




Speech By
James Lister

MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS

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WATER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (4.40 pm): I proudly represent the electorate of Southern Downs which is entirely within the northern basin of the Murray-Darling system. When I talk about this dam—I have dams on my mind; I will get to that. When I speak to this bill, I will be speaking with the authentic voice of people who have skin in the game when it comes to these things.

Southern Downs produces a great deal of food and fibre through irrigation from the MacIntyre, the Severn, the Condamine rivers and others. I was very pleased to see that the Border Rivers Food & Fibre group that represents many of the producers in my electorate and also our neighbours in New South on the other side of the MacIntyre and Dumaresq rivers made a submission. They, like others, had some complaints about this bill. They are broadly supportive—like AgForce and the opposition—of the intention to, as properly as possible, manage this limited resource and do that through measuring the take of water from the system. But a lot comes down to the regulations which we have not seen at this stage.

One point AgForce made is that the bill will provide for the chief executive to use any means necessary to further the interests of the act. That is a very broad ranging authority that is granted to the CEO—a non-elected person. AgForce rightly took umbrage with that and said that there needs to be consultation along the lines of exactly how that will be used and what such a broad ranging power would be applied to.

A number of speakers, particularly on this side of the House, have expressed concern about metering and meters and some of the practical difficulties in establishing a metering system in the time that is available. We are supposed to see the validation of meters before the end of this year. I know that in my electorate of Southern Downs we simply do not have the availability of contractors and qualified personnel to conduct a full-scale rollout across so many different properties in order to embrace metering as required by this bill. I am obviously very keen to see that looked at. I would ask the government to be realistic about that. I will have more to say about timings and rollouts and my experience with departments in the past as I get into my speech.

There is also the question of metering the stock and domestic usage of landholders. The reason we have always had stock and domestic usage unmetered is that it has always been seen as a relatively low-risk take of water. It has been broadly accepted that everybody is entitled to have water at their place and to water their animals. We are not talking about taking water for irrigating crops or for aquaculture or something like that. We are talking about water for flushing the toilet at home, for washing the car, for giving the cattle a drink. Like many of this bill's stakeholders, I object to the idea that that water would be metered. I suspect that the metering of it would lead to the obvious conclusion one day that it be charged for, and that is something that definitely scares the people in my neck of the woods. I will certainly be supporting the amendments to be introduced by my honourable friend the member for Nanango, the shadow minister for water.

When talking about implementation, consultation and so forth, I would like to inform the House of an experience that the irrigators in north-eastern part of my electorate, in the upper Condamine, had in 2019, under then minister, Dr Lynham. Dr Lynham was a good guy but he took a very long time to bring the department to heel after an event involving irrigators in the upper Condamine basalt and alluvial aquifers.

There were 900 irrigators in that system who received letters dated 26 June 2019 stating that by 1 July 2019 they must have meters on their bores. All these letters arrived after 1 July, which was a cartoonistic and comical bungle by the department. The department doubled down and said, 'We'll work with them' and so forth. I had to get on to the minister twice to get something done about that. To make matters worse, the letter that had been issued, with zero consultation with the irrigators in that system, said that until they had a water meter installed they could only take 80 per cent of their allocation and only on two days per week. There was a roster sent out to them for them to take it at night or during the day. It was an utterly ridiculous imposition because irrigators were irrigating onion crops or pasture for dairy. To have a restriction like that imposed on them with zero consultation and with negative three days notice—because these letters arrived on 3 July—showed just how badly some of these things can be done.

This minister is a good guy as well. Can I ask the minister and the department to make sure that the consultation is as flexible as possible when it comes to the rolling out of meters, noting the experience I had in my electorate was that we simply did not have the stock of meters and those who were qualified and capable of installing them just did not exist in the numbers necessary to comply in that space of time. I urge the government, the department and the minister to be flexible and understanding of users of water. This march to metering and telemetry, whilst on paper is a good thing, has to be done well. If it is not done well, it will be an impost on the individual irrigators who are just trying to make a buck. They are trying to feed their families and employ the people who work in their operations.

Lastly, I would like to respond to two things that the member for Logan just said. He said that the National Party has never built a dam. It is difficult to build a dam in Queensland without the consent of the Queensland government. Irrespective of how much money the federal government—I know Barnaby Joyce and after him David Littleproud have been in my electorate in their then ministerial capacities with huge wads of money available for the state to build Emu Swamp Dam—the state would not do it. Even paying almost nothing, the state would not do it. The state has the ability to build dams and the Commonwealth does not.

I say to this state government that blaming a federal government that has gone for their failure to build a dam is pretty rich. I know that it would be laughed at, at best, in my electorate of Southern Downs. I would say to my honourable friend the member for Logan that he would be most welcome to come to the Stanthorpe RSL and advance those views, but I think he would be tarred and feather—he might be honeyed and feathered or wine and feathered or something like, but he would not escape. He would know very well what the people of my electorate think.

I reiterate that the rollout of meters is a responsible and necessary thing. It is something that has been coming for a long time. Most users understand that this is coming. However, the rollout cannot be an automated process following a piece legislation. It has to work with people who are the bedrock of our society—those producing our food and fibre, employing people and themselves in order to pay taxes, taxes so that politicians and public servants can have a job. If we do not look after the people who look after us when it comes to our food and fibre and we do not look after the economy upon which all of the services that we wish to deliver from this House depend, then we are going to go backwards.

As I say, I support the bill and I will definitely be supporting the amendments which will be moved by my honourable friend the member for Nanango.