




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

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GENE TECHNOLOGY (QUEENSLAND) BILL

 **Mr PERRETT** (Gympie—LNP) (4.06 pm): I rise to speak on the Gene Technology (Queensland) Bill 2016. The 21st century is not just about innovation in computers and electronics, in robotics and digital disruption; it is also the century when we will embrace the use of what is called gene technology, genetic engineering or genetic modification. That is why it is important that we have a nationally consistent approach to gene technology.

As a grazier and someone who has had close contact during my entire life with farmers of a range of crops, I am aware that the scientific advancement in DNA biotechnology studies is seen as a welcome development. It has the potential to provide us with the tools to help control innovative and noxious weeds. That is where I have a specific interest and on which I will make most of my comments in my speech today. I draw the minister's attention to that.

Weeds contaminate produce, affect the operation of farm machinery, reduce farm and forest productivity, invade crops, smother pastures and, in some cases, can harm livestock. They aggressively compete for water, nutrients and sunlight resulting in reduced crop yield and poor crop quality. This bill primarily seeks to ensure national consistency in gene technology activities through a national legislative scheme. It ensures that all entities, businesses and individuals engaged in gene technology are covered.

This bill is yet another bill before the parliament that had its genesis during the previous LNP government. In 2013 the previous government commissioned an independent review of the Queensland act to: investigate whether the Queensland act is operating as an efficient and effective component of the nationally consistent gene technology regulatory scheme and to investigate particular aspects as specified in the terms of reference. That review identified that potential efficiencies could be achieved by adopting a lock-step approach with the Commonwealth legislation.

Automatically applying Commonwealth laws will reduce future legislative costs, improve administrative efficiencies and create clarity, consistency and certainty for state agencies, higher education institutions and sole traders who have dealings with GMOs. The review also identified that the lock-step approach 'should only proceed if there are legislative provisions accompanying the change to lock step which provide adequate safeguards for Queensland', in other words, an opt-out provision to ensure that the interests of Queensland and Queenslanders will be protected. I welcome the fact that this safeguard is reflected in the bill.

Despite the concerns of some submitters, this approach provides national consistency and certainty. Queensland companies will have greater certainty in developing and implementing new technologies. Many of us will have read fiction or watched movies which use DNA and biotechnology advances as a great conspiracy, but nothing could be further from the truth.

As someone who has worked in the agricultural sector, I have welcomed and been excited by scientific advances which have enabled us to use gene technology. In fact, gene technology is a logical and more precise extension of what workers in the agriculture and food production sectors have done for years. It is an extension of practices which have been used for centuries such as crossbreeding different types of plants so that you only get the traits that you want, using yeast to make bread rise and using rennet to make cheese. Gene technology is not simply about improving productivity. It is also used to help control, limit and eradicate some diseases; control and alter the contents of plants; modify plants for insect and herbicide resistance; and develop disease resistance. It has the ability to enhance economic activity, particularly through food and agricultural products.

Controlling invasive and noxious weeds is a time-consuming financial burden for farmers. Aggressive giant rat's-tail grass can reduce pasture productivity and significantly degrade natural areas. It continues to spread and is an ongoing problem in the Gympie region, with almost every landowner afflicted. The spread of the weed and the cost to control it is now making some properties unviable. Rubber vine is poisonous to livestock and smothers vegetation, infests waterways, hillsides and pastures, decreases biodiversity and impedes stock and native animal movement. Prickly acacia is already widespread on several million hectares of Mitchell grass plains and encourages erosion, threatens biodiversity, decreases pastures and forms dense thorny thickets that interfere with stock movement. Parthenium weed costs Australia's beef industry \$16.5 million per year and the cropping industry several million dollars per year.

Queensland landowners fight the battle daily to control these weeds. They cost Queensland an estimated \$600 million annually and have significant impacts on primary industries, natural ecosystems and human and animal health. Just five weeds—parthenium weed, rubber vine, prickly acacia, mesquite and parkinsonia—cost Queensland more than \$50 million each year in lost production and the cost to control. The cost of reduced production in the mulga lands of south-west Queensland caused by the intrusion of woody weeds and ensuing erosion is estimated at over \$50 million each year. The estimated annual cost of weeds in winter crops in southern Queensland alone is \$40 million.

Weeds reduce the quantity and quality of Australia's agricultural, horticultural and forestry products, which in turn affects both industry and consumers. It is estimated that weeds cost Australian farmers around \$1.5 billion a year in weed control activities and a further \$2.5 billion a year in lost agricultural production. The real cost of weeds to the environment is difficult to calculate. However, it is expected that the cost would be similar to, if not greater than, that estimated for all agricultural industries. Any way that we can use gene technology to help control and eradicate noxious and invasive weeds would be welcome in the agricultural sector, as it would increase productivity and reduce the physical and financial burden. I urge this chamber to support the bill.