




Speech By
Hon. Meaghan Scanlon

MEMBER FOR GAVEN

Record of Proceedings, 22 February 2022

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

 **Hon. MAJ SCANLON** (Gaven—ALP) (Minister for the Environment and the Great Barrier Reef and Minister for Science and Youth Affairs) (5.40 pm): I rise to speak against the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill. Our Great Barrier Reef is the jewel in Queensland's tourism crown and one of the most diverse ecosystems on earth, and those of us with the privilege of sitting in this chamber have a duty to protect that icon. This bill will violate that duty, undoing the important progress we are making for future generations.

The Health and Environment Committee—and I acknowledge all of the members who were on that—made one recommendation, and that was that this bill not be passed. There are three very key problems with this bill: one, it is founded on false claims about science and the impacts to farmers; two, it will prevent us from getting close to the reef water quality targets; and, three, and most importantly, at this time in our history the reef regulations that this bill seeks to overturn form a critical component of the joint response to the World Heritage Committee to keep the Great Barrier Reef off the in-danger list. I will start there.

Later this year the World Heritage Committee will consider the status of our reef. We know that water quality is the second greatest risk to the reef after climate change. The international community is watching us. This is not the time to lower our standards. This is the time for us to step up. The reef's World Heritage status is a significant tourism drawcard. This was made clear by the Queensland Tourism Industry Council's submission, which said that the reef—

... has an 'economic, social, and icon asset value of \$56 billion, supports approximately 64,000 jobs, and contributes \$6.4 billion to the Australian economy'. As such, it is critical that measures are put in place to ensure its ongoing health and curtail the runoff of sediment and pesticides. QTIC stresses the vital and urgent need for effective action to mitigate these risks. We support the unamended Bill and its commitment to improving the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef via compulsory minimum regulatory standards in addition to clear benchmarks and identifiable long-term targets.

The reef regulations have been front and centre of submissions made by the Commonwealth government—the colleagues of those opposite—to the World Heritage Committee, including, and I table: the *State party report on the state of conservation of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (Australia) 2019*; the *Reef 2050 long-term sustainability plan 2021-2025*; the *Reef 2050 water quality improvement plan 2017-2022*; and the most recent *State party report on the state of conservation for Australia's Great Barrier Reef 2022*, which was only submitted this last month. The Commonwealth government has made eight references to our regulations, including a whole-page feature and a reference that has been translated into French, and I have tabled those for the benefit of the House.

Tabled paper: Australian Government, Department of the Environment and Energy: Report, dated 1 December 2019, titled 'State Party report on the state of conservation of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area (Australia)' [171](#).

Tabled paper: Australian Government and Queensland Government: Report, undated, titled 'Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan 2021-2025' [170](#).

Tabled paper: Australian Government and Queensland Government: Report titled 'Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan 2017-2022' [169](#).

Tabled paper: Australian Government: Report, dated February 2022, titled 'State Party report on the state of conservation for Australia's Great Barrier Reef' [168](#).

That is the position of the federal LNP government there in black and white—and in French. These regulations are imperative to protecting the reef and the jobs that rely on it. This was reaffirmed again in federal estimates last year by Senator Jane Hume, who was appearing for the environment minister, Sussan Ley, who said—

The minister has been very clear that she supports the Queensland regulations.

She further said—

There is no intention to scale back those regulations.

Let me turn to the provisions of this bill. This bill seeks to dilute the strong progress the Queensland government has made to date. It would bring back environmental risk management plans for sugarcane farmers and cattle grazing on large properties. This reintroduction is not even supported by the agricultural industry, which repeatedly requests that the government stop asking for more paperwork. The bill would also reduce regulations to three of the six catchments, creating inequity across regions. It would decrease penalties for those who are doing the wrong thing. This bill also seeks to establish an independent regulator but only for the agricultural industry and, confusingly at the same time, also seeks to confer more power on the minister, contradicting the entire idea of an independent regulator in the first place. It is likely the bill seeks to both politicise decision-making and then slow agencies down with an office for alternative facts—both bad for the reef and creating uncertainty for industry.

We are currently investigating and consulting on a potential independent environmental protection agency and this could operate much more broadly, as was our election commitment. As such, I do not commend this narrow proposal that has not been consulted on with the Queensland community. Through the implementation of the reef regulations, we have certainly sought to work in good faith and partnership with the agricultural sector. The government has provided \$30 million for industry-led best management practice programs since establishment, with extension and innovation trials to help farmers deliver precision farming that not only improves reef water quality but also improves productivity and profitability of their farms. Regulated practice standards underpin these programs and are based on industry accepted practices and know-how.

On-farm trials have demonstrated that they at the very least, and most often, improve a farm's productivity and profitability. In fact, a 2021 Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences survey of Australian sugarcane farms found that the average financial performance of a sugarcane farm was better in 2020-21 compared to 2013-14. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the efforts and progress made by Queensland farmers so far. We now have 694 fully accredited growers and a further 1,604 growers engaged in BMP programs, up from only 40 growers when we formed government, less than one per cent. The LNP's statement of reservation asks for different treatment for BMP accredited farms. We already do that. It also criticised us that farmers have not taken up the reef rebate scheme, and I will say it again: we are reviewing that program and I can assure the House that that money will be spent on assisting growers to meet minimum standards.

Finally, I want to turn to the science. The explanatory notes and introductory speech for this bill raise a series of questions about the science underpinning the reef regulations. This House should not be deceived by cherrypicked statements from favoured witnesses which conveniently ignore the testimony of other eminent experts in water quality and coral. The 2017 Scientific Consensus Statement confirmed that poor water quality continues to be the key threat to the reef's health, second only to climate change. It also reconfirms that the main source of nutrient and sediment pollution is cumulative run-off from agricultural land use.

The consensus statement was produced by a multidisciplinary group of 48 scientists with expertise in Great Barrier Reef water quality science and management led by TropWATER at James Cook University with oversight from the Reef Water Quality Independent Science Panel. The consensus statement is robust and comprehensive, referencing over 3,000 authors of 1,300 published peer reviewed papers from 400 different research organisations across 50 countries. To reject the weight of evidence in favour of a couple of dissenting voices is extraordinary and, quite frankly, unacceptable.

There is a lot at stake with this bill. We must demonstrate to the World Heritage Committee that Queensland is committed to meeting our reef water quality 2050 targets. We have heard the clear position of the federal government, but my question is what will those opposite do? We know the member for Bonney is desperate to build his green credentials, but is that really in keeping with some of his colleagues over there? We know a number of them are not happy. What will the member for Callide do? What will the member for Gregory do? What will the member for Nanango do? They have had some very vocal views on this. Can the Leader of the Opposition keep control of the Nats and the cosplay progressives?

The reef would already be listed in danger if it was up to the state LNP. The Palaszczuk government inherited a basket case of reef management in 2015. The Newman government took the axe to Labor's sensible vegetation management laws and relied on BMPs with less than a one per cent adoption rate while sacking or moving 20 compliance staff, stalled its fisheries reforms and drew global concern over dredge spoil dumping.

More recently those opposite have waxed and waned on the regulations, voting against strengthening them last term. It depends on what day of the week it is as to what the LNP's position is on climate, on the reef, on a whole range of environmental issues. Our position has always been very clear: we will do everything in our power to protect the Great Barrier Reef. I oppose the reversal bill.