




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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NATURE CONSERVATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.10 pm): At the outset I want to thank the Queensland Beekeepers' Association, which has worked tirelessly to obtain an extension to access to our national parks and protected estates for another 20 years. I give a big shout-out to Jo and the team at the Queensland Beekeepers' Association for supporting the Bundaberg Region Promotion Night for the past six or seven years. They have been there every time we have run it. The event gives us a great opportunity to engage with members of parliament and others on the importance of bees. The association's perseverance in pursuing this outcome over many years highlighted for me the importance of access to publicly owned resources such as state forests and national parks.

I want to thank the beekeepers who made considered and insightful submissions to the committee. It was evident and consistent throughout the submissions that, if the government had continued with their proposal to exclude beekeeping from national parks, there would be a significant consequence. The success of the Queensland horticultural industry was highlighted many times in submissions to the committee, time and time again proving that the industry's success is supported by the pollination that comes from many healthy bee colonies. We know that the beekeeping industry's ability to supply those colonies is maintained by its access to rich native forests.

The committee heard that state forests and national parks remain critical to food production because the resource remains scarce outside those protected estates and that is due to many factors, including extreme weather events, urban clearing and expanding agricultural development. While in Queensland the value of honey and honey bee products might seem to be a modest amount at \$64 million, the industry contributes significantly to the Queensland economy—it is estimated that it contributes about \$14 billion—through pollination, honey production and boosting investment and employment, particularly in regional areas.

In areas all over Queensland and in the Burnett, agriculture is experiencing a huge expansion. Large numbers of juvenile tree crops such as macadamias and avocados are being planted each and every year. Stakeholders make their decisions trusting that beekeepers will be able to meet future demand and that they will be able to access strong and healthy hives for pollination. Many people underestimate the vital role that pollination plays in producing food and fibre. Much has been said here today and some of us have learned even more about pollination. Tree crops such as almond, macadamia, avocado, mango, apple and citrus all rely on bees. Fruit crops such as berries, melons and tomatoes as well as pumpkins, carrots, onions and other vegetables rely on bees. Vegetable seed crops and fodder crops such as clover and lucerne, as well as broadacre crops such as canola, beans, peas and sunflowers, rely on bees, and on it goes.

Areas of natural environment provide bees with protection and balanced nutrition to prepare for and recover from the important process of pollination. If we want to provide the food and fibre we need to feed the nation, we must accelerate Queensland's agriculture production. The industry and government must initiate long-term plans to futureproof our state's ability to continue to pollinate, grow and prosper with certainty.

Population growth and the COVID migration have seen significant development requests to progress many existing greenfield sites and, along with severe weather events, droughts, bushfires and floods events, this emphasises the need for there to be more diverse access to state protected assets. We know there are many examples where beekeepers work closely with other agricultural and horticultural enterprises when the application of chemicals provides challenges, making some areas unsafe for bees. Again, areas of natural protected estate provide bees with protection and balanced nutrition to prepare for and recover from all of those different situations.

I want to address the issue of setting an arbitrary 20-year extension on beekeeping permits. It is important that we acknowledge the amendment that has been put forward. I think it would be a tragedy if we do not allow a balance so beekeepers can plan their businesses. Twenty years will be upon us before we know it and I have no doubt that a different parliament will be here making this same sort of decision. As urban sprawl and the challenges facing our communities continue, access to protected estates will be needed to make sure that we continue to grow.

With something so important I question the reference to the cardinal principle and the arguments provided against having access to our protected estates. While the member for Maiwar is not here, I give a reminder to those who were talking about not supporting the bill. Those who advocate for the removal of bees from parks and state forests seem to forget that beekeepers are an asset in terms of surveillance while accessing forests. Commercial honey bee colonies are placed in forests for a period of only six weeks, every two to five years. Surely we should be able to work together. These are our protected estates. They are Queenslanders' protected estates. Why should not a very important part of our industry have access for such a minimal period? Those opposed seem to forget just how poorly our protected estates are managed. They are overgrown with feral weeds and overrun by feral pigs and pests. They are subject to intense wildfires as a result of a lack of mitigation and back-burning. I would suggest that does more damage than allowing honey bees into protected estates.

In closing, I give a big shout-out to the Queensland Beekeepers' Association for their tenacity in this project. They have given a lot of support to the people of my area. We talk about these things that are a little bit in the shadows and it is important to recognise just how important bees are. During COVID when the borders were closed, we realised that the migration of bees from northern New South Wales into the Burnett and Wide Bay was extremely important. For a long time the continuation of that process was on edge. The minister worked well with the industry and that needs to be acknowledged. Minister Furner rallied really quickly and we got the beehives into the area. It goes to show that sometimes we forget how important honey bees are and how important support for this legislation and, I suggest, the amendment is to Queensland's economy and Australia's food production.