



Speech By  
**Stephen Bennett**


**MEMBER FOR BURNETT**

---

Record of Proceedings, 13 October 2016

**AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**

**Report, Motion to take Note**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (12.37 pm): In addressing the Agriculture and Environment Committee's report No. 22, I want to talk more about the Auditor-General's report No. 20 of 2014-15: *Managing water quality in Great Barrier Reef catchments*, which was tabled on 10 June 2015. There are still unanswered questions around the dates of tabling and review being stalled to suit the government's agenda from 2 June 2015. There were several briefings from the Queensland Audit Office and the department, but I still have concerns with many aspects of the report and the tone of the statements that were enclosed.

On 12 June 2015, the independent science panel, under the Department of the Environment in the 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 and highlighting and supporting the call for additional monitoring to refine and calibrate model processes to allow the uncertainty in model estimates to be better known. This further supports my concerns with the Auditor-General's report. Without accurate data or consistent information, how can you compile a report on assumption and opinion?

Under the headings 'Summary' and 'Background' on page 1 and with reference to water quality and the reef, the audit made assumptions immediately regarding farming practices without acknowledging urban run-off and sediment from natural events, including the significant storms and cyclones that had occurred. Under 'Summary' and 'Conclusions', these statements are concerning. It shows that the author appeared to have little understanding of the breadth of the NRM programs being delivered, either in the reef catchment or across Queensland, either funded by the state or the Commonwealth. The arguments provided to support the conclusions in the report appear to essentially be obtained from stakeholder groups with only self-interests. The Auditor-General could have easily located the expenditure and what was being delivered to contribute to better reef water quality outcomes if they had looked.

On page 2, we see the first of many references to vegetation management, particularly the inference that recent land-clearing relaxation has had adverse consequences. What was not included was the advances made in the reef management plan. The main concern was the assumptions and comments made in the report, when clearly the lack of water quality monitoring sites to collect data, to verify information, must call into question the general and selective information reported. I again highlight that, if you cannot collect data, how can you report with confidence on managing water quality in the Great Barrier Reef catchments? This issue was even reported on page 2.

Page 3 is also of concern, when on 7 May 2015, the day before the report was to be again tabled, we had a convenient announcement from the minister for the Great Barrier Reef regarding the functions of the reef secretariat being expanded and transferred into the department as the new Office of the Great Barrier Reef. We then had the Auditor-General claiming the governance issues that had been addressed were now going to be dealt with, although the task force had only just been announced. Is an opinion and conjecture a fair inclusion in an audit summary? No, it is not. We clearly have a lack of data and evidence but we still have opinions being published.

It was also curious that the responsibility for the reporting and management of the many efforts and programs to protect the water quality under successive governments was with the reef secretariat in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. This was dismissed instead, referencing the creation of another bureaucracy that has given us no tangible credentials to measure. However, the report references the credentials of the new entity.

In 1.2.1, it is commented that in 2012 the Queensland government rightly decided not to enforce regulations while the industry developed best management practice programs. We have concerns that the report left the door open as we have seen attempts to force the reef police and the onus-of-proof regulations back on to the BMP process. This is exactly the style of political activity that prevents the results sought under reef rescue being considered and promoted.

On page 29, again we see the author making assumptions like, 'BMP do not result in direct water improvements'. I am not sure if we should be insulted or disturbed. Half the modules from the Smartcane BMP and Grazing BMP are targeted at reef protection. I also highlight that, on page 33 of report No. 20, the conclusions fail to acknowledge that successive governments have been focused on triple bottom line outcomes, including the environment, not as reported only looking at profitability and productivity. This again allows the author to demonise farmers across Queensland.

On Page 66 the author fails to acknowledge important parts—crucial parts—of the director-general's response to address advances in land management practices, which would challenge what appears to be obsessive references on vegetation management. At 1.6 the audit's objectives, method and cost were discussed, with the leading statement being the adverse impact of broadscale land use on the water quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef, costing nearly \$500,000.

The opportunistic nature of the WWF seized on this report. I table a copy of the WWF using the Auditor-General's report, even using selective quotes in another campaign, which has been routinely accepted by the Auditor General's Report.

*Tabled paper:* Document, undated, titled 'The regular public reporting fails in this regard, lacking transparency at best, and being misleading at worst' [\[1861\]](#).

They claimed—

The solution is to implement new farm practices which cut pollution. These practices also benefit the farm business—keeping soil and chemicals on-farm boosting production rather than in the Reef polluting.

They did selectively use the report to demonise farmers and I think that is why we had so many problems with the Auditor-General's report and subsequently the Agriculture and Environment Committee report No. 22.