




Speech By
Hon. Mark Furner

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

Record of Proceedings, 25 October 2022

**PUBLIC HEALTH AND OTHER LEGISLATION (COVID-19 MANAGEMENT)
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Hon. ML FURNER** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities) (6.56 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Public Health and Other Legislation (COVID-19 Management) Amendment Bill 2022. It is fair to say that Queensland had not seen anything like the COVID-19 pandemic for generations. It truly has been an emergency on a global scale.

In 2020, the Palaszczuk government was quick to recognise the potential this virus had to play havoc on our health system and the way Queenslanders go about their daily lives. This government was willing to enact unprecedented measures and facilitate unprecedented cooperation with the Commonwealth to get the best possible outcomes for Queenslanders. On 29 January 2020, a public health emergency was declared under the Public Health Act. In fact, Queensland moved faster than any other state or territory to declare a health emergency. The amendments made at the time and in the months since to the act gave the Chief Health Officer and emergency officers unprecedented powers to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I want to pay tribute once again to our Governor, Her Excellency Dr Jeannette Young, who, as chief health officer in 2020 and 2021, provided excellent advice to the Palaszczuk government and helped keep Queenslanders safe. I also pay tribute to the Queensland Minister for Health, who did a sterling job and continues to do a sterling job protecting Queenslanders, assisting in conjunction with our great Queensland health workers. What a sterling job they do for Queenslanders right across this state. The powers given to the Queensland Chief Health Officer were unprecedented but necessary. As a government, we listened to the experts, we backed the science and we kept Queenslanders safe through the worst of the pandemic.

As the explanatory notes in this bill point out, the current temporary emergency powers ultimately saved lives and kept the community safe when modelling suggested Queensland was on the same trajectory as other jurisdictions in terms of deaths and cases. However, the Palaszczuk government knew that temporary powers would disrupt our way of life and the way we do business. That is why we moved quickly to provide initial assistance to the first impacted industries and then acted decisively with the most significant and comprehensive jobs, business and health support package seen anywhere in this nation.

We were the first in the nation to declare agriculture as an essential service, highlighting the important role our farmers played in feeding and clothing people right across the country and making sure the routes for the supply chains were open. Initial support to the agriculture and fisheries sector included market diversification and resilience grants, designed to help directly impacted exporters and their supply chain businesses to source new markets or adapt their processes to keep their workforce employed and to keep business revenue flowing while things settled down.

The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries convened the Agriculture Coordination Group, bringing together over 70 industry bodies and sector leaders. The group met regularly during the pandemic as a way of sharing information and hearing directly from growers about the challenges of farming during the pandemic. DAF stood up agriculture coordination officers—more than 100 staff working and living in rural Queensland—to work closely with their communities to address issues such as staffing shortages. It was heartening to see the way the producers and government worked together to find solutions to challenges posed by the pandemic.

I want to highlight Kialla Pure Foods at Greenmount on the Darling Downs. They were a recipient of a rural economic development grant in 2019 which they used to upgrade their blending system to help meet their demand for organic flour and baking products. The new system came online just as COVID hit. Demand for Kialla's products jumped 300 per cent, and to meet demand they had to hire six more staff to keep up with this workload. Some of those workers were people who lost their jobs during the COVID-19 outbreak in other locations.

The situation in Queensland has changed. The way we deal with COVID has changed and that requires different responses. Most restrictions have been lifted as we learn to live with the virus in a new way. We are not out of the woods yet—not by any means. That is why temporary powers in this bill make sense. COVID-19 will be managed as a notifiable condition under the Public Health Act until 31 October next year. It will allow the Chief Health Officer to make public health directions that bring Queensland into line with other states and territories when a decision is made at National Cabinet.

The Health and Environment Committee examined this bill, and I want to thank all the committee members, especially the chair, the member for Thuringowa, for their contributions. I note there were some submissions to the committee opposed to what is being proposed in this bill. For instance, the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties does not think we have an emergency situation at the moment that justifies the use of any special temporary powers and that the vaccines we have are adequate to deal with COVID-19 outbreaks. However, this bill does not provide wide-reaching powers for the Chief Health Officer. The powers proposed are temporary and much more targeted.

This pandemic has been unprecedented. We cannot know how future variations of this virus will affect Queenslanders. As the Chief Health Officer said in his submission to the committee, he expects to only use these proposed powers when there is a serious risk to the community. The proposed amendments also state that the CHO must also publish on the Queensland Health website a justification statement for the public health direction within five days after giving the direction and must table that direction in this House within 21 days and that it could be subject to a disallowance motion.

There will be plenty of public and parliamentary oversight if these more targeted temporary powers are ever used. I do note the LNP state in their dissenting report they do not believe the bill is necessary. Rather, they are happy for this parliament to be recalled at a moment's notice to pass emergency legislation the next time a public health emergency arises. Need I remind everyone in this House that this is the same LNP that argued 64 times for the borders to be opened during the height of the pandemic, putting Queenslanders' lives at stake. This is an opposition that is telling Queenslanders, 'There is nothing to worry about. We will sort things out if there's another outbreak down the track.'

The Palaszczuk government is not as 'happy-go-lucky'. That is why Queenslanders trusted us at the last election and will trust us again at the next election in 2024. We listen to the experts. We trust the science. We keep Queenslanders safe. Unlike those opposite, we plan for the future, just like we are planning for the future with our Energy and Jobs Plan, and the LNP still argues about whether climate change is real. COVID-19 is still real. That is why we need the sensible approach in this bill to continue to keep Queenslanders safe so they can continue to enjoy the great lifestyle they are accustomed to. I commend the bill to the House.