



Speech by

Steve Wettenhall

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

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VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr WETTENHALL (Barron River—ALP) (6.09 pm): I rise to support the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2009 and make a few comments in relation to the consultation that was undertaken in the preparation of this bill and during the moratorium period. Before I do, I want to make a couple of comments about the contributions that have been made by members opposite.

Adjustments to the rights of property owners that are made through this bill are not uncommon, because all property owners, whether they be freehold owners or leaseholders of rural lands that contain important vegetation—vegetation that is important to protect—are subject to a balancing of rights. That is what this bill aims to achieve and does achieve, and it is what the entire framework of the government's vegetation management has sought to achieve in its various incarnations over time which have, contrary to the assertions of members opposite, been based on science and scientific evidence and new understandings of best practice in land management.

It is very sad and unfortunate that members opposite have in the debate on this legislation—as they did on the Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill that we debated last sittings, both pieces of legislation which they are opposed to—characterised the debate in the divisive way that they have, as if this government is targeting rural people with unfair, arbitrary and draconian measures. I think it has been acknowledged by speakers on both sides that the vast majority of rural landholders do have a strong and economic interest in pursuing good and best practice land management. As is the case in most fields of government regulation and legislation, unfortunately sometimes regulations and legislation have to be introduced and enforced to catch those people who, whether through misfortune, ignorance, economic circumstance or whatever reason, do not pursue best practice in land management.

That is what the scientists informed the government and others who are interested in the development of the Great Barrier Reef Protection Amendment Bill—that many landholders were doing their best to adopt practices that would reduce sediment and pesticide residue run-off into the Great Barrier Reef. But all of the good effort and the investment by many people could be so rapidly and quickly undone by the actions of a few. That is why it was necessary, in order to maintain the good condition of our Great Barrier Reef, which is so critical to the economy of our nation, our state and our regions, for the government to introduce those measures to improve the quality of water running off into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.

This legislation also includes a component to support that by protecting regrowth vegetation in riparian areas in priority reef catchments, one of those being the Wet Tropics region. I support that because, along with the member for Hinchinbrook, as I have mentioned in the House before, earlier this year I flew over the reef catchments. By air it is very easy to see just how significant the damage is in our watercourses in the reef catchments, where vegetation has been denuded to the very edge of those watercourses.

There is no part of this debate which seeks to put blame. What we as a community have to do is ensure that those practices that did cause damage and which the community at large, as well as

individuals, is paying to repair does not occur again in the future. All around the country we are now dealing with the consequences of poor land management practices in the past, many of which, if not a substantial majority, were in relation to clearing of native vegetation.

We need to remember in this debate that in protecting regrowth vegetation we need to consider exactly what regrowth is. It is vegetation that was cleared, and for whatever reason the landholders, whether they be those who undertook the clearing or those who have taken over the properties since, have not turned into productive land. We have cleared so much native vegetation that that which is left, whether it be regrowth or original vegetation, is critical to protect.

This legislation seeks to achieve, and I believe does achieve, a balance between the rights and interests of landholders and the community at large. Hundreds, if not thousands, of landholders are investing their time and their money in revegetating their waterways and riparian corridors, and we as a community are spending public funds through various levels of government—all three levels of government—in engaging with landholders and the community in revegetation projects right throughout the country, particularly along watercourses, because we now know how critical they are not only in protecting water quality flowing into the Great Barrier Reef but also in preserving the ecosystems upon which ultimately the productive capacity of the land depends.

In the last couple of weeks evidence has emerged that our native bird populations throughout the country have crashed. Hundreds and thousands of birds and individual species, the research is now showing, have disappeared, putting more species at risk of extinction and under threat. Birds are a very good indicator of the health of our ecosystems. Regrowth areas that are protected under this legislation are critical habitats for birds, which play a very important part in the health of our ecosystems and in the productive capacity of our lands.

I think it is very sad that some members opposite have characterised this important debate in the way that they have. They have tried to characterise it as simply based on politics. It is much more important than that. It is based on an evolution of our understanding of the critical role that native vegetation plays in the health of our ecosystem and the health, ultimately, of the Great Barrier Reef.

I support the provisions of this bill. There has been extensive public consultation during the development of the legislation. The moratorium was introduced to allow the government to consult with key stakeholder groups without the risk of pre-emptive clearing of high-value regrowth vegetation. The public was invited to make submissions on the control of the regrowth clearing, either directly to the Department of Environment and Resource Management or through key stakeholder groups who could represent their concerns. The department received some 386 submissions, 78 per cent of which were from rural landholders.

Considerable consultation was also undertaken with peak industry groups such as AgForce, the Queensland Farmers Federation, the World Wildlife Fund, the Wilderness Society, Wildlife Queensland and the Queensland Conservation Council including a ministers round table, which met twice with stakeholders. Organisations such as Meat & Livestock Australia, the Canegrowers Association, Timber Queensland, the Local Government Association of Queensland, the Real Estate Institute of Queensland, the Urban Development Institute of Australia, the Queensland Indigenous Working Group and Cement, Concrete and Aggregates Australia were also consulted.

To gauge the possible impacts of regrowth measures on lending decisions made by financial institutions, consultation was undertaken with the Australian Bankers Association and the Australian Finance Conference as well as agribusiness representatives from the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, the National Australia Bank, the Australia and New Zealand Banking Group, Westpac Banking Corporation, Suncorp Metway, Elders and Rabobank.

As we have heard, the minister has visited rural properties around the state with AgForce representatives to see firsthand the issues landholders face when managing regrowth vegetation. As a result of those consultations significant changes have been made to the final form of the bill. That is right and proper because it has been a genuine process, one that strove to achieve a proper balance between the rights of landholders and the community interest in preserving regrowth vegetation not for its own sake, not just for political purposes, but because ultimately our entire society depends on our ability to protect our ecosystems and protect the productive quality of the land.

I am sure, contrary to the assertions that have been made by some members opposite in this debate, that ultimately the value of the land that contains protected vegetation is going to be enhanced. There are a number of ways in which that will occur, not the least of which is under the regime that is likely to operate in the future based around a carbon economy. The preservation and existence of native vegetation on lands is going to add value to those properties. The community certainly places a very high value on the protection of what is left of native vegetation in this state after decades and decades of indiscriminate clearing. I commend the bill to the House.