




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR CONDAMINE

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

 **Mr WEIR** (Condamine—LNP) (6.18 pm): I rise to speak to the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021, introduced into the House on 21 April 2021 by the member for Hinchinbrook, Mr Nick Dametto. The bill proposes to: revert to the previous definition of an agricultural environmentally relevant activity; reverse the consolidation of a single offence for failing to comply with an agricultural ERA standard; establish an independent regulator; introduce changes to the operation of the offence about fertiliser application; limit the required period that documents for an agricultural ERA record must be kept; transfer the power making an ERA standard from the chief executive to the minister; and publish new ERA standards and recommendations made by the independent regulator. As already stated by the shadow minister for environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Mr Sam O'Connor, the LNP will not be supporting the bill and will instead be moving an amendment to the reef regulations to recognise and support farmers who have adapted their farming practices and are following best management practices.

BMP is not new in agriculture. It has been around in various forms for a number of years. Support for these measures was mentioned by a number of submitters. Some stakeholders argued that a voluntary, industry-led approach would be more appropriate than the current regulatory framework, claiming it is more likely to foster innovation. For example, the QFF submitted—

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 the enablers of such cultural changes.

Bundaberg Canegrowers Ltd referred to a lack of recognition of the high level of innovation and adoption of practices by growers in the Burnett-Mary region to minimise run-off, outlining the following current practices: over 70 per cent of all farm run-off goes through at least one tail water dam before entering a waterway; the majority of these dams were built in 2004; Six Easy Steps and nutrient management workshops were developed in Bundaberg to assist growers in understanding their soil tests; and the Bundaberg region has been the leader in irrigation program development—Watersense was developed with the assistance of the Bundaberg region.

The network of soil moisture probes and weather stations with central access via a central website and available to all growers was developed by and is still maintained in Bundaberg. These soil moisture monitoring probes are used to assist growers in determining when to irrigate to minimise run-off and deep drainage. The weather station provides localised records for temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction to assist in completing records for chemical application. A soil test survey of the district has meant that 100 leading growers have received a nutrient management plan in 2013, 2016 and in 2019. A Far North Queensland sugarcane grower, Mr Mario Quagliata, also agreed with a voluntary approach and stated he has already adapted for a number of years BMP farming methods such as laser levelling paddocks, using trash blanketing and installing wetlands to reduce erosion, and is SmartCane BMP accredited. He has also installed a bioreactor in a joint project with the MIP government appointed group to gather data.

During my farming career I watched and participated in these changes in cotton, grain and cattle. Many of these changes were driven by the industry itself. This is particularly so in the cotton industry. The cotton industry recognised that it had an image and sustainability problem as far back as the late seventies, regarding pesticides and water use in particular. This led to changes in pest management, investment in research and variety development and more efficient uses of water. These advancements have been nothing less than astounding, particularly in chemical usage. Growers regularly attend field and precision ag days to stay abreast of the advances that continue to be developed in this industry. This has led to not only better environmental outcomes but also a significant increase in productivity.

The beef industry also started down this path in the seventies when the honourable Vic Sullivan, the then member for Condamine and the agriculture minister under the Bjelke-Petersen government, introduced cattle tracing through the introduction of tail tags. It is fair to say that this innovation was not universally welcomed in the cattle industry, but lifetime tracing remains to this day and without it many markets would now be closed to us. Likewise the statutory declaration that accompanies the livestock stating that any veterinary products used on those livestock comply with the withholding period. Grain growers also need to provide similar documentation with any grain that leaves their property, whether it is for livestock or human consumption.

As I have said, some producers took some convincing of the necessity of these changes. I will remember implementing some of these changes on my farm when I was in partnership with my Uncle Des. Des was old school and did not accept change readily. One of these changes was stubble retention, as Mario spoke of now being practised in the sugar industry. When the wheat and barley harvest was concluded, the stubble would be set alight by dragging a set of fire harrows around the perimeter of the paddock. These stubble fires were spectacular to see and Des was a big supporter of this practice. I introduced stubble retention so it could be incorporated in the soil or left standing to be replanted with the next crop using minimum or zero till, but Des was not finished with the fire harrows.

One day after the harvest I had to go and pick up parts in Dalby. As I got close to home I could see a big black cloud of smoke and thought, 'That looks like it is coming from our place.' Sure enough, there was Des dragging the fire harrows around the paddock and the stubble ablaze. I went home and got the camera and as he went past me with a big grin on his face I took a photo. I had the photo developed and put it in a frame and presented it to him and said it was a photo of the last stubble fire there would be on this property. In time he saw the advantages of what I was trying to achieve and came on board.

It is the same in the sugar industry. Many now see the advantages in BMP. This is where the government should be committing more funding and support. There are advantages in BMP for both the landowner and the reef. No grower wants to see his chemical or fertiliser being lost into our watercourses, particularly with the cost of these commodities today. Anhydrous is currently selling for \$2,500 a tonne, urea is now at \$1,440 a tonne and phosphate is at \$1,650 a tonne. The price of all these commodities is still rising. The chemicals commonly used are between \$8 to \$40 a litre plus application.

I am sure all of us in this House, and indeed outside these walls, want to protect and preserve the reef. I have been doing a yearly trip to the reef for many years and intend to do so for many more years to come. Agriculture cannot continuously be portrayed as the bad guys by this Palaszczuk government. This is what upsets our farmers. They are all too often seen as the easy mark for this Labor government. It is this section of our community that is expected to do the heavy lifting on environmental issues time and time again. The government needs to work with the farmers. The farmers have more to lose than most. I believe the member for Bonney has presented a common-sense amendment that would reward those farmers who are doing the right thing. I would urge all members to support the member for Bonney's proposed amendment.