



Speech By
Hon. Glenn Butcher

MEMBER FOR GLADSTONE

Record of Proceedings, 25 May 2023

WATER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

 **Hon. GJ BUTCHER** (Gladstone—ALP) (Minister for Regional Development and Manufacturing and Minister for Water) (5.38 pm): I move—

That the bill be now read a second time.

I would like to thank the State Development and Regional Industries Committee for its review of the Water Legislation Amendment Bill 2022. I thank them for the work they do. In addition to holding two public hearings, the committee received 17 submissions from a range of peak industries, regional and environmental groups included. I would like to thank everyone who took part in the committee process along the way, particularly those members of that committee who were there for those hearings. The committee tabled its report on 9 December 2022, with the government's response tabled on 9 March 2023. The committee made four recommendations, including that the bill be passed, and I thank the committee for its support of the bill across both sides.

At its core, this bill is about strengthening water measurement across Queensland. In particular, it establishes a clear and transparent framework to implement Queensland's strengthened non-urban water management policy. This bill will improve the way that water take is measured and reported across the state which is a milestone in our government's commitment to improving water management and compliance here in Queensland. Strengthened measurement and reporting of water take will also help us meet our Murray-Darling Basin commitments in full.

The committee's second recommendation was for the department to monitor costs and transition time as the regulations and the guidelines are rolled out. I want to assure stakeholders that the strengthened measurement policy was, as its very core, intended to strike the important balance between improving water measurement and minimising costs for water users. My department will carefully look at costs and availability of suitable measurement devices as part of the rollout of the measurement policy annually. I also would like to make sure that the industry's ability to meet increased demand for measurement devices and validation services is monitored, and that it gives as many Queensland businesses as possible a chance to play their part in this process along the way.

There is also further work underway about when pattern approved meters may be required for those larger water allocations in Queensland. This is in direct response to feedback about large pattern approved meters as we heard along the way.

There are many benefits to the telemetry when it comes to water management. However, I acknowledge telemetry may be a change for some water users in the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin. Recognising this, the Palaszczuk and Albanese governments have come together to subsidise the cost of installing telemetry equipment for water users in the Queensland Murray-Darling Basin.

Preparing measurement plans, where they are required, will also be a new process for some water users. Again, the supportive and educational approach being developed by my department will enable water users to use their existing on-farm measurement devices and infrastructure which I know was an important part of some of these discussions that were had with those water users.

The committee's third recommendation is for the department to provide the Water Engagement Forum with exposure drafts of supporting regulations and those standards in advance of this implementation, and that a review of regulations be conducted after a period of no more than five years. I once again thank the committee for acknowledging the constructive and collaborative approach taken by my department and the Water Engagement Forum.

I certainly want to take the opportunity now to thank the Water Engagement Forum for all the work that they have been doing in relation to this bill moving forward. This consultative approach has helped members understand how the Water Regulation amendments will certainly work together with the Water Act amendments in the bill to create the framework necessary to implement the strengthened measurement requirements for this. Work on this committee recommendation is already underway and a draft of Water Regulation amendments was recently provided to the Water Engagement Forum for their feedback.

In relation to a review of regulations being conducted after a period of no more than five years, we will do it sooner. The Water Regulation is due to be remade by 2026 and we will conduct that review then, sooner than five years. With annual reporting on the progress of implementation, any issues with the regulation can be identified and they can be addressed at that time. This progress reporting will be publicly available on the department's website.

The committee's fourth recommendation is that the department develop and publish a clear framework that specifies how reported data will be collected, used, distributed and published.

Mr McDonald: A very good recommendation.

Mr BUTCHER: I will take that interjection from the member for Lockyer, one of the members on the committee. It certainly is a very good recommendation coming forward. Data privacy affects all of us, no matter who we are and how we interact with government. Access to better water take information for both the department and water users is an important benefit of the proposed measurement requirements in this bill.

For the department, information about water use is critical to understand water availability in Queensland, and to make informed water allocation and planning decisions into the future. The better information the department receives, the better the information we can provide to water users to meet their needs. For example, this can include information about their water use, their water entitlements and about water they can buy or sell on the market. As I move around the state and regional Queensland, it certainly is all about how they can get access to that extra water if it is available at that time on the market. We have done a lot of work as a department to make sure those opportunities for those irrigators are certainly available for them.

Queensland's Information Privacy Act 2009 sets out the protection of personal information collected and held by Queensland government agencies and outlines how personal information must be managed. We take this very seriously. We want to make sure that that data certainly is protected for those users. The department will ensure that the collection, use and storage of data meets the requirements of the Information Privacy Act here in Queensland.

Once again, I thank the committee again for their consideration of the bill and for the points that they raised in their recommendations. Fair and sustainable access to water is vital for Queensland's regional communities. It drives economic growth and job creation and supports social and environmental outcomes for these communities.

The primary aim of the Water Legislation Amendment Bill 2022 is to set up a clear and transparent regulatory framework to implement Queensland's strengthened non-urban water measurement policy. Implementation of the policy will improve the way that water take is measured and reported right across the state. This will provide more accurate information about how much water is being taken from our precious water resources so they can be managed sustainably, not only now but also long into the future.

The measurement requirements will apply to water users with a volumetric entitlement to take surface water or underground water. For water users who take water directly from a river or groundwater aquifer, this will mean attaching a meter to their pump or ensuring existing meters meet the meter standards here in Queensland. Where water take is more complex, the water user will need to describe the details of their measurement system in a measurement plan for that property. Measurement plans will be required for entitlements to take overland flow water in catchments in the Queensland

Murray-Darling Basin. Overland flow take in these catchments is significant and can amount to up to 40 per cent of all water consumed. These measurement plans will improve our ability to understand the impact of this take on river flows and water availability for other users so it can be managed more effectively.

The bill also makes amendments to improve the way water users report the amount of water that they take under their entitlements. For some water users, this will mean installing telemetry devices on their meters in Queensland. Telemetry devices transmit metered water use data in real time. They are very useful for monitoring the take that is time-and-event based, for example, where water may only be taken where certain water flow conditions occur. The strengthened reporting requirements will ensure that the department receives more detailed information about water take to make better water resource planning and management decisions across the board.

This will help stimulate economic development in regional communities; support businesses to thrive, expand and diversify; and ensure our precious water resources are managed sustainably for the benefit of all water users and our environment. The government is serious about strengthening water measurement in Queensland. The amendments in this bill will support appropriate action where water is taken and those important measurement requirements are not met. This bill before the House is a clear demonstration that the Palaszczuk government is delivering on its commitments to strengthen water measurement in Queensland and it is meeting its national commitment to the Murray-Darling Basin.

During the committee hearings the Inspector-General of Water Compliance for the Murray-Darling Basin stated that he welcomed Queensland's strengthened water measurement framework, congratulating Queensland on establishing arrangements for telemetry and measurement plans for measuring overland flow in Queensland. It was noted that this is a significant step towards improving water management in both Queensland and the whole northern basin. I must say I have taken the opportunity to visit the northern basin and seen firsthand how great this water system is in Queensland and we want to protect it.

The bill that I present today also includes amendments to other aspects of Queensland's water legislation portfolio. These amendments will ensure water laws remain effective and fit for purpose. To achieve this outcome, the bill makes several administrative amendments to the Water Act. The bill amends the current water licence process to ensure the chief executive can consider certain licence applications. This will protect the water rights of other users, environmental water needs and the public interest as well.

The bill modernises administration of category 1 water authority boards to bring them into line with other government boards with similar governance responsibilities. In particular, the amendments will ensure that swift action can be taken to address poor performance or bad behaviour of board members. This is important for safeguarding service delivery and accountability of these organisations that manage significant state owned assets and large capital investment programs in Queensland.

Minor operational changes and technical amendments to underground water management under chapter 3 of the Water Act are also included. This will improve the operation of the framework administered by the Department of Environment and Science. These amendments are brought forward on behalf of the Minister for the Environment and the Great Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister for Multicultural Affairs.

The bill also amends the water supply act to clarify dam safety and drinking water provisions. Dam safety amendments will ensure that the emergency action plans for Queensland's 114 referable dams are reviewed and approved well ahead of the start of the wet season. I am sure that the communities that are in the vicinity of those 114 referable dams will want to know of their emergency action plans well before the wet season. This will ensure that dam operators are well prepared and can readily respond to unforeseen circumstances, and Queenslanders know so much about that.

Other amendments to the water supply act include improving water service provider registration, reviews of customer service standards, reporting, auditing drinking and recycled water plans, and clarifying offence provisions. These amendments will allow the department to work more effectively and more efficiently. As I said, this bill is all about ensuring Queensland's water legislation operates efficiently and continues to reflect the principles of best practice regulation.

The bill will be supported by future amendments to the Water Regulation. This will include the detail to support implementation of the strengthened water measurement policy. As I outlined earlier, consultation is already underway with the Water Engagement Forum. I now turn my attention to an amendment I will move during consideration in detail to clause 17 of the bill.

Mr Stevens: Keep it coming!

Mr BUTCHER: I will take that interjection from the member.

Honourable members interjected.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: Order, members. There is so much more goodwill in the chamber since I was here the last time. I do not know what has happened in the intervening time.

Mr BUTCHER: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker, for your protection! Prompted by stakeholder feedback, the amendment clarifies the process for deciding an application for a water licence dealing. The bill currently provides that the chief executive is not required to publish—

Mr LANGBROEK: Mr Acting Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I draw your attention to standing order 244(6). The member for Lockyer did not acknowledge you as he crossed the chamber.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: The point of order is upheld. Do not do it again! We will continue business without the jocularity from here on.

Mr BUTCHER: I just have to find my place now! The bill currently provides that the chief executive is not required to publish a public notice of an application to add, remove or change a condition of a water licence if satisfied that granting the application will not have an impact on other interests or water needs. The amendment will ensure this also applies to the renewal of a water licence or reinstatement of an expired water licence.

In acknowledgement that the public views on these applications have already been sought and considered as part of the original application, this amendment will reduce the administrative burden and red tape for straightforward renewal and reinstatement of applications. A related amendment clarifies that a public notice must be published if granting the application would or could result in additional take or impact. This will affirm protections proposed by the bill for other interests and third parties.

As I am nearing the end of my speech, I just want to take the opportunity to thank the committee once again for the work they did, including members on both sides of the House, in making sure that my first bill in this House is heard. I would like to thank the committee members for their efforts in getting through this bill and taking the opportunity to meet with those stakeholders and irrigators who reported to the committee during that time. They certainly did a fantastic job in doing that, led by the chair of that committee, Chris Whiting.

Mr STEVENS: Mr Acting Speaker, I rise to a point of order. We are not allowed in the House to mention members by their names.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: The point of order is upheld—please use correct parliamentary titles.

Mr BUTCHER: As I said, not only was it the committee that went through the process as they do, but the secretariat also spent a lot of their time supporting our committees. The support of the secretariat and sometimes other support that is around as well as witnesses who came in to the public hearings does mean a lot to the committee members in ensuring there is the opportunity for them to get the good information.

An opposition member: And Hansard.

Mr BUTCHER: I will take that interjection. Hansard certainly does play a big part, and I acknowledge the Hansard ladies in the House tonight who have to listen to my dragged out second reading speech.

In all seriousness, the committee certainly engaged with the department. They certainly engaged far and wide to make sure they had all the information they needed for this bill. As we heard, four of those recommendations were supported by both sides of the House to make sure we can get this bill—

An honourable member interjected.

Mr BUTCHER: I will take that interjection—to make sure that this bill can move forward today. At the end of the day, I think it is a special time for us that we are now supporting this as we move forward with the second reading of this bill. I know the member for Nanango is certainly keen to get in and talk to this bill as well. I know how passionate she is about water in Queensland because we certainly hear about it. It is unfortunate that the member for Southern Downs is not here because I am sure he would be supportive—

Honourable members: He is.

Mr BUTCHER: He is. He is that interested in this bill he is still in the chamber.

Mr STEVENS: Mr Acting Speaker, I rise to a point of order. As we know, we are not allowed to talk about the absence or otherwise of members in the House.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER: There is no point of order. I call the minister to conclude his remarks.

Mr BUTCHER: As I said, the amendments I have been talking about are consistent with the policy intent of this bill. I would like to take this opportunity now to say that I commend the bill to the House.