




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 14 September 2023

WATER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (12.41 pm): The committee made four recommendations, the first being that the bill be passed. At its core this bill is about strengthening water measurement across Queensland. We have heard that the bill reportedly establishes a clear and transparent framework to implement Queensland's strengthened non-urban water management policy. The committee's second recommendation was that the department monitor costs and transition times as the regulations and guidelines are rolled out.

In his second reading debate the minister wanted to assure stakeholders that at its very core the strengthened measurement policy was intended to strike the important balance between improving water measurement and minimising costs for water users. The minister further stated that the department will carefully look at costs and the availability of suitable measurement devices as part of the rollout of the measurement policy annually. The minister also stated he would like to make sure that the industry's ability to meet the 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. We also learned that 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.

The committee's third recommendation is that the department provide the Water Engagement Forum with exposure drafts of supporting regulations and those standards in advance of this implementation and that a review of the regulations be conducted after a period of no more than five years. 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.

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.

This bill allows me to highlight a local issue to the House and the minister. The Queensland government first introduced regulatory arrangements in the Burnett basin by declaring the Bundaberg subartesian area in 1970. Groundwater entitlements were licensed and extractions were managed under an announced allocation system. At that time the Bundaberg District Groundwater Area Advisory Group, BDGAAG, was established by the department to provide advice on appropriate announced allocations. Today the Coastal Burnett Groundwater Management Area Advisory Committee, CBGMAAC, remains an active autonomous group that represents all industry sectors and geographical areas of the Coastal Burnett Groundwater Management Area and continues to play a vital role in the department's planning processes. The group consists of peak body representatives and long-term water users with a vast collective knowledge and understanding of local groundwater-related issues.

The departmental groundwater team attends each CBGMAAC meeting and discusses all key policy issues and likely options relevant to the CBGMAA. Discussions are frank and transparent, and the group has had a major influence on key water resource planning outcomes, including: water sharing rules; the control of seawater intrusion; specification of groundwater entitlements; groundwater monitoring; and improved water use efficiency and sustainability. The management of this resource is often reported by the department as being best practice and world class.

Mr Allan Dingle is the current chair of the CBGMAA committee. To put some context into how seriously we take the announced allocation take and rules, I have copied an excerpt of correspondence from the department below. It states—

Following water accounting of groundwater use in the Coastal Burnett GMA for the 2021-22 water year, the department has identified a very low level (0.2%) of non-compliance of take of groundwater with authorised entitlement.

There was also a very low level (0.6%) of non-compliance with Meter Reading Notices issued to groundwater entitlement holders by the department under Section 113 of the Water Regulation 2016.

The department will continue to address non-compliances with groundwater use in the South region, in line with the department's Regulatory Strategy and Annual Compliance Plan.

The CBGMAA committee appreciates the difference between certifying that a meter is accurate and intentional water theft, given that the meter revalidation issue has been driven because of supposed theft of water in the Murray-Darling Basin area. We do not think it is relevant to our area, as we have operational meters that met the standard of the day at time of installation. Up until now the CBGMAA committee has been supportive of meters. It is agreeable to Australian Standard 4747 compliance and it has been involved with this process for quite a while.

After extended discussions and advice from local departmental officers over the past year, the committee has come to the consensus that most of the 640 water meters requiring validation this year would meet specifications as they were installed around 2012. They met Australian Standard 4747 at that time. The cost of installation was in the vicinity of \$800 per bore—some would be more; some would be less—and irrigators were reluctantly agreeable to the process. Irrigators are now facing further changes to irrigation metering requirements and revalidation of their meters, and this is at their cost. The deadline for validation is set for November 2023.

One of our committee members had Sunfam, which is one of two local companies that has authorised meter validators, provide quotes for his bores to meet the new Australian Standard. The quotes were more than \$45,000 across nine bores. Similarly, Bundaberg Sugar has advised that they have had six of their 40 meters validated, and to date the average cost is \$2,518 each. Apart from the cost, it is also highly unlikely that all meters will be validated by the deadline of November 2023.

The team has met with representatives from the department and requested an extension to the deadline. They were advised that, because the metering requirement has been legislated, there is little scope for anything other than an undertaking from the department that irrigators who have demonstrated they have made legitimate attempts to comply with the revalidation will not be directed to cease pumping should they go over the deadline. That is a good outcome and I guess they just want reassurance that will be the case. They have suggested that the department undertake the validation process and any meter amendments and/or infrastructure required and recover the costs by way of an annual charge. This was the procedure used in 2013 when the existing meters were upgraded. We were advised that the department has insufficient staff capable of doing the assessment and did not have any accredited meter validators.

A complete rethink and amending of the regulation is warranted, given that the exercise will cost more than \$2 million and achieve very little, if anything. Growers are not disputing the fact that metering is required with updated meters. What they are disputing is the arbitrary and completely unattainable deadline of November 2023. Another question that needs to be answered is why the department will not employ their own validators. There are serious conflicts of interest, as current validators in the region are only employed by the same suppliers of meters. The committee is requesting that, for those irrigators who will be faced with costs of more than \$800, the Queensland government fund the entire cost of compliance—as they are doing in the Murray-Darling Basin—and recoup it via an annual meter fee amortised over five years at four per cent.

I need to address the media releases and the attempts to get this on the public record some months ago when the shadow minister for water came to Bundaberg. The address by the minister, trying to blame the LNP government for this outcome—

Ms BOYD: Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise to a point of order. I ask for your guidance in relation to 118(b), relevance. While the member has been going on for some six minutes around a local issue, I query whether it would be better addressed to the minister in correspondence, rather than taking up the time of debate in this House.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Lister): That is enough, member for Pine Rivers. I believe the member has been broadly relevant and as relevant as other contributors have been allowed to be by Speakers before me. Are you dissenting from my ruling, member for Pine Rivers?

Ms BOYD: No.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Are you sure of that?

Ms BOYD: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure of that. I was reacting to the member for Nanango's interjections.

Mr BENNETT: I did not think water meters were that emotive. They are an emotive issue for the local growers. I want to be very clear. The Queensland non-urban water measurement policy, as set out in the new metering and meter revalidation timeframes 2023 to 2027, is the trigger for this government's crisis that we have in the Burnett area. On behalf of those irrigators, I hope these sensible reforms can be considered. More importantly, we have to acknowledge that the growers around the state have preservation of water at their heart. I think we can all work together to make sure this valuable resource can be made available into the future.