




Speech By
Patrick Weir

MEMBER FOR CONDAMINE

Record of Proceedings, 1 May 2018

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr WEIR** (Condamine—LNP) (12.38 pm): I rise to speak to the Vegetation Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2018 as a member of the State Development, Natural Resources and Agricultural Industry Development Committee. Let me start my contribution right there with the title of this committee, in particular the part that says 'Agricultural Industry Development'. What an oxymoron that is, for there is no part of this legislation that will in any way further agricultural industry development in this state. It is quite the opposite. This legislation will put a stranglehold on the ability for the vast majority of landowners in this state to further develop or enhance their properties. I and all of rural Queensland will listen with close attention to the contribution by the member for Ferny Grove, the Minister for Agricultural Industry Development, on this legislation. If the minister does not rise and speak against this legislation, then the minister will have failed the industry that he has been given the honour to represent.

As in 2016, this bill was introduced into the House just before the Easter break and associated school holidays. On this occasion, it also coincided with the Commonwealth Games and some serious flooding issues in North Queensland. Once again, the lack of consultation with the stakeholders emerged as an issue, as highlighted by Travis Tobin, the Chief Executive Officer of the Queensland Farmers' Federation, who stated—

Disappointingly, the government did not consult with the agricultural sector and key stakeholders before the 2016 bill was introduced and nor has it done so before tabling the 2018 bill we are here to discuss today.

This was echoed by groups such as AgForce, Canegrowers Growcom, local government, Property Rights Australia and Desert Channels amongst many others. Interestingly, this was not an issue that was raised by WWF, the Wilderness Society, Greenpeace or other environmental lobby groups.

During its process, the committee received 777 submissions on the bill and approximately 13,100 form submissions—submissions with substantially uniform content based on a template submission document or wording. This represented the largest number of submissions to an inquiry received by any committee of the Queensland parliament to date. They predominantly came from: the Environmental Defenders Office Queensland, 116; WWF Australia, 4,747; Queensland Conservation Council, 183; the Wilderness Society, 4,955; and Greenpeace, 3,068. The committee held public hearings in Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville, Cloncurry, Longreach, Charleville and Cairns. Due to the constrained time frame, the committee could not travel to other areas that will be significantly impacted by this legislation. All public hearings were attended by very large numbers, which is an indication in itself of the concerns surrounding this bill.

Throughout this process, time and time again the committee heard a consistent message regarding the impracticalities of this legislation. One would have thought—indeed expected—that these concerns would find their way as recommendations or amendments to the bill in the committee report, but that was not to be. I had great hope when I saw this paper tabled earlier in the day. I thought, 'The minister has seen sense and made some recommendations for amendments.' Not so!

The non-government members of the committee were very disappointed by the lack of substance in the recommendations in the draft report and opposed the passage of the report. The report was passed unamended with the casting vote of the chair. The non-government members have submitted a dissenting report which outlines our concerns with this legislation.

It almost beggars belief that a bill with such widespread financial impacts on such an important sector of our economy, the agricultural industry, would be released with no cost analysis having been done. That there was no intention of doing this was exposed at the departmental hearing in Brisbane on 19 March 2018 under questioning by the member for Buderim. Mr Mickelberg asked—

Has the department undertaken any modelling in relation to the effect the proposed legislation will have on agricultural production across the state in the future?

Mr Hinrichsen: No.

Mr MICKELBERG: Does the department intend to?

Mr Hinrichsen: No.

This was a clear indication right at the outset that this legislation was going to be rammed through unamended regardless of the consequences to the industry. These concerns were outlined by the Angus family in Rockhampton. The transcript reads—

My name is Josie Angus and my husband is Blair Angus. We own 162,000 hectares in Central and Northern Queensland. I note that we run an award-winning beef business. We have developed 17 per cent of our land and this legislation takes away 10 per cent of that 17 per cent—2,700 hectares gone.

...

What do those 2,700 hectares mean for us? Our last independent valuation, done by HTW, showed a differential of \$1,250 per hectare between our developed and undeveloped land. That is \$3.3 million that this government wishes to rip off our family balance sheet.

That is just one case. The removal of high-value agriculture and irrigated high-value agriculture from this bill, which the committee heard is the most highly regulated part of the act as it is, was greeted with dismay by landowners looking to value-add or help mitigate the effects of drought on their properties. QFF, Growcom, Canegrowers and other intense agriculture lobby groups stated that this would be a major impediment to the continued development of the industry. Agriculture is losing HVA land every day to urban sprawl, hobby farms and lifestyle blocks, and other infrastructure.

The federal government has a policy called the Northern Australia infrastructure fund to help develop the north by building dams to create more growth and opportunities for intensive agriculture. What is the point in building new dams when landowners are obstructed from clearing land to utilise the water? This was particularly highlighted by the Indigenous representative Mr Gerhardt Pearson from the Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation, who labelled the legislation as poison. Mr Pearson is well aware that this legislation will stymie any possibility of the communities of the north developing a viable agriculture industry to help lift them out of the cycle of unemployment and despair. It will be interesting to see if the member for Cook will vote to support this blow to the north or will do the right thing and vote against this legislation.

One of the constraints during the committee hearings was the need to keep area-wide management plans as the 'one size fits all' under this legislation. It simply will not work. Indeed, as we heard many times, this will do more harm than good in terms of erosion and land degradation. The proposed amendments around thinning and managing regrowth are also unworkable. Landowners will be subject to a complicated and expensive development application process.

The committee also heard constant complaints about the accuracy of the SLATS mapping. It was also concerning to hear the Herbarium admit that they do not map regrowth and cannot differentiate between woody weeds such as prickly acacia and lantana.

The devil is in the detail with this legislation, and I refer in particular to the codes. The codes are interim codes and will be rewritten, and they will be rewritten to reflect the intent of this legislation. The intent of this legislation, as per the minister's own words in the introductory speech, is that, 'It will protect an additional 862,506 hectares.' To listen to the minister's speech earlier one would think we had nothing to worry about; it was all business as usual. That is what we stand to lose.

I was very disappointed with the response of the Labor members of the committee. Those members went and talked to the same people that we talked to. They heard the stories of the Quartermaines in Cairns. They heard the stories of Cameron and Jackie Tickell amongst many, many other stories we heard. This legislation will send some farmers to the wall. They will not be able to stand it. It is complicated by the codes. The codes around thinning are absolutely unworkable. The codes around mulga are absolutely unworkable. We heard from contract earth movers who drive bulldozers for a living and they said that they will not work.

Watercourses were a big issue. With the thickening along watercourses, there stands to be a lot of erosion and degradation of those watercourses. It is another case where one size does not fit all. This legislation is seriously flawed. I would urge members opposite to vote against it.