




Speech By
Stephen Andrew

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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PRIVATE MEMBER'S STATEMENT

Mirani Electorate, Sugar Industry

 **Mr ANDREW** (Mirani—PHON) (2.42 pm): The sugar industry is crucial to the economic prosperity and growth of the whole Mackay-Whitsunday region. It contributes \$4 billion to the Queensland economy, provides over 22,000 jobs and supports over 10,000 businesses. However, today the sugar industry is under sustained attack and its very existence is under threat. Since 2008, canefarmers' water charges have increased by 230 per cent while their electricity costs have risen a staggering 300 per cent.

Some 30 per cent of the region's sugar mills have shut down since 2000 and the number of canefarmers has plummeted. We have lost Pleystowe, North Eton and others. Since 2000 the number of farmers growing cane fell by nearly 50 per cent, from 6,286 in 2000 to 3,853 in 2019. Over the same period, the region lost 700 hectares of prime agricultural lands, a rate of loss that since 2015 has sped up dramatically. These impacts are going unnoticed and unrecorded in any of the government's regulatory impact assessment models or statistical datasets, and so are the rising rates of suicide, poor health outcomes and number of marital breakdowns and bankruptcies amongst farmers more generally in the sugar industry.

The cost and regulatory burdens are becoming too much and the current ageing cohort of canefarmers are saying that they are fast reaching the point where we could see them abandoning the land in droves or turning to other occupations like mining or carbon farming. Some have even got to the stage where they have to cut into their superannuation to keep running. This will have significant flow-on effects downstream which nobody in government or industry seems to be quantifying or carrying out risk assessments on—a clear breach of the Treasury guidelines on good governance and an unforgiveable failure in public policy in anyone's book.

Millers in particular are in trouble and many are operating close to the economic cliff. If we see any more mill closures this year, the whole industry will be put at risk. Mackay's canefarmers are already operating with government owned monopolies setting unrealistic prices on the one hand and short-sighted government bureaucrats applying the regulatory screws on the other. If it keeps up, the Mackay-Whitsunday region will be facing stranded network assets, mass job losses, small business failures and a population stampede to the cities.

It is not climate change doing this; it is government overreach—a rapacious, rent-seeking executive government that is misusing price mechanisms and regulatory powers to lay waste to an irreplaceable sector of regional Queensland's economy. If government says that this is not true, then let it prove it. Right now, Labor could regulate to reduce canegrowers' pumping related energy costs, reduce their bulk water charges to match the 50 per cent reduction given to horticulture and introduce a concessional energy tariff for irrigators. Plausible deniability is no longer an option. It is time for this government to turn words into action and extend the hand of support to canefarmers before it is too late.