




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 18 September 2019

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

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (12.27 pm): Some of the most far-reaching reforms to agricultural production and reef protection in Queensland history had already been decided before Labor left Brisbane. The sham that was the committee process had no effect. There was little recognition of the significant work that had been done on the ground in the Burnett-Mary region. It was embarrassing that certain members of the committee clearly looked uncomfortable and could not wait to leave the hearings and leave Bundaberg.

My contribution will deal mainly with the Burnett-Mary region as I do not claim to have knowledge of the northern area of our great state. That is why I will be supporting the amendments that I think are effective and sensible. We all accept that there is a need for effective reef protection, but not at the expense of rural and regional Queenslanders. We all agree to a plan that protects the Great Barrier Reef while protecting the rights of landowners. Despite knowing voluntary programs supported by industry get the best outcomes, Labor is choosing to put all that to one side and bring in a regulatory impost that we know is politically motivated and has a predetermined outcome. I hope those overzealous advisers appreciate the destructive course they are setting for rural Queensland.


Wide-reaching laws are proposed to be enforced from North Queensland to the Sunshine Coast by handing huge powers over farms and agribusinesses to Brisbane based bureaucrats without guaranteeing any significant benefits to the Great Barrier Reef. There is no reason to rush these changes, and I am calling on the government to acknowledge the botched communication and allow our community to have a meaningful say on the future of the Great Barrier Reef.

The proposed Labor government's regulations are high cost and support more regulatory burden with compliance and enforcement that supports minimum standards of compliance at the expense of true practice change. It does not encourage a culture of innovation and excellence, which for the reef's sake is what we need and we must get right.

We know that a lot has been said by those opposite on the claim of science being used to justify these heavy big-stick reef regulations. Further regulation of sugarcane growing, grazing and horticulture in the Burnett-Mary region is unjustifiable, and I am hoping to prove that. We have to acknowledge that this is a \$270 million industry in my electorate.

We know, because of the southerly movement of the East Australian Current, that run-off water from the Burnett-Mary catchments cannot reach the reef and islands. That is a direct reference from reef scientist Emma Kennedy from the University of Queensland who has clearly established science which proves that currents move in the opposite direction away from the reef. Again, that supports calls for delays in the implementation of this legislation in the Burnett and southern catchments until a thorough independent audit of the science has been conducted.

I will provide some facts about the Burnett-Mary catchment. Seventy per cent of the run-off in the Bundaberg district goes through a least one settling pond dam before entering any waterway. Eighty per cent of farmlands supplying Bundaberg sugar mills have nutrient management plans already taking into account previous cropping history and mill mud application. Hard coral cover in the southern Great Barrier Reef has increased by 50 per cent to 250 per cent from 2009 to 2015.

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (12.44 pm), continuing: As I was saying, hard coral cover in the southern Great Barrier Reef increased from 50 to 250 per cent from 2009 to 2015. During this time the Burnett-Mary region experienced two large floods. This demonstrates that the Burnett-Mary catchments do not negatively impact the southern barrier reef. It is clear that when we discuss improved farm management practices it is important to have a sound scientific basis for the decisions we make. Unfortunately, it has become apparent in recent years that much of the science on which decisions have been based is not as well quality checked as we would expect, and there are some doubts around these issues and the enforced legislation. We must talk about maximising benefits to the Great Barrier Reef and we must talk about remediation funds. It is possible that perverse legislation, which may significantly affect the viability of our farming and support businesses, may not have a significant effect on the Great Barrier Reef's health.

We need to worry about farmers, their families and the communities in which they live, which have been largely forgotten on a rising tide of support for the environment which often outstrips the rights of people. Farming is a tough game. Farmers are at the mercy of the weather and market forces, and the trend of environmental overregulation is only making things more difficult. Farmers are absolutely essential to feed and clothe our nation and others. In doing so, they contribute around \$60 billion to the national economy and provide hundreds of thousands of jobs. They share the nation's desire to conserve the landscape, preserve the reef and reduce carbon emissions. They have done much already to achieve those goals through voluntary industry-led programs, but there must be positive outcomes for producers who adopt global best practice in agriculture, not more punishment.

What producers need from government is not more regulation and red tape—which actually delivers worse environmental outcomes—but a clear long-term plan to drive better economic, social and environmental outcomes. Labor needs to stop talking down the reef. They have done much to stifle the tourism sector with their consistent claims that the reef is dead. It should not be a choice between agriculture versus the environment or damage to the tourism sector.

We know the environmental reasons why improvements in land use practice are required; that is, to improve water quality on the Great Barrier Reef, not at the end of catchments. For example, where are the predictions to show what the drop in concentrations of sediment on the corals of the Great Barrier Reef will be if the regulations are adopted? The reason this information is not given is because the effect would be negligible and below the level of detection. In any case, this information needs to be given to justify the regulations. If the southern Great Barrier Reef is not being affected, then the Burnett and other southern catchments should be treated like any other river in Australia. Current federal and state legislation already applies to those rivers, and no additional Great Barrier Reef related regulations are necessary.

The bringing in of regulations—as per the Great Barrier Reef Water Science Taskforce report of May 2016—was recommendation No. 5 out of 10 recommendations. While the government has said that changes are not happening quickly enough, it appears as though the state government has not allowed several of the other recommendations enough time to be implemented, as they were always designed to be recommendations with a lag time to demonstrate the benefits. Recommendation No. 2 was about communication, collaboration and stakeholder engagement. Recommendation No. 3 was about extension and education. These are always longer term programs that take more time than two years from the recommendation being made. Recommendation No. 4 was about incentives. There does not seem to be any significant incentive provided by the state government. For example, in Bundaberg, \$250,000 per 50 hectares will provide enough finance to improve irrigation infrastructure or purchase additional water and improve farm yield by 20 per cent to 30 per cent so that yields are close to or above district yield potential.

Recommendation No. 7 was about monitoring, modelling, evaluation and reporting. Yes, we do need more monitoring in the Burnett-Mary catchment, and that is where we should be putting our investment. The impact in the Burnett-Mary catchment, where agriculture is 13 per cent of the GDP compared to the state average of three per cent and unemployment is already at 10 per cent, means that regulation in the Burnett-Mary catchment will have a disproportionately high impact on the local economy. Emphasising the impact to employment in the sugarcane industry is really important. Given

the attacks in my local paper by the minister about ‘tin foil hat wearers’, we again point out the reports from AIMS and other research which show water quality in the southern region is good and provide some reasons why we do not need more regulation. I table these documents.

Tabled paper: Bundle of documents regarding the Great Barrier Reef [1509].

After Cyclone Hamish in 2009, the AIMS report showed that average coral cover was 9.32 per cent in 2011 and in 2017 it was 33.46 per cent. This rapid recovery is hardly proof of poor water quality. The condition summary also stated that any decrease in average coral cover occurred due to a large outbreak of crown-of-thorns starfish on Swains reef, and AIMS scientists stated that the outbreak at Swains reef is not based on terrestrial runoff. That was published in the *Journal of Marine Biology*. Professor Terry Hughes from James Cook University—director of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies—was lead author on a research paper published in the journal *Nature*, which stated that corals in the far southern section of the Great Barrier Reef, the bottom third, had increased levels of spawning compared to the historical average. Another study about water currents I mentioned earlier was reported by Dr Emma Kennedy in *ABC Online*. It is important that we support the proposed amendments.

We want to talk about the removal of the head of power in the legislation that allows the government to set requirements for the collection of data. This amendment seeks to remove the overreaching provision that has been discussed in this House. We want to talk about the removal of the power to set ERA minimum regulated standards and BMP practice standards from the chief executive and replace it with a requirement that all standards are to be passed as non-exempt subordinate legislation under the bill. The amendment seeks to require all standards to be prescribed by regulation.

It is important that we talk about the requirement for a 10-year grace period to enable a staged implementation in the Burnett Mary catchment region. Yesterday, the minister quite rightly excluded the Cape York area, quoting that there had been some good work done and some good lobbying. I would ask what has not been done in the Burnett Mary catchment by all of the stakeholders that have been providing over the last years a lot of good science about the areas and why we should delay the Burnett Mary catchment rollout. I notice that Far North Queensland have had 10 years to participate in their practices. This legislation brings in that the Burnett Mary has to accelerate to do it within three years. That is hardly fair, hardly necessary and hardly something you would do in consultation with stakeholders. As I said, I would be very interested to hear the rationale for excluding Cape York and not excluding the Burnett Mary. I would love to see that evidence in a comparison.

In closing, although I know it will make no difference to the government’s perverse agenda for the bush, I invite any member of the government or their key advisors who have obviously penned this legislation to participate in an on-ground tour in Bundaberg. The committee members were given this opportunity but did not really take it. We want to take you on a tour of the Bundaberg, Isis and Mary regions to showcase some of the voluntary programs that we have implemented to improve the environmental, social and economic sustainability of our sugarcane based agribusiness industry, grazing and horticulture. This will demonstrate why legislation is not required in my region, and it will show you the destructive results of Labor and its ideological agenda in killing off regional communities.

As someone who readily visits the southern Great Barrier Reef, Lady Elliot Island, Lady Musgrave Island and the inshore corals of Barolin Rocks and Nudey Beach areas around Bargara, I can say that there is no evidence that coral is suffering under perverse agricultural run-off. If anyone doubts that, if anyone wants to murmur—

Ms Enoch interjected.

Mr BENNETT: I will take the interjection from the minister. You are more than welcome to come back and spend some real time giving real thought to it. Don’t make fun of my region.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Pugh): All directions—

Ms ENOCH: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I take offence to the comments made by the member for Burnett and I ask him to withdraw.

Mr BENNETT: I withdraw.