




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR JORDAN

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ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION (GREAT BARRIER REEF PROTECTION MEASURES) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mrs MULLEN** (Jordan—ALP) (3.38 pm): There certainly has been some fertiliser spread in the parliament this afternoon after that contribution. The Great Barrier Reef is a vast and spectacular ecosystem and one of the most complex natural systems on earth. Recognised for its outstanding universal value, it is important to traditional owners, communities and industries that depend on a healthy reef for community benefits and livelihoods. The reef is core to Australia's identity and improving its outlook is critical. We have known this for many years. We knew this more than 10 years ago when the then Queensland Labor government introduced the first round of reef protection regulations. We have tried to work cooperatively and voluntarily with all stakeholders to protect the reef, but it is increasingly clear that voluntary efforts will not be enough. We must act now.

The introduction of the Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019 is one very important step that we as a parliament can take to address one of the most significant impacts on the reef: poor water quality as a result of nutrient and sediment pollution from agricultural land use run-off. The bill aims to do this in a number of critical ways, including: setting nutrient and sediment pollution load limits for each reef catchment at the river basin scale; provide the ability to apply commodity-specific minimum practice standards to a broader suite of agricultural ERAs such as sugar cane, grazing, bananas and other horticultural crops and grains production; and provide an alternate pathway for producers to meet regulatory requirements through accreditation against a recognised BMP program which currently exists for cane, grazing, bananas and horticulture.

In 2003 the Queensland and Australian governments made a 10-year commitment through the reef plan to address diffuse pollution from broadscale land use and to halt and reverse the decline in water quality entering the Great Barrier Reef. The reef plan at the time stated that there was a need for regulation 'where there was a risk that voluntary approaches will fail to deliver significant water quality improvements'. In 2009 regulations to protect the Great Barrier Reef were introduced to reduce the impacts of agricultural activities on reef water quality. Reading through the explanatory notes of the 2009 bill felt like *deja vu*. The explanatory notes state—

The key focus of many actions in Reef Plan has been to assist landholders in adopting best management practices through voluntary and incentive schemes.

The 2008 *Scientific consensus statement on water quality in the Great Barrier Reef* states—

Water discharged from rivers to the GBR continues to be of poor quality in many locations.

Land derived contaminants, including suspended sediments, nutrients and pesticides are present in the GBR at concentrations likely to cause environmental harm.

That was in 2008. We have known all of this since 2003 and we implemented regulations in 2009, only to take a step backwards in 2012 when the LNP Newman government stopped enforcing regulations and determined that a voluntary approach was better. This policy change can only be

described as irresponsible. It was irresponsible then and it is irresponsible now. We know that the voluntary approach has not worked. There has not been sufficient take-up, as evidenced by overall progress. Only one per cent of Queensland's graziers and 11 per cent of canefarmers are accredited under BMP standards. This represents less than a quarter of the total cane farming area and is despite over \$120 million in industry-led BMP programs, science and ongoing programs to assist landholders in improving agricultural management practices. Report after report shows that water quality and the outlook for the reef are not improving. We need to accelerate progress towards meeting reef water quality targets, which is what the bill before us aims to achieve.

Those opposite have attempted to paint the picture that there has been limited consultation on this bill and what it proposes to achieve. I believe this is quite disingenuous, as it is clear from information provided by the Department of Environment and Science that since August 2016 there has been ongoing consultation on reef regulatory proposals through the Agricultural Stakeholder Advisory Group. This group comprised a number of key stakeholders, including AgForce and Queensland canegrowers, and there were three separate public consultations held in March 2017, September 2017 and January 2018. There was also a discussion paper and a consultation regulatory impact statement which provided details on the regulatory proposals included in the proposed minimum standards. As for the so-called 'lack of consultation', there were 51 submissions received on the RIS, including from agricultural, industrial and conservation sectors and the community.

In October 2018 a consultation draft of the bill was released for comment to key industry stakeholders. It is very important to be clear on the matter of consultation. During the public hearing the executive director for environmental policy and programs in the office of the Great Barrier Reef said—

I have been involved in legislation for the department on and off for 15 years, and I can say that this bill has been one of the most extensively consulted bills that I have ever worked on.

Having said that, our parliamentary committee undertook an extensive examination of this bill and not only held public hearings in Brisbane but travelled to key regional areas including Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Bundaberg. These hearings were very well attended, with many witnesses appearing before the committee. We received valuable information for our deliberations. I would like to thank those farmers who invited us to their properties to see firsthand the work being undertaken through BMP programs and hear about the personal impact this legislation will have on their operations. I do understand and have great sympathy for those farmers who have been doing the right thing voluntarily to improve water quality through their practices and who I genuinely believe understand the importance of protecting the reef.

I would also like to thank the scientists we met during our visit to the Australian Institute of Marine Science in Townsville. It was such an eye-opening experience to visit AIMS. This organisation was set up with foresight by the Whitlam government in 1972. The work that is occurring at AIMS is incredibly important and, importantly, credible. With an initial focus on exploring and defining the Great Barrier Reef, they have spent the past 20 years monitoring and understanding the changes, knowing that in the next decade the focus will be on action to help sustain and repair those ecosystems in the face of a changing climate.

The attack on science to justify inaction is quite frightening, and I do believe history will not be kind to those who continue to push this perverse line of 'science quality assurance'. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority publishes its outlook report every five years. This report is a scientifically robust assessment of more than 1,400 references which have undergone peer review. The assessment is clear: the overall outlook for the Great Barrier Reef in this report is very poor. The reef report cards are showing limited improvements in water quality. We know that change will remain slow while improving land management practices remains voluntary. As the outlook report states—

It is important to remain vigilant, active and optimistic in managing the Reef. Actions taken now ... will matter and make a difference to the Region's long-term outlook.

Actions begin today with these proposed reef protection regulations. I commend the bill to the House.