




Speech By
Ann Leahy

MEMBER FOR WARREGO

Record of Proceedings, 14 September 2023

WATER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms LEAHY** (Warrego—LNP) (4.00 pm): I rise to contribute to the debate on the Water Legislation Amendment Bill 2022. I thank the members of the State Development and Regional Industries Committee for their consideration of the bill. The primary objective of the bill is to amend the Water Act to establish a regulatory framework for implementing Queensland's strengthened policy for measuring the take of non-urban water. The bill includes amendments to the Water Act, the Water Supply (Safety and Reliability) Act, and the South-East Queensland Water (Distribution and Retail Restructuring) Act to improve the operational efficiency of these acts.

The bill will amend the Water Act to make minor operational and technical amendments to the framework for the managing of underground water which is administered by the Department of Environment and Science. I place on record that I support the amendments proposed by the shadow minister for water, Deb Frecklington. These amendments will clarify that stock and domestic use from overland flow is excluded from metering across the entirety of the state. This is because there are significant costs to these water users; however, their water take is low and, therefore, they are very low-risk users.

I seek the minister's advice regarding his assurances around stock and domestic entitlements. Will these assurances extend to local governments, who often have water supply entitlements for domestic supply? Will they have to have telemetry and water metering for their domestic supply? Many do have licences for that—even in the Murray-Darling Basin—and it is particularly important that they have access to that water.

The bill proposes to expand existing arrangements to broaden the type of equipment and devices that may be required to ensure takes of water can be measured. This includes overland flow. The bill allows for the installation of telemetry in some areas. In most situations it is a simple thing to measure and a measurement device, such as a meter, can be used to measure the volume of water taken—for example, where the water is pumped directly from a river or an aquifer. In other situations, measuring the take is more complex and requires a combination of different measurement devices or methods to calculate the amount of water that is taken as part of the measurement system.

New section 217E, 'Using measurement devices', clarifies the measurement requirements that apply to a holder of the relevant authorisation in relation to using a measurement device. The measurement device, for example, a water meter, must be attached to the works through which the water is being taken under the authorisation. Depending on the specific set-up of the works and how the information about the water will be reported, this requirement may mean that both a meter and a telemetry device will need to be attached to the works. There are considerable areas in my electorate that have overland flow which water harvesters use and harvest into storages. I would be interested if the minister can advise how many water entitlement holders will have to have multiple devices—meters and additional telemetry devices—in the Murray-Darling Basin section of Queensland. Has the government done any modelling on how many devices will be needed, given the government understands that there are a little more than 100 overland flow entitlements in Queensland? Further,

can the government advise how many devices a Commonwealth water entitlement holder will have to install in the Queensland section of the Murray-Darling Basin? That is particularly important not only to the water management plan but also to the entire Murray-Darling Basin.

I wish to bring to the attention of the House important concerns raised in the Border Rivers Food & Fibre submission to the bill. They are very aware of particularly complex licensing arrangements, both in Queensland and in New South Wales, because they deal with two different sets of water entitlements. They state that, in their experience, they would like to highlight some of the risks to the current implementation plan in the practical delivery of metering in the proposed time frames. In the New South Wales experience, there physically are not enough approved meters available on the market to be installed, with a significant number on long-term backorder in New South Wales—before we add in the new demand from Queensland.

There is also a shortage of qualified people to install what meters do become available. Those people are required to travel out to remote areas because the Murray-Darling Basin in Queensland is not a small area; it is a very large geographical area. Due to the ongoing flooding issues—we would love a few of those at the moment—there are also physical constraints involved in accessing some of the pump sites to install the meters.

They would flag that there is a risk to the telemetry requirement. Border Rivers Food & Fibre explained that in New South Wales they have had the experience that telemetry just will not work in some locations because there is no connection to the telecommunications that are required. That happens quite regularly, unfortunately, across the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin area. A straightforward exemption process should be instituted as part of any policy. I ask the minister: in circumstances where telemetry will not work, has an exemption been considered as part of this legislation?

The amendment to section 23A refers to the reviewing and changing of service provider registration details. Clause 57 amends section 23A of the Water Supply (Safety and Reliability) Act to make it clear that service providers must give the regulator notice of a review conducted of their registration details, including whether or not the details have changed, to ensure information is kept up to date, within reasonable time frames.

I note that the submission of the Central Highlands Regional Council raises concerns with clause 57. In their view, it proposes to require all service providers—including local government service providers—to provide the regulator with an annual notice even if there has been no change to their service provider registration details. This creates an unnecessary administrative burden on the local government workforce, who at this time in that sector are experiencing a 35 per cent vacancy rate. Councils submit that it introduces unnecessary red tape. Perhaps the minister may be able to explain to the House and to all councils in Queensland the purpose of this additional red tape and how Queensland local governments were consulted in relation to this change. Does increasing this red tape increase operational efficiency?

I now turn to some other aspects of operational efficiency. I have been contacted by one of my constituents who is trying to build a ring tank in the Maranoa Regional Council area of the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin. After what he has gone through, I did not have the heart to tell him that this legislation will probably increase his costs a bit more. His ring tank will be 1,000 megalitres and will supply centre pivots so that the family business can become drought resilient by growing their own stockfeed. Keep in mind that all this family is trying to do is droughtproof their business. Unfortunately, due to the Labor government, they will not get any drought freight subsidy, which is why they are so keen to do their own on-farm droughtproofing and grow their own stockfeed.

First, they put in an application to the State Assessment and Referral Agency, SARA. After taking \$14,000, SARA told them to go to the Maranoa Regional Council. The council then told them to go back to SARA. Now they are on their way back to SARA, and it will cost them another \$25,000 just to re-lodge their application. Nearly \$40,000 later, they still do not even have an approval to build their ring tank, let alone the chance to droughtproof their property. When family businesses are trying to droughtproof they should be encouraged. The process should be streamlined. Governments should not be trying to clip the ticket to this extent, when family farming businesses are simply trying to establish their drought resilience.

This bill deals a lot with the Queensland section of the Murray-Darling Basin. I have some further questions, given the announcement from the federal Labor government about their ambitious world-leading initiative for water across Australia. I table for the interest of the House a media release from the federal Labor government.

Tabled paper: Media release, dated 27 April 2023, from the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Hon. Linda Burney MP, titled 'Delivering water ownership for First Nations' [1341](#).

In the Queensland section of the Murray-Darling we are dealing with a water system that is fully allocated and one that will now be fully measured. Given the proposals from the federal government, can the minister advise if First Nations will have ownership, access and management rights to existing allocated water and will they have these rights to the Commonwealth water entitlement held in the Murray-Darling Basin? Can the minister advise how communities in the Queensland portion of the basin will be consulted in relation to these proposals by the federal government? These are important questions that the state government must answer given the intentions of its federal government counterparts. In fact, the legislation that we are debating today relates to the Murray-Darling Basin and the minister needs to put on record very clearly what the intentions are and what the consultation will be, because my constituents in the Murray-Darling Basin and my water users, which encompass most of the Queensland portion of the Murray-Darling Basin, would like to know answers to these questions. I look forward to the minister's responses in his summing-up.