




Speech By
Aaron Harper

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

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

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (5.59 pm): I rise to speak on the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021. From the outset I will say that I will not be supporting this private member's bill. I, like many others, have complete confidence in the scientific evidence used to inform the existing legislation protecting the Great Barrier Reef.

Let us talk about the reef for a moment. It is the world's largest coral reef ecosystem. It stretches 2,300 kilometres from the Torres Strait in the north to Bundaberg in the south and covers 350,000 square kilometres. It comprises more than 2,900 individual coral reefs. It supports 60,000 jobs and contributes approximately \$6 billion to the Australian and Queensland economies. It has a diversity of fish, corals and many other species. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people consider the reef to be of special significance. More than 70 traditional owner groups have long continuing relationships with the reef and its catchment, stretching back some 60,000 years.

The reef is under pressure from multiple threats, including climate change, poor water quality from land based run-off and the impacts from coastal development. While the greatest threat to the health of the reef is climate change, deteriorating water quality has been identified as a key threat that needs to be addressed, particularly in relation to excess nutrients, fine sediments and pesticides from agricultural run-off and that of other industries. Nutrients, notably nitrogen and phosphorous, that come from fertilisers used on land have been found to increase coral-eating crown of thorns starfish outbreaks, macroalgae abundance and algal blooms, which can take over and reduce coral diversity and reduce the light available for corals and seagrasses. Excess nutrients can also increase coral bleaching.

Unfortunately, while many farmers—and we heard from the minister that some 694 are accredited and another 1,600 are engaged—are working hard to reduce their impact on the water quality of the reef, recent monitoring and reporting shows that regulation is needed to help Queensland meet its commitments by reducing nutrient and sediment loads entering the reef catchments by 2025. If this bill were passed the existing legislation would be weakened, putting at risk the health and resilience of one of Australia's most iconic natural wonders.

On behalf of the committee, I thank all the organisations and individuals who made written submissions on the bill and appeared at the committee's public hearings. I thank my fellow committee members and the Parliamentary Service for their contributions throughout. The committee received a briefing from the member for Hinchinbrook on 11 June 2021. We also heard from a range of stakeholders at public hearings conducted in June and September in Brisbane, including the Department of Environment and Science, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's Chief Scientist and environmental stakeholders including the Australian Marine Conservation Society, the Australian Institute of Marine Science, the National Environmental Law Association and individual conservationists. We also heard from agricultural and livestock stakeholders including AgForce and

bodies representing canegrowers. I wish to commend the Bundaberg Canegrowers group for the implementation of their Six Easy Steps initiative, which I thought was commendable work. They do a good job.

The policy objective of the bill is to repeal the amendments introduced by the amendment act to restore the regulatory framework that existed prior to its enactment. It proposes to revert to the previous definition of an agricultural 'environmentally relevant activity' or ERA. Under the bill, an agricultural ERA would comprise commercial sugarcane growing or cattle grazing carried out on an agricultural property of more than 2,000 hectares and carried out on an agricultural property in the reef catchment of the Wet Tropics, Mackay-Whitsunday or Burdekin.

At the public hearing the member for Hinchinbrook advised that consultation involved talking to 'local growers, talking to the people who live in my electorate, as well as growers across neighbouring electorates who have to work and deal with this legislation and these regulations'. The member for Hinchinbrook advised that consultation on the bill had also been undertaken with tourism operators and scientists in the field. However, no stakeholder names were provided except for that of Dr Peter Ridd.

As we have heard, there was some criticism from the member about the committee not consulting with farmers. I turn to the former inquiry of the Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Bill 2019. As part of that process, some 230 submissions and 1,500 form submissions were received. That committee received written briefings and travelled to Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Bundaberg. General support for the bill was provided by lots of groups, such as those I have already mentioned. In addition, a number of stakeholders from outside Australia also supported the bill.

Both the Queensland and Australian governments have committed to protecting the Great Barrier Reef. The Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan is the Australian and Queensland governments overarching framework for protecting and managing the reef. Both governments have committed more than \$2 billion over 10 years to protect the reef, which is an unprecedented level of investment into improving water quality. The Reef 2050 plan is a joint commitment of both governments and seeks to improve the quality of water flowing from catchments adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef.

The Reef 2050 plan is underpinned by comprehensive peer reviewed research—the *2017 Scientific consensus statement: land use impacts on Great Barrier Reef water quality and ecosystem condition*—and is supported by robust monitoring and evaluation programs such as the Paddock to Reef Integrated Monitoring, Modelling and Reporting Program, the Paddock to Reef Program. The *2017 Scientific consensus statement* for the Great Barrier Reef is a review of the significant advances in scientific knowledge of water quality issues in the reef to arrive at a consensus on the current understanding of the system. The Paddock to Reef Program provides a framework for evaluating and reporting progress towards the Reef 2050 plan targets through the report cards that the minister tables. The program is jointly funded by the Australian and Queensland governments and unites more than 20 industry bodies, government agencies, natural resource management bodies, landholders and research organisations that are working together to measure and report on water quality factors that impact reef health.

To assist with meeting water targets and reducing nutrient and sediment pollution, the Great Barrier Reef Water Science Taskforce recommended the implementation of staged regulation throughout the reef regions. The task force recommended a reinvigorated regulatory approach as a mix of tools to accelerate progress towards meeting the targets to help preserve the high values held in the reef and increase the resilience of the reef to other pressures such as the impacts of climate change.

To wrap up, after concluding work on this bill I was flying back to Townsville and spent two hours talking with a third-generation farmer from the Hinchinbrook electorate. He is well known for his pineapples, cane and cattle. We turned to the topic. After talking about how he managed to look after his farms, which are very diverse in nature, he told me that most farmers are doing the right thing and are complying with regulations, but some are set in their ways and will never change their practices. I get it that we should not have to take a big-stick approach, but it is because of those farmers who will not change that we need to continue to regulate the industry. I do commend those farmers who do the right thing. As I have said, I commend and acknowledge the work of the Bundaberg Canegrowers group with their Six Easy Steps workshops that inform local growers of soil and nutrient testing. It is a good and commendable program.

I am satisfied that the science underpinning existing legislation is robust. In closing, I welcome the ministerial requirement for a review of the effectiveness of the reef protection regulations in reducing nutrient and sediment loads in the Great Barrier Reef catchment, with the first review commencing in December 2022 and to be completed within a year. I commend the minister for her work in protecting

the reef and listening to the science. That is what we should do: we are the caretakers of the Great Barrier Reef and it is important that we listen to the science and continue to do the right thing. As I said at the start, I will not be supporting the private member's bill.