




Speech By  
**Dale Last**

**MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN**

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Record of Proceedings, 3 November 2016

## **AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE: REPORT, MOTION TO TAKE NOTE**

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (11.51 am): I rise to speak to the Agriculture and Environment Committee report No. 22 *Consideration of the Auditor-General's report 20: 2014-15—Managing water quality in Great Barrier Reef catchments*. This is an issue which is particularly relevant to my electorate of Burdekin. As members would appreciate, the Burdekin is home to the largest sugarcane growing area in Australia and one of the largest irrigation schemes in Queensland. The spotlight has been very firmly shone on the Burdekin regarding water quality issues, and it is for that reason I want to raise some pertinent points around this important issue and the Auditor-General's report.

On 12 June 2015 the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan Independent Science Panel, Department of the Environment, Australian government, issued a statement about the report, emphasising the need for state-of-the-art models to predict improvements in water quality reaching the Great Barrier Reef. It is that very fact that I want to highlight here today, because without accurate data or consistent information how can one compile a report other than on assumption and opinion? Yet that is exactly what has been happening with regard to water quality in the reef. There is an urgent need for additional monitoring to refine and calibrate model processes to allow the uncertainty in model estimates to be better known, and all decisions should be underpinned by sound scientific evidence and not the hysteria, innuendo and wild assumptions that currently exist.

In my electorate of Burdekin, water is everything. It sustains the sugarcane and horticultural industries and over the years the use of water for irrigation in this area has been refined to ensure maximum efficiency. Farmers are not environmental vandals; they actually have a strong attachment to the reef and the waterways that feed into the ocean. Scientific research and assessment of the reef is a rapidly evolving process and studies completed as recently as eight years ago are now outdated and do not accurately reflect the current status of the reef. It is for this reason that I am sceptical of many of the assertions and conclusions outlined in the Auditor-General's report. We are now seeing industry led voluntary best management practices across the Burdekin. Farmers have as much interest in limiting the use of fertiliser and water run-off as the most ardent greenie because excess fertiliser and water use costs money. Increasing numbers of farmers are now participating in the best management practice program and the awareness of water quality in farming practices that might impact on water quality in the Great Barrier Reef is certainly much improved. We are now seeing the benefits of a Reef Alliance and increasing cooperation between government, industry bodies and landholders adjacent to the reef which is resulting in an improvement in water quality and a reduction in sediment run-off.

There is no question that the modelling is complicated and sophisticated, and for this reason there is a need to ensure reputable organisations, such as the Australian Institute of Marine Science, are engaged to carry out this research. For too long we have relied on substandard information and data that cannot be validated which has led to ineffective and inefficient delivery of Queensland's reef plan programs. In conjunction with this research, programs need to be in place that accurately record

land management change and ecological processes over the long term to ensure confidence in reported data which should be independently verified.

Improving water quality in the Great Barrier Reef and reducing farm run-off will not be solved by shovelling bucketloads of money into feel-good programs with no accountability. We need to see that funding is aimed at producing solutions to this issue that meet the needs of all sections of the community, including farmers, graziers, developers, the resources sector, community members and tourism. It is easy to blame farmers and mining operations for sediment run-off, but this pales into insignificance when one considers the damage caused to the reef by natural events such as cyclones and floods. There is unequivocal evidence from the Australian Institute of Marine Science showing massive destruction of coral reefs from cyclones, and this should be acknowledged in those areas which have been subjected to a cyclonic event in recent years.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that advances in farming technology and a growing commitment from all sections of the community to the protection of the reef is making a difference. Instead of listening to the scaremongering of those groups and individuals with a political agenda, we should be acknowledging the work that is going into improving water quality in the Great Barrier Reef and the difference it is making.