




Speech By  
**Rob Molhoek**

**MEMBER FOR SOUTHPORT**

---

Record of Proceedings, 15 March 2022

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

 **Mr MOLHOEK** (Southport—LNP) (6.37 pm): As the deputy chair of the Health and Environment Committee I rise to make a contribution on the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021. It was an incredibly interesting and challenging time as we conducted hearings and listened to the various proponents in our consideration of the bill and writing our report on it. I have to say that, as a father and a grandfather now—

**Mr Saunders:** Congratulations.

**Mr MOLHOEK:** I have been a grandfather for four years but I thank the member for that interjection. I know I do not look old enough.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Kelly): Order, member. If you pull out any photos I will ask you to table them; you know that.

**Mr MOLHOEK:** I am not taking any more interjections about my grandfatherly duties.

I knew when this legislation came up that it would be, like so many other pieces of legislation around reef protection, kicked around as one of those issues that would seek to wedge members of this House and political parties within the state of Queensland. I took it upon myself to do a little bit of extra work on the review of this legislation. I had the great privilege of travelling north. I decided that I wanted to meet the canefarmers who are directly affected by this legislation. I also wanted to go and talk with some of the environmental care groups. I had the privilege of spending the best part of a day at the Australian Institute of Marine Science. It is interesting, because all sides of politics seek advantage over the other sides of politics on these issues. The reality is that times have changed. The thing that has surprised me through my travels, in the meetings I have had and the investigation I have done is that both sides of the debate have changed. It is a little bit like Uber to the taxi industry. There is disruptive technology that is impacting on everyone.

The member for Burdekin provided some introductions for me to go and visit some canefarms within the Burdekin region. What we are seeing there is world's best practice. We should be immensely proud of our canefarmers across Queensland, because most of them have already embraced a lot of the legislative changes and, out of necessity, are adopting best management practices because to remain viable there is no alternative. No farmer wants to put more fertiliser on a crop than they need to. No farmer wants to burn more diesel looking after the crop than is absolutely necessary. No farmer wants to waste water.

In the Burdekin I spent some time with the Hesps. The Hesps—Chris and Sonya—are also very involved with the cane industry more broadly. They are perhaps third-generation canefarmers. They have a beautiful family. They want to hand over very sustainable and vibrant farming practices to their children. I was surprised to learn that, while most of the land used to be laser graded, the land is now graded using satellite technology. The camber or the run-off of the cane fields is managed, the water is conserved and the farms are designed to capture the water in pits or dams across the properties where

they actually recycle the water. We hear fairytales about canefarmers just throwing fertiliser around everywhere and about how it runs off into the ocean and destroys the Great Barrier Reef. That sort of thing may have happened 30, 40 or 50 years ago, but it certainly is not happening now because the canefarmers simply cannot afford to run their farms and grow their crops with that kind of waste. Canefarmers in Queensland have become sophisticated business operators. We should be very proud of the work that canefarmers do across our state.

In respect of the Katter party's proposed bill, there are a couple of issues within the bill that I thought were actually sensible. One that particularly concerned me—this is typical of the heavy-handed approach we want to take towards the cane industry and farmers—involved the amount of penalties that would apply to farmers who breach the regulations currently in place. The reality is that there have been no breaches. The canefarmers are actually doing an incredible job with their management practices so it is almost a moot point; however, I think it is quite disturbing that you could effectively dump three or four 44-gallon drums of toxic waste into the Brisbane River and, under the current environmental laws, the maximum penalty would be maybe \$13,000 but, if you were caught spreading a little bit too much fertiliser on your farm—perhaps you exceed the tolerance by half a per cent or one per cent and it could be proven—you could be fined hundreds of thousands of dollars. In terms of the whole issue of penalties that were alluded to in the proposed bill and in the current legislation, it seems a little bit like we got a bit carried away with, 'We really have to make an example of those farmers but it is okay for factories and manufacturers in South-East Queensland to do whatever they want.' I support the amendments proposed by the member for Bonney.

I want to thank a few people. I had the privilege of meeting with the Reef Restoration Foundation and Whitsunday Conservation Council—Tony Fontes and Faye Chapman. I also had the privilege of meeting with Olivia Brodhurst from the Whitsunday Climate Change Innovation Hub. They certainly provided some interesting insights into issues of run-off, the inner reef and the outer reef. They also facilitated the opportunity to go out on one of the research vessels to Stonehaven Bay and to Daydream Island to participate in collecting coral spawn. I have made a few colourful posts about that on my social media that I have had people chat to me about. What an incredible experience to spend an evening in a rubber dinghy with nets, waiting and hoping that the coral would spawn, suddenly seeing all of this coral spawn coming up through the water, literally frothing and bubbling on the surface, and then catching it. On this particular occasion our goal was to net about 20 million eggs. The survival of those eggs is estimated at about 10 per cent.

There are some amazing practices happening on our reef, not just with the capture of coral spawn and then using it to regrow coral but also with the propagation of coral. I saw some amazing things at the Australian Institute of Marine Science. I point out to the House that that institute was established back in the 1970s with bipartisan support from both Liberal-National and Labor governments of the day, at a time when people were talking about wanting to mine for oil on our barrier reef. We have made some great strides forward. At AIMS we also heard from their CEO and some of their key staff. They told us that the Great Barrier Reef is considered to be in the top 10 best maintained reefs in the world. We should be very proud of the work that we do in this House.