



Speech by

Shane Knuth

MEMBER FOR DALRYMPLE

Hansard Wednesday, 10 March 2010

WATER RESOURCE (BARRON) AMENDMENT PLAN (NO. 1): DISALLOWANCE

Mr KNUTH (Dalrymple—LNP) (7.50 pm): I second the motion moved by the shadow minister for natural resources and water, and I quote—

That subordinate legislation number 266, Water Resource (Barron) Amendment Plan (No. 1) 2009, tabled in the House on 9 February 2010 be disallowed.

In particular, we are targeting clause 53, 'Applications for subartesian management area B', which states—

- (1) This section applies if an application for or about a water licence to take subartesian water in subartesian management area B would increase the volume of subartesian water taken in the area.
- (2) The chief executive must refuse the application.

This has been going on for 10 years. It is not the farmers' fault, it is not the irrigators' fault; it is the government's fault and, likewise, it is the department's fault. This problem could have been solved many years ago if the departments and this government had worked with irrigators. That is what we plan on doing. We are not about introducing these spy-in-the-sky satellites like this government has. We are about working with farmers and irrigators to get a proper outcome.

Even the water advisory group, which the Minister for Natural Resources set up, advised the minister that there is enough water in area B. They know this area; they have the local knowledge. Not only that, they have provided a leading hydrogeologist to examine these areas. They have found that there are large volumes of subartesian water in area B.

I will give the House a bit of history of the Barron catchment before 2002. All water in the Barron catchment above Tinaroo Dam was regulated. Subartesian water in the former Atherton shire was regulated. Subartesian water in the former Eacham shire was unregulated—that is, licences were not required. The Barron water resource plan came into force on 18 December 2002. Two management areas for groundwater were declared—area A and area B. Area A encompasses the known abundant groundwater near Atherton where irrigated farming is well established. Further entitlements were prohibited in area A on the basis that the resource was already overallocated. Area B surrounded area A and contained land which traditionally had not been so heavily used for irrigated farming.

The department encouraged irrigators to explore suitable subartesian water in area B and a lot of money and effort were put into drilling to find suitable water. The department issued new entitlements in area B in the water resource plan and then the government slammed on a moratorium. This has resulted in a number of court cases and has cost irrigators hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The department has presented an internal report on the reasons area B was locked up. That has been highly criticised by, naturally, the water advisory group which tried to advise them, including leading hydrogeologist consultants Douglas Partners. They have described the department's report as having a pessimistic view, having a number of errors and being fundamentally flawed. The department did not seek the views of leading hydrogeologists at all.

An example of one of those flaws is the claim that it would be detrimental to the iconic curtain fig tree. This is very important. The fig tree is uphill and the roots of the fig tree go down only two metres. It is impossible to draw water from that area B subartesian basin. This is one of the examples that was used. They want to save this iconic fig tree so they lock up area B.

The department's report is conflicting, as the member for Callide said earlier. In a case in the Land Court of Queensland on the take of water in area B—*De Tournouer v Chief Executive, Department of Natural Resources and Water*—the judge reviewed the Department of Natural Resources and Water's report in relation to area B and said—

... I have concluded that the opinion evidence provided by ... Hydrologist and Principal Policy Officer, Department of Natural Resources and Water could not be safely relied upon.

The judge said that the principal policy officer—

... attempted to distance himself from important aspects of his own earlier co-authored reports; was selective in his treatment of such material; was evasive in cross-examination; and was intellectually arrogant in his treatment of Mr Hair's expert evidence.

The judge said that the rationale behind the principal policy officer's inclusion in the case was somewhat perplexing.

Given that the scientific debate is not settled, why does the minister not continue the existing moratorium? Why has the government already made the decision to lock up area B? Why is the minister closing area B to further applications for groundwater when his department's evidence will be strongly contested by leading hydrogeologists? Some licensed applicants alone have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars proving that the water is there and challenging the department's stance on this issue—and the water is there. Some bores were pump tested for 24 hours at 35,000 gallons per hour. The previous assessment criteria used by the department would give applicants a fair and equitable share of resources.

Tinaroo Dam has a 46,000-megalitre distribution loss each year. This is more than the total of all the irrigators and urban licences in the Tinaroo Falls catchment, and there is very little evidence that the department is addressing this loss. If it does address it—and I do not believe it will—why not allow the irrigators to utilise that water? I say again: 46,000 megalitres of water is lost each year. Why is the government locking up area B? Why is it so important to this government, when more water than in all the licences put together is going down the drain?

The question needs to be asked of the minister: where is the criteria for the report from leading hydrogeologist Iain Hair from Douglas Partners which is a part of the Tableland irrigators submission? The Tableland irrigators are asking for a technical review of Iain Hair's Douglas Partners report. There has been no response from the department over the report. The irrigators have written and requested a response. I table the Douglas Partners report, which conflicts with the department of natural resources' report.

Tabled paper: Document, dated 18 July 2008, titled 'Comment on Draft Amendment to the Barron Water Resource Plan Proposed by Natural Resources & Water June 2008', prepared by Douglas Partners for Tableland Irrigators [[1880](#)].

Will the minister provide a technical review of Iain Hair's Douglas Partners report, which describes the department's report of area B as fundamentally flawed?

Irrigators are just asking for a fair outcome, not distorted, conflicting, twisting, political ideology. The farmers and irrigators are about sowing the good seed, producing the best crops and, in the end, putting good food on your table. That is why they are out there. That is why they are asking for this water allocation—so they can give you good meat, good vegetables, good pieces of fruit, good bananas.

I hope this government supports our motion. The government wants to create 100,000 jobs; this is about 10 years of locking up, of sustainable management where jobs could have been provided. This is all about political ideology. I ask the government to support our disallowance motion.