




Speech By
Hon. Leeanne Enoch

MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

Record of Proceedings, 27 February 2019


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

Introduction

 **Hon. LM ENOCH** (Algester—ALP) (Minister for Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister for the Arts) (11.17 am): I present a bill for an act to amend the Biodiscovery Act 2004, the Chemical Usage (Agricultural and Veterinary) Control Act 1988, the Environmental Protection Act 1994, the Fisheries Act 1994, the Nature Conservation Act 1992 and the Vegetation Management Act 1999 for particular purposes. I table the bill and the explanatory notes. I nominate the Innovation, Tourism Development and Environment Committee to consider the bill.

Tabled paper: Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019 [260].

Tabled paper: Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019, explanatory notes [261].

 **Hon. LM ENOCH** (Algester—ALP) (Minister for Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister for the Arts) (11.19 am): I am pleased to introduce the Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019. The Palaszczuk government is committed to protecting the Great Barrier Reef for future generations. This commitment is enshrined as one of our six Advancing Queensland's Priorities, and this bill is a fulfilment of one of the priorities outlined in the Premier's charter letter to me at the beginning of this term of government. This bill will amend the Environmental Protection Act 1994—the EP Act—to help reduce catchment water pollution and accelerate progress towards meeting the Great Barrier Reef water quality targets under the Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan 2017-2022.

We have the privilege and responsibility of having the world's largest coral reef right on our doorstep. Complex, diverse, adaptable, resilient and fragile all at the same time, the Great Barrier Reef is the largest living structure on the planet and without question one of the most extraordinary places on earth. It is home to a breathtaking array of life: more than 1,600 species of fish; 600 types of coral; 100 species of jellyfish; 30 species of whales and dolphins; 130 varieties of sharks and rays; 215 bird species; and six of the world's seven marine turtles. It is made up of more than 2,900 coral reefs and 70 separate bioregions. It is home to one of the world's largest seagrass habitats, encompassing 15 species over some 6,000 square kilometres, providing food and habitat for green sea turtles and dugongs and providing nursery grounds for commercial, recreational and Indigenous fisheries. Its health is the yardstick by which we judge the broader conditions of our environment. It is an indicator of the environmental health of not only Queensland but the planet. The reef is one of the clearest markers of the impacts of oceanic warming and the potential impacts of climate change.

Science tells us that the Great Barrier Reef is around 500,000 years old and that its current formation is around 6,000 to 8,000 years old. The first peoples—the first scientists of this country—have been living alongside the Great Barrier Reef for some 65,000 years, experiencing its changes and

documenting those changes in dance, song, art and ceremony. All of this reminds us that our generation and our actions are literally but a speck in time, but our speck in time is undoubtedly one of the more important ones in the entire existence of the human race. With the effects of climate change accelerating and the impacts of poor water quality threatening, it is clear that we are at a tipping point. We stand on the doorstep of not only devastating environmental impacts but also economic impacts, with over 60,000 jobs reliant on the continued good health of the reef.

This bill tackles water quality head-on, directly responding to the 2016 recommendations of the Great Barrier Reef Water Science Taskforce. It ticks off on all of the remaining required areas that the task force said needed to be tackled. Importantly, these changes are based on the best available science. The Australian Institute of Marine Science has shown that the Great Barrier Reef lost around 50 per cent of its coral cover between 1985 and 2012. There are two major causes: the first is the impact of poor water quality, which has a serious impact on reef health; the second is climate change, which poses the biggest threat to ongoing reef health. With heating oceans we have seen successive mass coral bleachings along with an increase in frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report paints a grim future for the reef if we fail to stop global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius, with the danger that we might experience 99 per cent reef loss if the temperature rise hits two degrees Celsius. We have little time to act, with about a decade to ensure that global temperature rise is stabilised.

The lived experience of climate change is very clear and, importantly, the science of climate change is undeniable. What the Great Barrier Reef needs most is leadership from the federal government on climate change mitigation. Key Great Barrier Reef ecosystems continue to be in poor condition, due largely to climate change and water quality, which is diminished by extreme weather events and land run-off. For example, water monitoring continues to show high levels of nutrients. We expect that monitoring done following the recent flood event in December will show both high levels of nutrient and sediment contamination, as is common after heavy rain events.

While Queensland is doing its part to combat climate change, we also hold the key to relieving the reef of its other great pressure. We can dramatically improve water quality and concurrently improve the health of the reef overall, making it more resilient to other types of change. Excess nutrients cause algal blooms, which can be toxic to coral and are linked to outbreaks of the devastating crown-of-thorns starfish. Sediment smothers ocean habitats, including seagrasses which are food for turtles and dugongs, and estuarine habitats which are the breeding grounds for fish, including popular species like coral trout. The bill focuses on reducing run-off from agriculture as well as direct sources of pollution from intensive land uses such as sewage treatment plants, aquaculture and mining.

The Palaszczuk government acknowledges the many efforts that have already been undertaken to limit pollution run-off. For over a decade we have supported many farmers and other industries to transition away from intensely polluting activities, and we have jointly seen great success working with more than 40 partners. But the dial is not shifting fast enough, and we must now accelerate action to save the reef. This is the reason we have brought these regulations forward, and we will be pursuing new strategies to ensure more rapid change and better outcomes for the reef. Our partnerships with farmers and industry to incentivise change will continue.

Last year we announced record funding, with \$330 million over five years, to help restore, protect and build the resilience of the Great Barrier Reef. A large portion of this—around \$260 million—is for reef water quality measures. We extended the Queensland Reef Water Quality Program to support the transition of graziers and cane and banana growers to better practices that reduce nutrient and sediment run-off as well as sustained farm productivity and profitability. Many producers, local governments, community members and industries have been working alongside the Palaszczuk government and investing their creativity, time and resources to tackle sediment run-off, but the evidence is overwhelming. We need to move faster to protect the reef.

Despite the Queensland government's significant investment of nearly \$70 million in voluntary measures, in addition to investment by the Australian government, progress is far too slow and not widespread enough. If we do not make changes now, Queensland will not meet its water quality targets and we will lose the opportunity to give the Great Barrier Reef the best chance to survive. The 2017 Scientific Consensus Statement confirmed that the decline of marine water quality associated with land based run-off from adjacent catchments is a major cause of the current poor state of many of the coastal and marine ecosystems. That is why this bill is needed.

This bill will broaden and enhance existing reef protection regulations as part of this government's multipronged approach to radically improve water quality from reef catchments. A key objective is to set nutrient and sediment load limits for all reef catchments. The load limits are derived from river basin targets in the Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan. They will be used to guide regulatory

decision-making about environmentally relevant activities that generate nutrient and sediment loads. The bill puts in place measures to ensure there is no net decline in water quality from new development, as recommended by the task force. New prescribed—and resource—environmentally relevant activities will contribute to meeting the catchment load limits by having zero net nutrient or sediment loads from their activity. This can be achieved through the design and operation of the development or by providing a water quality offset under the Department of Environment and Science's voluntary Point Source Water Quality Offsets Policy.

The Palaszczuk government welcomes new development, and these measures will ensure that it is compatible with protecting the Great Barrier Reef. Agriculture is the predominant land use in the reef catchments and cumulatively the largest source of nutrient and sediment pollution to the reef, so it is the focus of the bill's other measures. To date, only grazing and sugarcane production within three reef regions—the Wet Tropics, Burdekin and Mackay-Whitsunday—have been regulated as agricultural environmentally relevant activities. Consistent with the task force's recommendations, the regulation of agricultural activities will be expanded to all six reef regions. In addition, grains, banana and other horticulture will need to comply with commodity-specific minimum practice standards as well as grazing and sugarcane production.

The standards will require growers to replace outdated high-risk practices with practices that are known to limit nutrient and sediment run-off and enhance efficiency, including in cost of production. These changes will be staged to commence between 2019 and 2022 according to water quality risk. The minimum practice standards align with recognised benchmarks for agricultural practices but limit run-off while sustaining farm productivity and profitability.

There will also be little impact on those producers who have already voluntarily moved to improved practice standards. I have met many of those farmers who are working in that space. I acknowledge them. Provision has been made to directly recognise producers accredited against registered industry best management practice programs or like programs as meeting the minimum practice standards, but there will be a bit of work to do for producers who have not already embraced the change needed.

As with industrial activities, to ensure there is no net decline in water quality from new cropping activities, they will be subject to higher standards via an environmental authority. New cropping activities will need to comply with farm design standards including setbacks from waterways. They will only apply to new cropping where the land does not have a cropping history, recognising the flexibility within farm systems and limiting the need to retrofit farm design requirements on existing farms. New cropping on 30 hectares or more of land will require a site based assessment to ensure that any impacts to water quality can be effectively managed. This approach will ensure that unsustainable proposals can be prevented from further worsening the problem of poor reef water quality.

The bill also ensures advice provided to regulated producers is not false or misleading and relevant records are kept. This acknowledges the influential role advisers can have on farmer decisions such as how much fertiliser should be applied to crops. The bill will also provide for regulations to be made about the provision of industry data. This responds to both a task force recommendation and a recommendation from the Queensland Audit Office on the need for more industry information to help the government fully understand the effectiveness of the programs it funds and make decisions about what is working and what is not.

To support the implementation of this package, the Queensland government allocated an additional \$13.8 million over four years as part of the 2018-19 state budget. This includes \$10 million to support producers to access professional advice to meet the new requirements.

This bill makes minor amendments to the Nature Conservation Act 1992 to give effect to the common assessment method for threatened species and amends wildlife classes to be consistent with the method. The common assessment method is an intergovernmental commitment for the adoption of a common approach for the assessment and listing of threatened species across jurisdictions. To reflect this, minor consequential amendments are also required to the Fisheries Act 1994, the Vegetation Management Act 1999 and the Biodiscovery Act 2004.

We are now in one of the most important times in human history. We have the opportunity to make bold decisions—decisions not just to protect the Great Barrier Reef but to leave a world in which future generations can live and thrive. The introduction of this bill is one of these decisions, and we cannot wait any longer. We must make sure measures to improve water quality are more vigorously implemented throughout the Great Barrier Reef catchments. If we improve water quality outcomes now, it will help to build the resilience of the reef to the threats and pressures it is now facing, including impacts from climate change. We are at a junction in time where we must act today. I commend the bill to the House.

First Reading

Hon. LM ENOCH (Algester—ALP) (Minister for Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister for the Arts) (11.32 am): I move—

That the bill be now read a first time.

Question put—That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Bill read a first time.

Referral to Innovation, Tourism Development and Environment Committee

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Kelly): Order! In accordance with standing order 131, the bill is now referred to the Innovation, Tourism Development and Environment Committee.