




Speech By
Stephen Andrew

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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STATE DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INDUSTRIES COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr ANDREW** (Mirani—PHON) (3.16 pm): I rise to speak on the Auditor-General's report on regulating dam safety in Queensland. Overall, the Auditor-General's examination of dam safety in Queensland found that critical elements of a well-functioning regulator were not being performed and that compliance with its regulatory processes were not being consistently enforced. Dams pose a significant risk to those living and working downstream, as well as to the environment and economy, if they are not maintained and operated correctly.

Dams can fail or malfunction, releasing large volumes of water as well as many other substances into our waterways. Although such failures are infrequent, their impacts can be catastrophic, which is why this report deserves to be taken very seriously by the government. The report makes a number of recommendations which the department claims to have actioned and implemented. However, many of those actions appear to be more bureaucratic and process driven than real or targeted measures to improve dam safety practices in Queensland. It is important to remember that a failure in regulatory processes is often symptomatic of much more systemic problems in the underlying program overall. That is why I believe a much more considered response to this report is called for.

I note from the committee's report that the department has since engaged a 'nationally recognised expert' in dam safety to review the department's work processes and practices. The review identified a need for 'greater emphasis on compliance to better support the engineering and other technical expertise' and that 'any reduction in the technical capacity of the dam safety regulator was to be avoided'. This strongly suggests there may be an issue with under-resourcing, particularly in regards to adequate levels of 'engineering and other technical expertise'. The Auditor-General's report hints at the same thing.

I also note the committee's advice that three new positions have been added to the dam safety team: an engineering manager, a principal compliance officer and a senior project officer for information systems. These appear to be managerial positions rather than technical ones. The department should consider recruiting additional flood engineers to ensure there are sufficient flood engineers to carry out dam safety audits and other regulatory activities each year. Formal flood event training programs and simulations for engineers should also be regularly conducted to ensure the flood operations centre is keeping pace with the latest in dam safety best practice.

Another suggestion would be for a technical review committee to be set up—one made up of independent experts in hydrology, meteorology and dam operations. This committee would be tasked with examining all technical work and supervising and reviewing all decisions made at the managerial, administrative and regulatory level. The department should also take note that dam safety operations could be in a 'conflict of interest', because as a government entity it is expected to regulate government owned dams. This is far from ideal and poor 'risk management', especially given the clear conflict of interest that dam owners themselves must have in performing their self-regulatory role.

Another concern is the lack of rain gauges in our waterways. According to the water policy spokesperson for AgForce, the state's current water computer models are based on inadequate data. Mr Bremner stated at the public hearing—

They do not actually go out there and measure the water and say, 'You can have this much water.' It is all based on computer models... Frankly, in Queensland we do not have enough river gauges in any of the systems to make accurate computer model allocations.

An independent assessor should therefore be engaged to look into the cost effectiveness of installing more gauges in our rivers and streams, particularly at high elevations in the relevant catchments.

In closing, I would like to thank the members of the State Development and Regional Industries Committee for their diligence in examining and reporting on the Auditor-General's report. It is an extremely valuable report, and I would like to thank the Auditor-General once again for producing yet another excellent and thorough report. His role in providing the people of Queensland with some much needed transparency and accountability is to be highly commended.