




Speech By
Hon. Scott Stewart

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

Record of Proceedings, 22 February 2022

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

 **Hon. SJ STEWART** (Townsville—ALP) (Minister for Resources) (6.54 pm): I rise to strongly oppose the bill that is before the House, the Environmental and Other Legislation (Reversal of Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) Amendment Bill 2021. As the member for Townsville I feel it is important to speak on this bill, as the Great Barrier Reef is right on the city's doorstep. In fact, we have two islands that boast that they live on the Great Barrier Reef—that is, Maggie Island and Palm Island. This bill from the Katter's Australian Party seeks to dismantle the important protections this government has put in place to protect one of our greatest assets. The Great Barrier Reef is one of the major drawcards of Townsville and it is important to both tourists and locals alike.

Mr Deputy Speaker Kelly, you have been to Townsville—you are a Townsville boy—and you know that Magnetic Island is the jewel in Townsville's tourism crown. We need to protect it and we need to protect the reef itself. This is not about demonising North Queensland farmers or the sugar industry; it is about protecting our natural assets like the Great Barrier Reef which everyone wants to do, including our farmers. I would have expected the member for Hinchinbrook to understand that.

As a government we back our primary producers, the Great Barrier Reef and the jobs they support. Despite what the KAP is claiming, you can have your cake and eat it too. We know the Great Barrier Reef supports around 64,000 jobs and injects more than \$6.4 billion into our economy. That is why we are working with the industry to reduce pollution on the reef and help producers make their farms more sustainable and more profitable.

This bill before the House completely ignores important scientific facts. I disagree with the member for Bonney because he continued to say that we are painting farmers as villains. That is incorrect. As we all know, there are some great farmers out there doing some outstanding work with some huge improvements, there are farmers down the other end who are not prepared to do anything, and there are farmers in the middle who are making some changes as we go along. There are farmers on this huge continuum, and that is what this is about. It is about recognising those farmers who are doing the great work but also working out what we need to do to bring those other farmers along to make sure we can have our cake and eat it too.

The current reef protection regulations were introduced in response to the recommendations of the Great Barrier Reef Water Science Taskforce and the best available consensus reef science at the time. Work has been done by a range of well-respected scientists in this space, including many in Townsville from James Cook University and that outstanding institution, the Australian Institute of Marine Science. They are experts in their field and it is important that we listen to the experts when it comes to looking after the Great Barrier Reef and looking after our agricultural sector, which continues to be a traditional strength of our economy.

We know Queensland farmers also want the best for their environment and the land they operate on, which is why the Palaszczuk government continues to support the industry. For more than a decade the government has actively supported and invested in the agricultural sector to increase the voluntary

uptake of improved farming practices. Between 2009 and 2021 more than \$156 million was invested to support the agricultural industry to improve water quality and productivity through industry-led best management practice programs, science and on-ground programs. As a government we are also investing in helping sugarcane farmers upskill by learning about better nutrient management.

I am an old Burdekin boy but I grew up in Brisbane. Many of my family are canefarmers. My brother-in-law is a canefarmer but it does not make me a canefarming expert. My experience comes from holidays when I jumped on the back of a tractor and rammed sugar down the chute so we could plant it. Those days are long gone, thankfully. They are now planting by billets, which is much quicker. It demonstrates that over time things have changed and farmers have changed their practices. What we need to do is continue to change behaviours.

The government has helped 80 sugarcane farmers with this work, which has resulted in stopping about 12,000 kilograms of dissolved inorganic nitrogen running off into the reef. We appreciate the important contribution made by farmers to our economy and we continue to support them as they continue to evolve their practices, like they always have and always will. If this bill was passed, Queensland would go backwards when it comes to looking after the environment and the Great Barrier Reef. Reversing the reef protection regulations would undermine the Palaszczuk government's efforts to improve reef water quality.

Looking after the Great Barrier Reef is incredibly important. Our current reef regulations are integral to looking after the reef. This legislation is not what it seems to be, and that is why we will be opposing it.