment to the Chemical Usage (Agricultural and Veterinary) Control Regulation 1999.

In conclusion, I want to again acknowledge all of those who have taken part over some time in these efforts—that of course includes farmers, whether they be graziers or cane farmers—all of the people who have been involved with the farmers and graziers associations, the natural resource management bodies and those who work in government agencies and non-government scientific organisations and universities.

They have worked very hard to identify the causes of declining water quality in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon and to come up with ways to improve it. This bill is a very important component in that.

What a shame that the members of the Liberal National Party cannot see that and cannot support this legislation. What a shame that they insult the people of Queensland who care about the environment and who care about preserving the Great Barrier Reef by characterising this government's introduction of this legislation in terms of it being a grubby deal with the Greens. All of those people who care about the environment, all of those people who supported a green party or a conservation-minded candidate in the 2009 election and other elections before it will be rightly offended and insulted by the remarks and the contributions made in this debate today by members of the LNP. I for one will be reminding them at every opportunity of the shameful things that have been said about people in this state and in their electorates who care about the environment. I commend the bill to the House.