




Speech By
Dale Last

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

Record of Proceedings, 15 March 2022

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

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (6.27 pm): I rise to contribute to the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021. I state at the outset my unconditional support for our farmers right across Queensland and in particular my canefarmers in the largest sugarcane growing area in Australia, the Burdekin. I am proud to stand here as a fourth generation cane industry family who have worked and is still working in the sugar industry in this state. It is a disgrace that the Katter party are using our farmers and graziers as pawns in this debate.

Honourable members interjected.

Mr Dametto interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Hart): Order! Pause the clock. Member for Hinchinbrook, I understand that this is your bill. I am avoiding warning you, but I will shortly, so no more. Other members, keep the noise down.

Mr LAST: Make no mistake, this is about the members for Hinchinbrook and Traeger trying to split the community in North Queensland. In fact, it is exactly what this Labor government has done and continues to do.

Mr Dametto interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Pause the clock. Member for Hinchinbrook, you are warned under the standing orders. I just gave you a direction. Be careful. Try and stay for the rest of the debate.

Mr LAST: Canefarmers, and for that matter farmers right across this state, are sick and tired of being used as a political football, of being the easy target for a government hell-bent on strangling our agricultural sector through overregulation. The shadow minister for the environment has tabled amendments and it is those amendments that I want to elaborate on because they are sensible, practical amendments that recognise farmers and landholders as the true conservation champions for their land. These amendments will ensure that our farmers who have completed a recognised accreditation program such as BMP or AgCarE, and we have heard about that tonight as part of this debate, are exempted from the onerous penalties currently embedded in the Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Act.

The reasons for the LNP's amendments are simple: they can work, they are based on consultation and they are based on respect. They are amendments that recognise the importance of the reef just as strongly as the importance of primary production. For any primary producer, the health of their land is the most important and valuable asset that they have. In all my years living in regional Queensland I have never heard a primary producer say that they do not care about the land on which they work. Never have I heard a farmer play down the importance and value of the environment around them or environmental assets such as the Great Barrier Reef.

The Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Act shows the disdain the current government has for primary producers. Along with zero acknowledgment of the farmers' effects on recycled water, the planting of alternative crops to lock nitrogen into the soil and leaving paddocks fallow, we saw legislation that empowered government agencies to demand information and enter properties without legal checks and balances. The amendments proposed by the LNP not only recognise but also reward the actions taken by our primary producers. Rather than attacking their rights, our amendments recognise their rights and the rights of others. Rather than portraying them as environmental vandals, the LNP's amendments recognise the work of primary producers in embracing internationally recognised accreditation systems. In short, the LNP's amendments will remove the risk of—

Mr Dametto interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Kelly): Pause the clock. I am sorry to interrupt, member. Member for Hinchinbrook, you have carriage of this bill. You are on a warning. I have just come into the chair. I will not warn you again. You will be asked to leave the chamber.

Mr LAST: In short, the LNP's amendments will remove entirely the risk of penalties from farmers, provided they are accredited under a recognised program and are complying with the requirements of that program. It is important to note that farmers do not receive funding to participate in or make changes to their farming practices. They do that because they acknowledge—in fact, they embrace—their responsibilities while also feeding and clothing Australians. I have seen firsthand the work and commitment of our farmers to continuous improvement and innovation. I say to those opposite, and I have seen this firsthand also: do you honestly think our farmers will use excess fertiliser and spend money on pumping water or purchasing chemicals and diesel if they do not have to? They are efficient, they are effective and they know what they are doing. It is about growing the best quality cane and produce they can with minimal input from fertilisers and chemicals. It is about time that those opposite stopped demonising our farmers.

As the member for Bonney mentioned in his contribution, the LNP will be moving amendments to this bill. Rather than posting on Facebook, claiming to be seeking support, how about members in this chamber support our amendments because it is those amendments that will make a real difference. On that point, I put on the record the LNP's appreciation for our primary producers and the role that they have played during the COVID pandemic. They have been subjected to restrictions that have affected their workforce, transport and many other factors, but they have kept Australia fed and clothed.

It is worth noting that in their response to a question asked on notice last year, the department stated—

Smartcane BMP and Freshcare Environmental Program were granted recognition on the basis that they have standards under section 318YB of the Act. Producers who are accredited under these programs are deemed to have met the minimum practice agricultural standards through an industry supported pathway.

There it is. There is recognition from the minister's own department that farmers are meeting the accreditation standards. Therefore, it naturally follows when the member for Bonney, my colleague and shadow minister for the environment, introduces amendments exempting farmers who meet those requirements that this government should support those amendments.

As Canegrowers Queensland chairman Paul Schembri said on 23 February this year—

We welcome an additional move by the Liberal National Party to amend the reef regulations to exclude growers accredited under our industry best practice program Smartcane BMP, acknowledging the importance and value of such programs.

Canefarmers do not shy away from the need to be environmentally responsible and the involvement of 80 per cent of the cane area in the voluntary Smartcane BMP program is evidence of that commitment. Canegrowers have acknowledged that, on their current trajectory, reef regulations pose a massive cost risk to the Australian sugar industry, regional communities and the economy. Canegrowers' calculations have put that cost to the Queensland economy at up to \$1.3 billion over 10 years through a misguided push to cut nitrogen use on the crop.

As the submission to the committee from Green Shirts Movement Queensland states—

The legislation does not factor in clear evidence of demonstrated improvements—

Mr Dametto interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Kelly): Pause the clock. Member for Hinchinbrook, you can leave the chamber for one hour.

Whereupon the honourable member for Hinchinbrook withdrew from the chamber at 6.35 pm.

Mr LAST: The submission states—

The legislation does not factor in clear evidence of demonstrated improvements made by the sugar industry in using fallow rotations, trash blanketing and underground fertiliser applications.

It does not consider that over 70% of the states cane growing land is already being operated under industry best practices. It instead gives broad reaching power to a departmental Chief Executive officer in setting minimum standards and the ability to change them without sufficient consultation, accountability, or regard to potential crop yield reduction and increased cost burdens.

In their submission to the committee, AgForce highlighted the importance of 'achieving realistic and achievable targets about water quality' whilst ensuring we 'avoid a diminution in the environmental and economic sustainability of farming enterprises'. That is a logical response and I thank AgForce for their role in advocating for primary producers and for their consultation.

In their submission, the Queensland Farmers' Federation stated—

We consider regulation is a high cost, simplistic instrument that supports minimum standards of compliance, and does not encourage or foster a culture of long-lasting practice change. By contrast, voluntary industry-led farm management systems (such as BMP programs) and other water quality improvement projects have proven to be enablers of such cultural changes.

The QFF goes on to cite what they call significant underinvestment in 'voluntary and industry-led programs to date when considered against the cost of achieving the water quality targets that governments have set'.

Exempting primary producers who participate in a best practice management or Smartcane BMP program from draconian and excessive environmental protection measures will result in a better outcome for the Great Barrier Reef than the original bill or the bill introduced by the member for Hinchinbrook would ever achieve. I point out that the bill put forward by the Katter party gives an independent regulator very broad powers, including 'anything necessary or convenient to be done in the performance of the independent regulator's functions'. That should be ringing alarm bells for our farmers. Would members believe that the Environmental Defenders Office—that is right, the EDO—supports the establishment of an independent regulator that could end up being harsher on our farmers than the regulations themselves? In giving evidence during the public hearing, Ms Revel Pointon said, 'We do support the things in the bill that relate to implementation of an independent regulator.' There it is.

I support the practical amendments put forward by my colleague the member for Bonney. I would encourage all members in this place to support those amendments when we vote on this bill.