




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 15 March 2022

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

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.50 pm): It is important that we continue to raise the issues of regulations that attack our farmers. I welcome the opportunity to talk about the reef regulations. I also take the opportunity to talk about the sugarcane industry which has been vilified over a long period under Labor governments. We have to remember that farmers are the best custodians of their land; it is not governments and it is not bureaucracy. If I can stand up and talk about the great people in my electorate, I will do that every day. Our canegrowers recognise the need to reduce the impact of farming on the nitrogen and chemical loads in our waterways, but at every turn they are attacked. The last time Labor introduced reef legislation, the stress and anxiety was evident on farmers who were facing that brutal, heavy-handed legislation. I will talk more about that later.

Of the many problems with the drafting of the Katter bill before us today—and one is the complete rollback of the regulation to 2009—one is the lack of acknowledgement of the work that has happened in environmental and technical advancement in best practice over the last 13 years. I am proud of those advancements and those growers who have progressed work with accreditation programs. All of those advancements would be lost. The LNP amendments recognise and protect those growers. The Katter bill retains the extreme penalties for breaching the regulations of up to \$13,000, so amendments are needed to make sure we have some sort of a level playing field or accreditation for our growers.

As consumers, corporates and businesses embrace sustainable products and socially responsible production, how can we justify the potential risks to the industries that many of us in this place represent if we are perceived to be removing reef protections? Smartcane BMP meets the requirements of international and corporate sustainability standards. It is important we think about our markets and where our growers send their sugar, including Bonsucro, Czarnikow, VIVE, ProTerra and Coca-Cola Amatil. That would be at risk if we start to talk about rolling back reef regulations. Policies need to promote and celebrate the excellent work our growers do to ensure we future-proof the industry, not put that industry at risk.

The KAP bill also gives an independent regulator very broad powers. We know there is a problem when the Environmental Defenders Office is supporting the establishment of something like this. It ends up being harder on farmers, with organisations always breathing down their necks.

Mr Andrew interjected.

Mr BENNETT: It is a bit hard when the member for Hinchinbrook is right behind me. I am not sure if he is going to jump up and slap me, but I take it on good faith that he will not. It is important that I make this contribution because I am from a sugarcane growing area. I am from a irrigated high-value agriculture base, so it is very important that those people in my electorate understand my rationale when I am talking about my objections to the KAP bill.

The number of growers accredited in Smartcane BMP continues to grow and we will double numbers. That is about recognition of those growers. Canegrowers also brought in the Cane Changer project to better understand the behaviour and needs of growers. There is no acknowledgement of that, but it is leading to increased adoption of best management practices.

I want to make sure I am on the record as saying that the Burnett Mary catchment should never have been included in the 2019 broader reef regulations. There are many things about that particular issue of the Burnett Mary. It is so far below the Southern Great Barrier Reef that it does not even impact on the reef, but we did not get our outcomes when we put that to the committee and the government at the time. The Burnett Mary catchments are outside the Great Barrier Reef. It is 70 kilometres from the mouth of the Burnett River to Lady Elliott Island, which is the most southern coral cay of the Great Barrier Reef, so it is a long way. Based on Bureau of Meteorology current forecasting models, the ocean currents from Mackay flow south so there is very little risk to the reef from the Burnett River, the Kolan River and the Burrum River.

There has been no formal monitoring of the inshore coral reefs. After my trips to the ocean with my grandkids over Christmas, I can assure members that there are a lot of soft corals replenishing and there are a lot of inshore corals, so I do not accept the science that is being used to justify it. I want to do a shout-out to the Burnett Mary Regional Group and the Gidarjil Sea Rangers who are monitoring these inshore reef areas. That is making sure that science and the facts are articulated. There is no marine water quality monitoring in the Burnett Mary region, with the nearest marine monitoring station at North Keppel Island which is 235 kilometres to the north.

Based on the water quality target information for the five subcatchments I mentioned before, we are really up against it when we try to justify the issues. It is also a big slap in the face to those growers who put so much into making sure that there are low levels and minimal run-off. They do not acknowledge that over 70 per cent of all farm run-off in my area goes through at least one tailwater dam before it enters a waterway. The majority of these dams were built before 2004.

Six Easy Steps and nutrient management workshops were developed in Bundaberg to assist growers to understand their soil tests. I have to say that none of these farmers put fertiliser on wanting it to wash down a creek, yet they are accused of being vandals, and that is why we are insulted by this. They have been doing soil monitoring and have been putting in probes without any help. I want to give a shout-out to the 100 leading growers that have received a nutrient management plan in 2013, 2016 and 2019. The crown of thorns are not an issue for us. The Swains Reefs are over 250 kilometres out to sea and do not have the issues that are being reported.

I want to quickly talk about the 2019 bill in the time I have left. The bill gave the government more power and we are waiting for that heavy hand to be applied. It is not reasonable that a growers' ability to farm profitability is affected by legislation. Minimum standards for sugar cane already exist in law so there are questions about why we needed it more under section 81, particularly when there was no RIS done to support bringing that in.

I want to acknowledge the Six Easy Steps program. As I said before, it is about trying to make sure nitrogen is used efficiently. The proposed regulation of sugarcane growing in the Burnett Mary region is unjustified based on its low significance for reef water quality outcomes. It has been proved time and time again that we do not have those issues that have been reported. Section 79 of the bill brought in the Burnett Mary, and as long as I am here I will be fighting to get that removed. The bill provided the government with unrestrained power to demand and use data. I remember AgForce and their very stoic protest which deleted all of that. I still congratulate them for that day when they stood up to big government and big bureaucracy.

In closing, I take this opportunity to congratulate our growers who contribute so much to our community. I will continue to stick up for our farmers and fight against the vilification that continues to be applied. I want to put on the record my thoughts to those growers who have approached me and my office about supporting the Katter bill. My interpretation of what is being proposed does not do them any favours. Those growers need to make sure they continue to work strongly and use their innovation and sustainable outcomes to ensure the Bundaberg region continues to be a big sugar grower. It is not quite as big as Whitsunday—

Mrs Gilbert: Mackay.

Mr BENNETT: Sorry, Mackay. We have been reminded a couple of times that we are only of low volume. It is important that I acknowledge the member for Mackay and the team that put together last night's Friends of Sugar. It is ironic that we are here today talking about this. I know that this is about

water quality and reef regulations, but the people who usually get attacked and caught up in this mess are those in the canegrowing industry. It is important that they were there last night. The Friends of Sugar is an important initiative to bring parliamentarians, the milling industry and canegrowers together in a more collaborative way so we can better understand the way forward and ensure the sustainability and viability of the sugar industry. I want to do a shout-out to the Isis mill and the Bundaberg sugar guys who were there last night. I acknowledge all the other mills as well, but the Isis and the Bundaberg guys are the ones who vote for me so I have to make sure I give them the plug. In all seriousness, we will continue to fight for those farmers and the sector that puts so many billions of dollars into our economy.

Mr Knuth interjected.

Mr BENNETT: I will take that interjection from the Katter boys. If they had sat down and worked with some sensibility about what this could have looked like, we could have put canefarmers together—

Mr Knuth: You supported this eight years ago.

Mr BENNETT: I take that interjection. Eight years was a long time ago when we have moved positively forward as an industry. I am sticking up for my canefarmers and I will make sure that what we do in the future does not allow pieces of legislation like this to potentially put them all at risk.